

National free school meals voucher scheme opens to orders

I have been notified by the Government that the national free school meals voucher scheme has opened to orders. Schools can begin ordering free school meal vouchers for eligible pupils from today, adding to the support available for disadvantaged families.

An online service for schools, the scheme allows schools to place orders for supermarket gift cards on behalf of parents and carers whose children are eligible for free school meals.

The vouchers are worth £15 a week per child and families can receive codes by email to redeem themselves, or as a gift card provided by post, collection or delivery to families without internet access.

In addition to the national scheme, schools can continue providing free meals to eligible pupils via lunch parcels, through catering suppliers, or via locally arranged solutions. This might include vouchers for a local shop or supermarket not currently included in the national scheme.

The Department for Education continues to work with LACA, the body representing school caterers to ensure lunch parcels and meals all meet high standards. Guidance developed by LACA and Public Health England is being updated to reflect the additional funding that has been provided to support schools and school caterers in following this approach.

You can read more about the scheme at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme-opens-to-orders>

Universal credit

Yesterday I accepted the Prime Minister's advice and abstained on the Opposition day motion. I was in two minds about it and gave the government the benefit of the doubt.

On the one hand it is a perfectly fair tactic for the Opposition to table a motion to smoke out a government view on a contentious issue. I prefer it when the government has a view and then defends it with arguments and votes. It would be popular with many if the government just agreed to continue the new higher rate of benefit. On the other hand, I could see that the government wishes to make up its mind on whether to continue the extra £1000 a year Universal Credit to all recipients nearer the budget when it

should have new forecasts of how likely it is people can get jobs to boost their incomes, and how the spending figures generally are placed.

The central idea of Universal credit is to ensure people are always better off working. Higher minimum wages, control of low wage migration, taking lower pay out of income tax are all part of a suite of policies to make it true that it is better to work, whilst ensuring all can afford to live from benefit payments if they are out of work. I was a strong supporter of the increase in UC when the pandemic hit with policies to control it that drove many lower paid out of work altogether, and slashed the overtime and performance related pay of others.

I fear we will need further support for families and small businesses before the pandemic is over and more normal life resumes. I will press for suitable measures in the run up to the budget. I am against the ideas I see in some parts of the media that from March the government needs to rein in spending and borrowing and push up taxes. That would be quite the wrong response when the economy is still limping along way below its levels of income and work of 2019.

Why are we waiting?

I read that the Chancellor has been charged with chairing a Committee to take advantage of the freedoms we gain from leaving the EU. I wish him well, as there are many obvious easy wins which the government should have ready after four and half years delay in our exit. Why are we still waiting for them?

The Chancellor in particular should get on with a Brexit bonus budget. He should set out the large savings on our contributions to the EU and how they are being used. He should explain how the sums we will still be paying to farmers in lieu of the CAP payments will be better directed. I want to see more of that money promoting domestic food production. The EU often paid us grants to stop us producing things.

He should explain how he will police any residual bills from the EU under the Withdrawal Agreement and what action he will take to get our money back from the EIB and other joint assets we held with them.

I want him to overhaul VAT, an EU tax. He could begin by removing it from all green products, and from domestic fuel. That would promote higher standards of insulation, fuel efficiency and more modern controls, and reduce fuel poverty.

He should examine tax levels and grants for small business with a view to producing a better package. He needs to promote small business and self employment as we need them to power the recovery from the deep anti CV 19 recession we have been living through.

This is not the time to be increasing tax on the self employed through IR35, nor to be putting VAT onto foreign visitors who used to come here for duty free shopping amongst other reasons. We need a UK open for business and welcoming to visitors with money to spend.

Improving this site

On Monday night the web expert who runs the technical side of this site will make improvements to the layout. The work will be done after 9pm. I have asked him to make it clearer that people can ask to receive a free email of each day's blog posting, to improve the layout of the text so people can read it more easily on small mobile devices and update the appearance. I have sketched some changes.

I intend to continue with a daily main story which I write. I will continue to turn down the various offers of guest writers, adverts and sponsorship, as I wish it to be independent, and will continue to pay for the service myself. It will continue to be the John Redwood site. It will include items relevant to my job as MP for Wokingham, with a separate local pages section on Wokingham and West Berkshire issues. It is not an MP website site paid for by taxpayers. None of its content is cleared with Conservative Central Office.

Moderating the site is taking up too much of my time owing to the refusal of a limited number of people to accept my guidance. I will repeat

Please limit the number of proposed postings each day

Avoid long postings – unless you have something novel and well researched to say, in which case I might publish them

Avoid links to other sources, unless they are helpful links to easily identified government/Central Bank/global quango free public websites supplying useful data and backup

If you want to highlight something good you have read elsewhere then mention the source and give a small summary of what excites you about it in your submission.

Avoid allegations against individuals or companies as I do not have time to check them out for libel. I afford the same protection from allegations to Opposition MPs as to Conservative ones.

I will from now on be deleting many more incoming comments from a few individuals who are repetitious, who constantly ignore this guidance and whose opinions are now well known to regular readers. They need to find something new to say and to say it better if they want to be posted.

This site does not seek to censor people who disagree with me or the government or the Conservative party, and is willing to explore alternative explanations and policy options in a sensible way.

Death rates

The official figures for death rates in the UK show that the death rate in 2020 was considerably higher than in recent years. They also show, contrary to some media reports, that the death rate stayed below the higher levels it reached in the years 1999-2004. The overall rate is around 1% per annum, with most of those dying being the elderly. As people are living longer, so the typical age of death has trended upwards over the last half century.

There was a surge of deaths in the spring of 2020 brought on by CV 19 which boosted overall annual numbers. Since then progress with finding a range of treatments and nursing procedures that can cut the death rate from the virus have helped to bring down the numbers dying from the pandemic.

Today there is concern that other causes of death including cancer and heart problems may be boosted by people not seeking the treatment they need with these conditions, or by delays in access to hospital care resulting from the need to create extra capacity in some hospitals to handle covid 19 patents. There is also the double hit to overall NHS capacity that has come from the measures to tackle the virus. There is more social distancing in hospitals to wrestle with infection control, and absences of more staff who either catch the virus or need to self isolate for periods after contact with it.

The NHS management and their Ministerial supporters are concentrating on rolling out the vaccine, with the hope that this will solve the problem of lockdown. It may require more development of vaccines and further vaccination moves should the virus transmute. This important work should not detract from the need to advance in other ways as well. So let us look at other ways we can learn to live with this virus.

1. More medical guidance on ways the rest of us can fend off the virus, using everything from diet to exercise. What is the official view of zinc, Vitamin C, weight loss and other measures in addition to Vitamin D which now has some official support?
2. Are there treatments like Regeneron and chloroquine that can offer some protection?
3. More treatments that can cut the death rate and reduce the severity of viral attacks. The work that has discovered dexamethasone and the anti rheumatoid drugs is welcome. Where are we on Ivermectin and others?
4. More guidance and support for people to convert air flow and heating systems and introduce air cleansing systems within their air systems, to reduce exposure to disease laden air in enclosed rooms and spaces
5. More use of isolation hospitals to cut the spread of disease in health

settings and to reduce the numbers of NHS staff at risk