Department for Education

Guidance

Free meals in further education funded institutions guide: academic year 2025 to 2026

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Applies to England

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1. Free meals: key points

The 1996 Education Act requires maintained schools and academy sixth forms to provide free meals to disadvantaged students who are aged over 16. In academic year 2014 to 2015 the requirement was extended to disadvantaged students following further education (FE) courses at the range of FE funded institutions. Funding agreements place a legal duty on institutions to comply with the requirement.

Institutions must make a free meal available for all eligible students for each day the student attends their study programme, where this is appropriate.

Institutions receive funding at a rate equivalent to £2.61 per student per meal taken.

Students aged over 19 who are continuing on the same study programme (19+ continuers) they started before they turned 19 or who have an education health and care (EHC) plan are eligible for a free meal where they meet the criteria.

Where institutions receive funding for both free meals in FE and 16 to 19 Bursary Fund discretionary bursary, they may use the funding as a single allocation.

Transitional protections continue to apply and have been extended until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026. The protection means that all students already receiving free meals on or after 1 April 2018 continue to be eligible to receive free meals until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026. This also applies to students who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) before moving into FE provision.

From the start of academic year 2026 to 2027, we are introducing new eligibility criteria for free meals meaning that all recipients of Universal Credit (UC) will be entitled to receive a free meal. We will provide further information on this in our guidance for academic year 2026 to 2027.

> You are reminded that you cannot carry forward free meals funding for more than one year. You must inform us of the total amount of any unspent funds (not previously reported) from any year up to and including academic year 2023 to 2024.

Unspent funding must be reported using our customer help portal specifying the amount of funding and the year/s it relates to. You should do this as soon as you are aware however you must report it no later than 31 March each year. We will recover all unspent funds.

2. Eligibility for free meals

2.1 Institution eligibility

Students must be enrolled in FE provision funded via the Department for Education (DfE) to be eligible for a free meal. Eligible institutions are:

- general FE colleges, including specialist colleges
- sixth-form colleges
- independent learning providers
- higher education institutions (HEIs) with DfE 16 to 19 funding
- special post-16 institutions (SPIs)
- local authorities and FE institutions directly funded for 16 to 19
- 16 to 19 only academies and free schools
- 16 to 19 only maintained schools

2.2 Student eligibility

Age
A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2025 to be eligible to receive a free meal. Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a free meal if they are continuing on a study programme they began aged 16 to 18 ('19+ continuers') or have an EHC plan.

These 2 groups of aged 19 plus students can receive a free meal while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), as long as their eligibility continues.

The following groups of students are not eligible for free meals in FE:

- students aged between 14 and 16 (these students are already covered by FSM provision)
- students aged 19 or over at the start of their study programme unless they have an EHC plan or are a 19+ continuer
- apprentices, including those with an EHC plan.

Residency
Students must also satisfy the residency criteria set out in our funding rules.

Eligible benefits
Free meals are targeted at disadvantaged students. Free meals in FE defines disadvantage as students being in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC))
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after someone stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- UC with net earnings not exceeding the equivalent of £7,400 for each year (after tax and not including any benefits they get)

A student is only eligible to receive a free meal when they, or a responsible adult on their behalf, have made a successful application to the institution where they are enrolled.

Working Tax Credit is not a qualifying benefit for free meals, and a parent or student in receipt of Working Tax Credits is not entitled to a free meal (this is a common question sent to DfE). Qualifying benefits do include the Working Tax Credit run-on which is paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit.

From 1 April 2018, any student who is in receipt of, or has parents who are in receipt of, UC must have a net earned annual income of no more than £7,400 to be eligible for free meals.

Eligibility criteria introduced under UC from 1 April 2018 will result in some households becoming eligible for free meals and others falling outside of the eligibility criteria. We have put transitional protection arrangements in place to provide certainty for families and ensure they do not experience a sudden loss of free meals.

The protection arrangements apply as follows:

- all students already receiving free meals from 1 April 2018 will continue to receive free meals until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026. This will apply even if their household earnings

rise above the new threshold during that time

- any student who becomes eligible for free meals after the threshold has been introduced will also continue to receive free meals until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026. This will apply even if they subsequently become ineligible during this period because their household earnings rise above the new threshold
- from the start of academic year 2026 to 2027, all recipients of UC will be entitled to a free meal. We intend to fully discontinue protections from the start of academic year 2026 to 2027, meaning that students must meet the new eligibility criteria to continue receiving a free meal from that point onwards

You do not need to carry out any further eligibility checks for these protected families during the period that transitional arrangements apply, up until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026. You may wish to note the students as ‘protected’ in their free meals auditable records. You should seek to identify students who are eligible to receive free meals under the transitional protection. If a student transferring in from a school, falls under the transition protection rules we recommend you obtain evidence of FSM eligibility from the previous school or local authority. If a student is transferring in from a previous FE funded institution, we recommend you obtain evidence from that provider where possible. Where you are unable to verify previous eligibility for free meals using these approaches, you may wish to consider seeking evidence from the student/their parent, for example, by requesting a copy of previous entitlement letters. You must retain appropriate evidence of eligibility for audit purposes.

A student who has not previously claimed free meals is only eligible to receive one when they, or a responsible adult on their behalf, have made a successful application to the institution where they are enrolled. From the start of academic year 2026 to 2027, we intend to fully discontinue transitional protections. From this point, claimants for free meals will need to meet the

eligibility criteria in order to receive a free meal. FE institutions will need to keep eligibility for free meals under continued review. We do not expect rechecks of eligibility to be carried out more than once a year, to prevent claimants facing sudden loss of entitlement, during the academic year. Further guidance on this will be issued in due course.

Students who make a first application for UC in academic year 2025 to 2026 and who have household earnings above the threshold will not be eligible for free meals.

3. Verification of student eligibility

You are responsible for assessing applications for free meals. All students applying for a free meal for the first time in academic year 2025 to 2026 must submit an application (either by the student or by a responsible adult on their behalf) to the institution where they are enrolled. Some institutions may use a paper application form, others may operate an on-line application.

You will be aware that DfE provides an electronic Eligibility Checking System (ECS) that enables local authorities to check FSM eligibility on behalf of institutions.

It is important that you and local authorities understand that the legal gateway (section 110 of the Education Act 2005) that enables DfE to obtain benefit information held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HMRC for checking eligibility is limited to FSM in schools. Information from ECS cannot currently be used to check entitlement for free meals for post-16 students.

As part of the application, you must ask the student (or their parent/guardian) to provide evidence of the award of qualifying

benefits. This might be an award notice or letter from DWP or HMRC. You may want to use a combined application form and process for free meals and the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

4. Universal Credit

For new applicants, you must verify the eligibility of students, or their parents, who are in receipt of UC, by asking for a copy of their UC award notice that includes their monthly earnings. You will need to assess the information given to obtain an accurate proxy of the individual's current earned annual income. Monthly earnings are after tax and do not include any benefits the individual receives.

You should check eligibility using the following assessment process:

4.1 Threshold 1

The student or their parents provide a UC award statement from their most recent complete assessment period, showing that their earnings in that period do not exceed £616.67. This is a twelfth of an equivalent annual income of £7,400.

If their earnings do not exceed £616.67, they are eligible for free meals.

If their earnings do exceed £616.67, move to threshold 2.

4.2 Threshold 2

The student or their parents provides UC award statements from

their 2 most recent complete assessment periods, showing that their earnings in that period do not exceed £1,233.34. This is a sixth of an equivalent annual income of £7,400.

If their earnings do not exceed £1,233.34, they are eligible for free meals.

If their earnings do exceed £1,233.34, move to threshold 3.

4.3 Threshold 3

The student or their parents provides UC award statements from their 3 most recent complete assessment periods, showing that their earnings in that period do not exceed £1,850.00. This is a quarter of an equivalent annual income of £7,400.

If their earnings do not exceed £1,850.00, they are eligible for free meals.

If their earnings do exceed £1,850.00, the student is not eligible for free meals.

4.4 Manual check for self-employed students or parents

You are required to complete a manual check to determine eligibility for those students or their parents who are self-employed and in receipt of UC.

Parents will need to provide evidence that:

- they are in receipt of UC by providing their UC award letter
- they are self-employed by providing a copy of their company registration or tax return form

- their monthly net earnings do not exceed the threshold as set out in steps 1, 2 and 3

You should request that self-employed parents complete the self-declaration form and once satisfied that they are eligible, provide the student with a free meal.

5. Allocations and payments

Where possible, we have based academic year 2025 to 2026 free meals funding for FE institutions on their academic year 2023 to 2024 data and their funded student number for academic year 2025 to 2026. We have used the number of students assessed as eligible for, and in receipt of, free meals in academic year 2023 to 2024 as a percentage of the total number of reported students aged 16 to 19 in that year. This percentage establishes the number of funded students we might reasonably expect to be eligible for free meals support in academic year 2025 to 2026 (‘fundable free meals students’).

If academic year 2023 to 2024 information is not available or not appropriate, we will use alternative approaches to generate the allocation. We strongly advise you to make data returns on an ongoing basis for the number of students who meet the free meals eligibility criteria that are assessed as eligible for and in receipt of free meals.

We apportion the number of fundable free meals students across the funding bands, using the same methodology as for mainstream allocations. Band 5, band 4 and band 1 full-time equivalents (FTEs) are full-time students. Band 3 and band 2 are part-time students. Two funding rates apply, one for full-time students and one for part-time students, equivalent to £2.61 per student per meal.

As in previous years, we have made an adjustment for historic double funding between free meals and the 16 to 19 Bursary

Fund. We calculate each institution's share (percentage) of the total number of students supported with free meals who informed the 2025 to 2026 free meals allocations. We use this percentage to calculate the amount to be subtracted from each institution's discretionary bursary allocation.

Further information about the allocations methodology is set out in funding statements issued to institutions in February and March 2025.

5.1 Payment of allocations

We pay free meals allocations to institutions in 2 parts, approximately two thirds in August 2025 and one third in April 2026. The first payment for eligible academies is in September, reflecting their usual payment schedule.

As always, all institutions must contact us to return their allocation if they know they do not have eligible students during the academic year.

5.2 Administrative contribution

You are permitted to use up to 5% of your academic year's allocation for administrative costs.

When you receive allocations for both the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund and free meals in FE schemes, you are permitted to use up to 5% of the combined allocation for administration. You must ensure you do not take a sum that is greater than 5% of the single allocation total.

6. Recovery and rules for returning unspent free meals funds

We permit you to carry unspent free meals funds over to the next academic year. You must continue to use any funds carried forward to support students in line with the funding rules in this guide. You cannot add the funds to general institution funds.

When you are given a single overall allocation that includes funding for both free meals and the bursary fund, you can carry forward funds from both schemes. You may use this funding for either free meals or bursary fund payments in the new academic year.

You cannot carry forward funding for free meals and/or the bursary fund for more than one year. You must fully use any unspent funds for either free meals or the discretionary bursary or return them in line with the one-year rule.

> You must inform us of the total amount of any unspent funds (not previously reported) from any year up to and including academic year 2023 to 2024. You must report unspent funding using our customer help portal specifying the amount of funds and the year/s it relates to. We encourage you to do this as soon as you are aware however you must report it no later than 31 March each year. We will recover all unspent funds.

7. In year growth

Free meals in FE and 16 to 19 Bursary Fund allocations are linked to allocated student numbers in the individualised learner record (ILR) or census. This means an increased student number allocation resulting from the exceptional in-year growth for student numbers process may also result in increased bursary and/or free meals allocations.

In addition, we will release additional free meals in FE funding to ensure that you have sufficient funding to support the students you recorded as eligible for, and in receipt of free meals, in your in-year data return. Additional free meals funding will be awarded where there are more students recorded as being eligible for and in receipt of free meals than those already allocated plus any free meals award linked to the exceptional in-year growth.

As with all other strands of in-year growth, we make growth awards subject to affordability and on the assumption that the in-year data used is materially accurate. If later data returns (usually the R14) show that the in-year data returns are inaccurate, we will recover some or all the bursary and/or free meals in FE growth award.

8. The provision of free meals to students

You must make provision for free meals to eligible students (those who are in receipt of the qualifying benefits and who make a successful application for free meals) for each day the student attends their study programme, where this is appropriate. You must hold attendance evidence to support any payments made.

For example, if a student attends for 5 days a week, 9am to 3pm, for part of their course, you should provide 5 free meals. If a student has 2 days a week when they only attend from 9am to 10am, then you do not have to provide meals on those days.

You are responsible for encouraging and supporting students in making healthy food choices. Many caterers will be able to advise on suitable healthy options to offer students. You should also offer hot food options where practical.

You should provide a meal free of charge to eligible students or fund the free meal via an electronic credit or voucher that can be redeemed on-site or off-site where institutions have arrangements with nearby food outlets. Electronic credits and vouchers must be worth a minimum value of £2.61. Where money is added to a card, the value must be reconciled to return any unspent balance.

If you determine it is necessary to enhance the £2.61 free meals funding rate, in other words, to provide a meal with a greater value, from the single funding allocation or other sources, you have discretion to do so. You must consider the value for money and reasonableness of an enhancement to the £2.61 rate and must be able to justify this at audit, particularly if you choose to make a significant variation from this amount. Any top up from the discretionary bursary fund must meet the bursary guidance and be correctly accounted for and evidenced.

The cost of meals is sometimes included as part of the package of support for high needs students that is agreed with local authorities. In these instances, you should consider the issue of potential double funding for meals when assessing the need to support. This might be by deducting the appropriate amount of funding from the total costs of the package for those students who will be eligible for a free meal, enabling local authorities to use those funds elsewhere.

Most students will require a free meal at lunchtime to fit in with usual study and attendance patterns. However, you may exceptionally choose to make provision for a free meal at an alternative time instead of lunchtime, for example, breakfast instead of lunch, depending on the study pattern of individual students.

You must make free meals provision for students on days when they are off-site as part of their study programme, for instance attending a work placement, work experience or industry placement. Wherever possible, you should provide the student with a voucher they can use at nearby food outlets or arrange with the work experience or placement provider to provide a meal.

We expect that a meal, voucher, or credit will be provided to eligible students. However, this may not be practical in some situations, and you are permitted to make cash payments to students in the following exceptional circumstances:

Students attending institutions that meet all the following criteria:

- fewer than 50 students in total on roll
- no catering or kitchen facilities on site
- no suitable food outlets locally that will agree to take part in a credit or voucher scheme
- students who are off-site on work placement or work experience as part of their study programme whose host organisation is unable or unwilling to provide a meal, and who have no access to a suitable food outlet that will accept a voucher. Examples include work placements in rural areas or on industrial sites
- institutions with more than 50 students in total on roll but which have sites away from their main campus that:
  - have no on-site catering facilities
  - are too far away for students to travel back to facilities on the main campus

If you identify particular and exceptional circumstances that fall outside these parameters, you have discretion to make cash payments if they believe that failing to do so will prevent an eligible student from being provided with a meal. You must ensure you record any such decisions as part of your auditable records and hold attendance evidence to support payments.

8.1 Catering for students with special dietary requirements

You are best placed to make decisions in the case of students who have special dietary requirements, considering local circumstances. You are expected to make reasonable adjustments for students with these requirements.

The School Food Plan's UIFSM toolkit was developed to help schools implement universal FSM for infant pupils, but it contains advice on how to cater for pupils with special dietary requirements, which may be helpful to institutions.

9. Free meals and the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund

There is no barrier between the free meals in FE allocation and the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund discretionary bursary allocation to give institutions flexibility in using the funding. You must manage the single allocation appropriately to ensure all students eligible for a free meal receive one in line with this guide.

Prior to the introduction of additional funding for free meals, institutions had supported the cost of meals for students who needed them from discretionary bursaries. We adjust discretionary bursary allocations for those institutions also in receipt of an allocation for free meals in FE.

You have discretion to manage the single allocation to best provide support to eligible students for both schemes. However, free meals in FE remains an entitlement and you must manage the single allocation appropriately to ensure that all students entitled to a free meal are provided with one.

If you determine it is necessary to enhance the £2.61 free meals funding rate and provide a meal with a greater value, whether from your single allocation or other sources, you have the discretion to do so. However, where you choose to do this, you must ensure that funding for discretionary bursaries continues to provide sufficient help to students facing the range of barriers to participation and should not enhance free meals funding to the detriment of other needs.

Any students supported through a top up from the discretionary bursary fund must meet the eligibility criteria and wider bursary guidance requirements and any payments should be correctly accounted for and evidenced.

You can give additional support to students eligible for a free meal from the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund, if you assess they meet the criteria for bursary for vulnerable groups or the discretionary bursary. You must ensure you consider the provision of a free meal, or the funding provided to the student for the free meal, when you assess their overall need for support.

10. Raising awareness of free meals

You are responsible for ensuring students are aware of the eligibility criteria for free meals. You should also encourage students who may meet the criteria to make an application for a free meal.

You should clearly set out your free meal provision for students and parents. This might be by publishing a statement on your website, promoting, and providing information about free meals at induction and enrolment days, sending letters home to parents, for example.

Students do better in their studies when they have access to

proper, regular, nutritional meals. We encourage you to support students to make healthy food choices by raising awareness of relevant information and guidance.

11. Data returns, including ILR and school census

You must complete the free meal field in the ILR to provide information on the number of young people eligible for free meals in FE. This is code FME2.

You must ensure you only record students who are eligible and have taken up the free meal in the free meal field. Students assessed as eligible but who do not take up a meal should not be recorded under code FME2.

Students who receive funding for meals from the discretionary 16 to 19 Bursary Fund must not be recorded under code FME2 nor should students who receive FSM, for example, 4- to 15-year-olds.

The ILR states that code FME2 should be used if the student is eligible for, and has taken up, free meals at any point during the academic year. If the student stops taking free meals, FME2 should be retained and not removed until the start of the following academic year. Similarly, if a student becomes ineligible during the year, the transitional protections mean that FME2 should be retained until the end of academic year 2025 to 2026.

This code should be recorded for eligible students who are DfE funded students aged 16 or over and under 19, 19- to 24-year-old students who are subject to an EHC plan, and 19+ continuers.

Institutions that do not complete the ILR but instead complete

the school census should complete the 2 free school meals fields.

12. Audit and assurance

Free meals in FE is subject to normal assurance arrangements for 16 to 19 education and training.

You must maintain accurate and up to date records that evidence which students receive free meals funding.

- confirm student eligibility for funding, including where transitional protections apply
- demonstrate appropriate use of funds
- show clearly that payments are linked to actual attendance
- holds records at learner level on the value of funding paid out to date against the free meals in FE funding
- include the rationale for any enhancement to the £2.61 free meals rate

You must also be able to confirm, during any audit, the amount of any unspent funds that have been carried forward to the current academic year.

You are responsible for deciding what evidence you accept for free meals and how recent it is. However, you must ensure you can evidence that only students who meet the eligibility criteria for free meals in each academic year receive them. Where you have used your discretion to make cash payments that are outside the specified criteria set out in this document, you must ensure these are recorded.

You should note that, following an audit, we might recover funding where free meals payments are found to have been made to ineligible students or not linked to actual attendance.

13. Further information

Information about healthy eating, including recipes, is available at healthier families and the NHS Eatwell guide.

These funding rules should provide the information that you need to administer free meals and should be consulted before contacting us. However, if you have a question that is not answered by this guide, you can contact us via our customer help portal.

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