



Childcare Works Briefing 3: Lunchtimes and additional charging

Introduction

Lunchtimes provide an invaluable opportunity for learning and socialisation for children (and their child carers too), as well as supporting health and well being. Any provision of food must adhere to regulations, for example food hygiene and health and safety. Other considerations should also be taken into account when deciding how to deliver the free entitlements and childcare over a lunch period.

This paper clarifies what providers can and cannot do in terms of the provision of lunches. It also suggests some questions for providers to consider in their decision making.

The DfE is clear:

“You should use [government funding for childcare](#) to provide 15 or 30 hours a week of high-quality, flexible early education and childcare.

You shouldn't use this funding to cover the cost of consumable items, such as drinks, meals or nappies, or additional services, such as baby yoga, music lessons and school trips.

You can charge parents for additional items or services, but you mustn't make this compulsory for any parents taking up a publicly funded place for their child.”

DfE Website 1st December 2016

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-business-sustainability-guides-for-providers/extra-sources-of-income-for-early-years-providers>



On that basis, providers who are delivering free entitlements and childcare over the lunch period can:

1. Provide and fund lunches for all children
2. Require families to bring a packed lunch for their child
3. Provide some lunches families can pay for, and offer the option of bringing a packed lunch
4. Offer some funded lunches (for example for children who would be eligible for free school meals), some paid for lunches, whilst still offering families the choice to bring a packed lunch.

Any charges for a lunch must be voluntary for the parent, and parents should be given the option of providing their packed lunch. Parents should also be given the option of buying their own consumables.

Option one and four are dependent upon a setting being financially sustainable enough (through other income) to cover the costs of providing lunch options. The entitlement funding should not be used to cover the cost of consumables. Options two and three should not incur a cost to the setting. Option four mirrors the practice schools and many settings follow now.

Providers should consider and balance a series of questions when deciding how to manage the entitlement delivery across lunch periods. We have suggested a few below:

1. What would best meet the needs of children who attend the setting?
Consider the needs of individual children, groups and the whole.

2. What does the business plan do to support the settings sustainability?
Balance what is desirable, with what is possible and affordable.
3. Has schools forum been asked to consider a local authority wide policy on funding lunches for disadvantaged children, just as they do in schools? Whilst funding is under pressure everywhere, providing lunches for children who stay at a setting over a lunch period is an option for the local authority and schools forum to consider.
4. What do facilities allow, and is their room for change? Could a partner or another local setting deliver lunches?
5. What can be learned from other providers and schools who are already offering a range of options?
6. If you are offering a 'paid for' lunch meal, how much will the charge be? The charge should cover costs, and not be unreasonable so that it is out of reach of families. A high charge for the lunch meal may influence decision-making of new families choosing provision moving forward. Local authorities will use their information duties to support families in knowing about and choosing provision that delivers their legal entitlements.
7. Staffing will need to be considered if offering the entitlement over a lunch period for the first time. There are lots of providers who are delivering a range of options for lunches now, so there is a lot of experience in the sector to tap into.
8. Ultimately your decisions need to balance the settings needs and the demands and preferences of families, with what can be delivered within the framework of regulations, whilst maintaining a high quality sustainable service.