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Guidance

Free school meals expansion grant: methodology

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Applies to England

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Introduction

In June 2025, the UK government announced that, from the 2026 to 2027 academic year, the eligibility criteria for free school meals (FSM) in England will be expanded to all children in households receiving Universal Credit.

The Department for Education (DfE) has announced over £1 billion over the multi-

year spending review period from 2026 to 2029 to fund the expansion of FSM.

The additional funding will be allocated through the free school meals expansion grant for the period from September 2026 to March 2027. This is to help with the additional costs of free meals in the following settings:

- mainstream schools – for pupils from reception to key stage 4
- maintained special schools
- special academies and free schools
- non-maintained special schools
- alternative provision (AP) schools

This guide explains how we will allocate this additional funding to mainstream schools and local authorities. Allocations to local authorities in respect of early years settings will be made separately. Further details of funding for early years settings will be published in due course.

Mainstream academies will receive an additional payment through the FSM expansion grant to cover the period from April 2027 to August 2027. Other arrangements for 2027 to 2028 and beyond are set out in [funding for future years](#).

The FSM expansion also applies to further education free meals. You can find details in the [free meals in further education guide](#).

You can find more information on the FSM expansion and what it means for the sector in the [guidance for schools and local authorities](#).

Eligibility for the grant

Mainstream schools – from reception to key stage 4

The FSM expansion grant will provide additional funding for pupils from reception to key stage 4 for the following mainstream school providers:

- primary and secondary maintained schools

- primary and secondary academies and free schools
- all-through maintained schools
- all-through academies and free schools
- city technology colleges
- studio schools and university technical colleges

Special and AP schools

The FSM expansion grant will provide additional funding to local authorities to enable them to support schools that are required to provide a free meal to additional pupils as a result of the expanded eligibility criterion.

The following schools are able to receive the additional funding from local authorities:

- maintained special schools
- special academies and free schools
- non-maintained special schools
- pupil referral units maintained by a local authority
- AP academies and free schools

Paying the grant

In 2026 to 2027, we will pay the FSM expansion grant for the period from September 2026 to March 2027.

Mainstream schools – for reception to key stage 4

We will pay funding:

- for maintained mainstream schools to local authorities, and they will be required to

pay it to their individual maintained schools at the published rates

- directly to mainstream academy trusts at the published rates

We will pay the grant in:

- February 2027 for local authorities
- March 2027 for academies

These payment dates will also apply to new and growing schools.

Special and AP schools

We will pay funding to local authorities in February 2027. They will be required to pass on to special and AP schools the funding in respect of individual pupils on the roll of the schools, where those schools incur additional unfunded costs because of the expanded FSM entitlement.

Additional funding must be passed on to schools as soon as possible after the local authority has received notification of their FSM expansion grant allocation from the DfE.

These requirements on local authorities are set out in full in the [conditions of grant](#).

Funding for future years

In 2027 to 2028, funding for the expansion will be incorporated into the core funding that mainstream schools receive and high-needs top-up funding that special and AP schools receive from local authorities.

To ensure this is affordable for local authorities, they will receive additional funding through their dedicated schools grant (DSG) schools block and high-needs block allocations. This will reflect the increase in FSM-eligible pupils that they will have to:

- fund through their local mainstream schools formula
- continue supporting in the relevant high-needs settings

We will ensure that the usual arrangements are in place for mainstream academies

to cover the FSM expansion for the period from April 2027 to August 2027, given their funding cycle follows the academic year. An additional payment will cover the period before we move the grant into those academies' core budget allocations.

From 2028 to 2029, we plan fully to roll the FSM expansion grant into the schools block of the DSG – allocated through the national funding formula – for mainstream schools, and the high-needs block for specialist school settings.

More details on future years will be provided in due course.

Funding rates

These funding rates apply to the 2026 to 2027 financial year.

Mainstream schools – from reception to key stage 4

The allocations will be determined by the difference between the number of pupils eligible for FSM in a school as recorded in the October census as follows:

What we will measure

School-level increase in FSM eligibility from the October 2025 census to the October 2026 census.

Decreases in FSM eligibility will not be counted. This means that there will be no negative adjustments to funding for schools seeing a decrease in FSM eligibility.

What schools will receive

Measured increase in FSM eligibility × £295. This is calculated as pro-rata of the £505 schools national funding formula FSM factor value for 7 months from September to March.

$$£505 \div 12 \text{ months} = £42.1.$$

$$£42.1 \times 7 \text{ months (September-March)} = £295.$$

For example, if the number of pupils recorded as eligible for FSM in a school increases by 10 between the October 2025 census and the October 2026 census, that school will receive an additional £2,950 for the period from September 2026 to

March 2027 (10 × £295).

The additional payment for academies for the period from April 2027 to August 2027 will be paid at a rate of £210 per pupil. This will be calculated using the same pupil numbers as for the September 2026 to March 2027 period.

Exceptions to this methodology are made for [new and growing schools](#).

Special and AP schools

What we will measure

Local authority level increase in FSM eligibility from the October 2025 census to the October 2026 census, using pupils resident in the authority's area who are attending the relevant special and AP schools.

As for mainstream schools, any decrease in FSM eligibility will not be counted.

What schools will receive

Measured increase in FSM eligibility × £295 (same value per meal as for mainstream schools above).

$£505 \div 12 \text{ months} = £42.1$.

$£42.1 \times 7 \text{ months (September-March)} = £295$.

Allocations

We have published the conditions of grant and aim to publish school level allocations for mainstream schools and local authority level allocations for high-needs settings in February 2027. This shows the total funding allocated for the 2026 to 2027 financial year.

New and growing schools

Mainstream schools – from reception to key stage 4

The only exception to the methodology described above is for mainstream schools that have been opened in the past 7 years and are still adding year groups in the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

For schools which opened before the October 2025 census, and are still adding year groups, we will estimate increases in the number of pupils eligible for FSM in order to apply the policy fairly. Allocations will be calculated by multiplying the difference in the average number of pupils recorded as eligible for FSM in each year group by the number of year groups.

This calculation is illustrated in the table below. It uses an example of a school moving from having 2 year groups in October 2025, to 3 year groups in October 2026.

Census year	Year 7 (number of pupils eligible for FSM)	Year 8 (number of pupils eligible for FSM)	Year 9 (number of pupils eligible for FSM)	Total	Average per year group
October 2025	110	90	-	200	100
October 2026	125	120	115	360	120
Difference in average number of pupils per year group	-	-	-	-	20
Number of pupils we would allocate additional funding for = average difference multiplied by number of year groups	-	-	-	-	60
Amount of funding allocated = number of pupils × £295	-	-	-	-	£17,700

No October 2025 census data is available for new mainstream schools opening between 3 October 2025 (the day after the October 2025 census) and the date of the October 2026 census. For those schools, we will adopt the same methodology as that set out in [mainstream schools – from reception to key stage 4](#), but use the number of FSM eligible pupils as recorded in the 2026 to 2027 authority pro forma, instead of the number of pupils recorded in the October 2025 census.

Special and AP schools

There will be no adjustment for new and growing special and AP schools opening between October 2025 and October 2026, or whose year groups are growing. This is because the data count is based on pupils resident in the local authority area.

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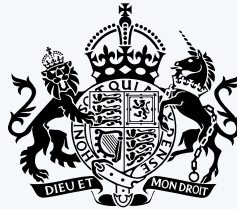
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