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Guidance

Free meals in further education funded institutions guide: academic year 2026 to 2027

Updated 8 May 2026

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 a range of FE funded institutions. Funding agreements place a legal duty on institutions to comply with the requirement.

References to 'we' or 'us' in this guidance are to the Department for Education (DfE). Where we refer to 'you' this means education institutions such as:

- colleges
- schools
- academies

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, all students from households in receipt of Universal Credit will be entitled to receive a free meal. FE institutions and school sixth forms will receive additional funding through the existing free meals in further education grant.

Institutions must make a free meal available for all eligible students for each day the student attends their study programme, where this is appropriate. The meal rate for 2026 to 2027 academic year will, as a minimum, match last year's rate of £2.61 per student. As with all programmes, funding is kept under review. We will communicate any subsequent updates to you separately.

Students aged over 19 are eligible for a free meal if they either:

- are continuing on the same study programme (19+ continuers) they started before they turned 19
- have an education health and care (EHC) plan

Transitional protections for free meals are ending at the end of the 2025 to 2026 academic year. To receive free meals from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, students (or their families) must meet the eligibility criteria. Ongoing eligibility

should be monitored through rechecks of eligibility, taking place once a year.

To allow students in school sixth forms and eligible FE providers to be eligible for free meals from the start of the autumn term, checks should be completed ahead of the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

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 2024 to 2025.

Unspent funding must be reported using our [customer help portal](#) specifying the:

- amount of funding
- years it relates to

You should report this as soon as you are aware, no later than 31 March each year. We will recover all unspent funds.

2. Schools and academies with sixth forms

We have expanded the scope of free meals in FE in academic year 2026 to 2027 to include school sixth forms. This includes 16 to 19 provision in all-through or secondary schools such as:

- local authority-maintained mainstream schools
- mainstream academies and free schools
- academy and free school alternative provision providers

We will refer to these provider types as 'school sixth forms' in this guide.

For schools, including school sixth forms, from the start of academic year 2026 to 2027 there will be 2 categories of benefits-based free school meals (FSM):

- 'targeted FSM' which continues to be based on the existing threshold, covering pupils who are in households in receipt of Universal Credit with annual household earnings of no more than £7,400
- 'expanded FSM,' a new category covering pupils who do not qualify for targeted

FSM, but who are in households receiving Universal Credit

School sixth forms will receive specific funding for students in the expanded category of FSM.

3. Eligibility for free meals

3.1 Institution eligibility

Students must be enrolled in FE provision funded by 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
- school sixth forms (part of all-through or secondary schools and academies)

3.2 Student eligibility

Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2026 to be eligible to receive a free meal. Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a free meal if they either:

- are continuing on a study programme they began aged 16 to 18 ('19+ continuers')
- have an EHC plan

These 2 groups of aged 19 or over 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).

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 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:

- Universal Credit
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

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.

Households in receipt of Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or the guarantee element of Pension Credit may also be entitled to a meal.

4. Verification of student eligibility

You are responsible for assessing applications for free meals. All students must apply (either 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 online application.

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 HM Revenue & Customs (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, except for students in school sixth forms.

To allow students in school sixth forms and FE providers to be eligible for free meals from the start of the autumn term, checks should be completed ahead of the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

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.

5. Allocations and payments

Where possible, we have based academic year 2026 to 2027 free meals funding on your academic year 2024 to 2025 data and your funded student number for academic year 2026 to 2027.

We have used the number of students assessed as eligible for, and in receipt of, free meals in academic year 2024 to 2025 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 expect to be eligible for free meals support in academic year 2026 to 2027 ('fundable free meals students').

If academic year 2024 to 2025 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.

Two funding rates apply, one for full-time students and one for part-time students, equivalent to £2.61 per student per meal.

The funding bands attracting the full-time rate are:

- band 4
- band 5
- T Levels bands 5 to 9
- band 1 full-time equivalents (FTEs)

The funding bands attracting the part-time rate are:

- band 2
- band 3

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 2026 to 2027 free meals allocations. We use this percentage to calculate the amount to be subtracted from your discretionary bursary allocation.

Further information about the allocations methodology is set out in funding statements we issued to you during spring 2026.

For school sixth forms who are newly in scope for free meals funding this year, we will base allocations on data in the autumn (October) school census.

5.1 Payment of allocations

We pay free meals allocations to institutions in 2 parts:

- approximately two thirds in August 2026
- one third in April 2027

The first payment for eligible academies is in September, reflecting their usual payment schedule.

School sixth forms will receive initial funding allocations via an in-year payments process in spring 2027.

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 or the bursary fund for more than one year. You must either:

- fully use any unspent funds for free meals or the discretionary bursary
- 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 2024 to 2025. You must report unspent funding using our [customer help portal](#) specifying the:

- amount of funds
- the years the funds relate 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
- on the assumption that the in-year data we use is 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 either:

- provide a meal free of charge to eligible students
- fund the free meal via an electronic credit or voucher that can be redeemed on-site (or off-site where you 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 you have discretion to do so. You must:

- consider the value for money and reasonableness of an enhancement to the £2.61 rate
- 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

- industry placement

Wherever possible, you should either:

- provide the student with a voucher they can use at nearby food outlets
- 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 you assess failing to do so will prevent an eligible student from being provided with a meal. You must ensure you record all decisions as part of your auditable records and hold attendance evidence to support payments, for each day the student attends their study programme.

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 Universal Infant Free School Meal 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 you 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, you 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. For example, by:

- publishing a statement on your website
- promoting and providing information about free meals at induction and enrolment days
- sending letters home to parents

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 must not be recorded under code FME2 if they receive:

- funding for meals from the discretionary 16 to 19 Bursary Fund

- 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. 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
- 19+ continuers

Institutions that complete the school census, instead of the ILR, should complete the FSM fields. Schools must ensure they return accurate information about the FSM eligibility of their cohort of pupils through the school census. Detailed guidance on completion of school census is available in [Complete the school census](#).

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 school year, school census returns must specify whether pupils who are eligible for FSM meet the targeted or expanded criteria.

In the October 2026 census, a 'last verified date' (referring to the most recent check of FSM eligibility) between and inclusive of 1 June and 1 October 2026 is required for:

- a pupil to be deemed eligible for FSM
- the school to receive associated funding

12. Audit and assurance

Free meals in FE are 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, which:

- identify students in the ILR or school census who are eligible for free meals
- confirm student eligibility for funding
- 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 will 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, and payments are only made for each day the student attends their study programme.

Following an audit, we might recover funding where free meals payments are found to:

- have been made to ineligible students
- are 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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