

Dear parents and carers,

In November, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a £170m COVID Winter Grant Scheme (CWGS), with Essex County Council (ECC) set to receive £3.8m. The CWGS aims to support children and families that need it with food, energy and water bills and household essentials over the winter period.

Some of this money will be used to provide free school meal vouchers to eligible children during the Christmas holidays and February half term.

Parents and guardians of children and young people identified as eligible to receive food vouchers will receive a text message or an email from ECC's voucher provider Wonde in the last week of term (14 to 18 December).

The vouchers can be used at a number of supermarkets and local shops, details of which you'll see when the voucher is accessed. They can only be used to purchase non age-restricted items and will carry an alert to warn of this. Further details of the scheme are set out below.

If your child hasn't previously received free school meals but your circumstances have recently changed, please speak to your school in the first instance.

If you or your family need support outside of the free school meals, please visit our website here essex.gov.uk/topic/support-for-residents. You will find more information about how to access the initiatives that are being put into place across Essex this winter to help citizens.

Who is eligible to receive food vouchers?

Children and young people in education up to the age of 19 who are in receipt of Free School Meals are eligible to receive vouchers for the holiday period. Those in Key Stage 1 and Reception who currently receive Universal Infant Free School Meals but would be eligible for need-assessed Free School Meals if they were older are also eligible to receive holiday meal vouchers. You can view the eligibility criteria for free school meals on our website here essex.gov.uk/free-school-meals

What will I receive if my child / young person has been identified as eligible?

Parents and guardians of children and young people identified as eligible for the scheme will receive a text message or an email from ECC's voucher provider Wonde in the last week of term (14 to 18 December). This message will contain a link to 'redeem a voucher'. You will be taken to Wonde's 'school vouchers' page where you will need to enter your details and confirm your email address before being asked to select the retailer you wish to receive a voucher for. You will then be given a PIN and the option to view the voucher. Having confirmed the PIN, you will be issued your voucher. The voucher barcode can be printed off or scanned on a smartphone for use in-store.

Details of the process and more questions about Wonde can be found on their website here help.schoolvouchers.com/hc/en-gb

We would like to thank all Essex schools for their support in helping administer this scheme at what is an already very busy time.