

Poorest UK schoolchildren sent meagre pandemic food parcels, as contractors reap massive profits

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Millions responded with shock as the appalling contents of the “food parcels” being delivered to the families of 1.7 million schoolchildren who receive free school meals was exposed on social media.

Many expressed disgust and denounced the profiteering from poverty during the school closures necessitated by the pandemic.

One mother, using the handle “Roadside Mum,” posted a photo of the contents of her food parcel which contained a loaf of bread, two carrots, two potatoes, a tomato, a tin of baked beans, some individual cheese slices, two mini cake bars, three snack tubes of fromage-frais and a small bag of pasta. The fruit in the parcel was bruised. The mother said that the parcel was supposed to last for two weeks and be worth £30. Her photo was shared more than 30,000 times.

“I priced that like-for-like from Asda [supermarket] and it came to £5.22. Where’s the other £25?” She added, “The private company who have the #FSM [free school meals] contract made good profit here.”

She told BBC Breakfast, “As I unpacked that food parcel in my living room and looked at the contents, it felt very sad and very depressing. One of my children came in and saw me laying this out on the floor, and I said I was going to picture it because it didn’t look like a lot. I could see the child’s realisation that this is what I’ve been given to eat for a week and the sense of sadness.”

Other photos showed even less. Lisa T received meagre portions that looked like the modern-day equivalent of the slop served in Victorian workhouses. She explained in a twitter post, “We were given this in a paper bag. It consisted of a bag of pasta, granola, cheese and tomato soup mix (both in money bags!) etc.” The onion (quartered), tomato (halved) and pepper (halved) and carrot (a tiny piece) had been cut up and put into cling

film. Lisa commented, “Our school was disgusted by our caterers! Food in money bags!!! Pathetic carrot stub.”

Another image from Christa Lee showed food contents also packed in bank money bags for her 17-year-old daughter. Her school is in one of the ten most deprived areas in England. Christa told the *Daily Mirror*, “This tells our children that they do not matter. That all they are worth is food in unsafe packaging that will leave them hungry. Children as young as 11 years old are being given this and expected to be able to prepare it. Many of them will be preparing it alone due to parents having to work. Those on low incomes rarely have the luxury of a job that can be done from home.”

Mother Faye Emery shared a picture showing five small bottles of water, a cheap loaf of white bread, a few slices of processed ham, a small package of cheese and four small, prepacked fruit cakes. Each of her two children received this package from their academy school in Norfolk.

According to government guidelines, food parcels should take into account a family’s dietary requirements. Faye said that this had not been followed in the case of her children. “My daughter has a musculoskeletal disorder and severe joint issues and there is no way she’s getting the protein she needs from the package so it’s going to end up costing me the same amount as what the government is paying the school to feed her at home, which I obviously don’t have.”

Stating that “I don’t know if I’d feed the ham to my dog,” because “what I’ve got is a bunch of gristle,” Faye asked the school to use the £30 to provide her with ingredients to cook a hot meal instead. The *Metro* said she was told, “you either get it or get nothing.”

Amy Weldon was delivered a few rations in a black refuse bin liner. She said, “Every parent in the country

needs this to be reverted back to the [school meal supermarket] vouchers as some children will starve. The food companies are profiting massively from this. It's outrageous at what they've given for my daughter and considering it's meant to be a pandemic because of a virus they shouldn't be opening food and touching it to repackage it."

Many of the parents shared the images of the parcels with Manchester United and England international footballer Marcus Rashford. Rashford, now 23 years old, had himself suffered from hunger as a child. In the summer, the government were forced into a series of U-turns after Rashford used his massive social media presence to demand that children from poor families be provided with free school meals during school holidays.

Despite having to back down, the Tories ensured a financial killing for their mates in the private sector. Government guidance was issued that instead of cash vouchers schools should be "strongly encouraged" to adopt a "food parcel first approach" sourced from existing catering providers, with a budget of £15 per pupil per week. It was only last week, as Britain entered its latest partial lockdown, that Education Minister Gavin Williamson announced that the national supermarket vouchers scheme would be re-introduced, but only if schools could not provide "food parcels or meals" for eligible children.

One of the main firms profiting is Chartwells, a subsidiary of the Compass food group. Compass serves more than 5.5 billion meals annually across 45 countries and is described by the *Financial Times* as the "world's largest caterer."

Entire tranches of services previously provided by the state have been handed over to the private sector for profit in the last decades. The *Guardian* reported, "Compass and its subsidiary [Chartwells] have won contracts worth almost £350m for school catering, typically including free school meal provision." Chartwells has a multiyear contract with the Harris Federation, which runs 50 schools in the UK, worth £40 million. Other firms cashing in are Worcester-based Aspens Services, who were "awarded contracts worth £75m between 2016 and 2020, followed by Cater Link with contracts worth £72m."

Chartwells has close links to the Tory Party. Former chairman Paul Walsh stepped down as a director only last month and previously served as a member of the business advisory group to Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. Walsh donated £10,000 to the Tories in 2010, the year Cameron took office.

Chartwells commented in response to Roadside Mum's photo: "For clarity this shows five days of free school lunches (not ten days) and the charge for food, packing and distribution was actually £10.50 and not £30 as suggested."

The wretched parcels sent out to the poorest are a far cry from the lavishly prepared gourmet food provided by the "Chartwells Independent" arm of the company to private prep and boarding schools. Social media was flooded with photos of the luxuries that Chartwells provides for the scions of the ruling elite. They included a canapés table and a dessert of oatmeal and panna cotta with orange and chocolate provided to Norwich School. Pupils at New Hall School were served up a dish of coconut, lemongrass and banana leaf-wrapped salmon. One private boarding school, Haileybury, had an entire "gingerbread village" created by Chartwells.

Rashford this week denounced the situation as "unacceptable." This forced Prime Minister Boris Johnson into a hand-wringing declaration that he would carry out a review as "these food parcels do not meet the standards we set out and we have made it clear to the company involved that this is disgraceful." He admitted that the rations being delivered by private contractors are based on government guidelines.

Johnson's abasing himself before Rashford to placate public anger highlights how the Labour Party and their trade union partners are refusing to lift a finger against the austerity programme and homicidal herd immunity agenda of the Tories that has already cost over 100,000 lives.

In Parliament, Johnson even declared cynically, "I'm grateful for Marcus Rashford who highlighted the issue and is doing quite an effective job by comparison with the right honourable gentleman [Starmer] in holding the government to account for these issues."



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