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Guidance

Free school meals expansion grant, 2026 to 2027: conditions of grant for local authorities and academies

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Applies to England

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Introduction

Legislation

The free school meals (FSM) expansion grant will be paid by the Secretary of State for Education as a grant under section 14 of the Education Act 2002.

In accordance with section 16 of that Act, the Secretary of State attaches the following terms to the grant payable.

Purpose

In June 2025, the UK government announced that, from the 2026 to 2027 academic year, the eligibility criteria for 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 to fund the expansion of free school meals.

DfE will pay the FSM expansion grant funding to local authorities for mainstream maintained schools and directly to mainstream academies and free schools. They will be paid on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education.

DfE will pay the FSM expansion grant funding to local authorities for:

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

Funding in respect of post-16 provision, except that in special school sixth forms, will be distributed through the existing mechanism. You can find more information in the [free meals in further education guide](#).

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.

Period

These conditions of grant cover the financial year 2026 to 2027.

Eligibility

Types of settings

Maintained mainstream schools, in respect of their reception to key stage 4 provision, are eligible to receive funding through local authorities.

Local authority funding is also available if there are additional costs in providing a free meal for a pupil in the cohort newly entitled to receive a free meal. This applies to:

- 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

The following settings are eligible to receive funding directly from DfE:

- mainstream academies and free schools, including studio schools and university technical colleges – in respect of their reception to key stage 4 provision
- city technology colleges

Refer to the [FSM expansion grant methodology](#) for eligibility.

Payments

Calculation

Allocations of this grant have been calculated using the [FSM expansion grant methodology](#).

Payment timetable

DfE will pay the FSM expansion grant for the 7-month period, September 2026 to March 2027, in one payment. This schedule also applies to new and growing schools.

Local authorities will receive one payment in February 2027 for their maintained mainstream schools, special schools and AP schools.

Academies will receive one payment in March 2027 and a further payment later in 2027 for the period from April 2027 to August 2027.

Academy conversions

In a small number of cases, mainstream schools that convert to academy status after the allocations spreadsheet is produced will still be listed as local-authority-maintained schools on the allocations spreadsheet. In such cases, the local authority should still pass the funding listed on the spreadsheet to the successor academy.

The grant allocation is intended for the school, and it will be assumed the local authority passed on the entire grant funding to the school immediately upon receipt from DfE. In addition, any unspent grant funding should remain with the school after it converts.

Local authority duty

Local authorities will be required to certify that they have passed on the correct amount of funding to schools in line with these conditions of grant. DfE will issue a certification form in spring 2027.

Local authorities must pass funding on in a timely manner and, before 31 March 2027, to:

- their maintained mainstream schools in line with their scheme for financing schools
- the eligible special and AP schools in which they have placed pupils

The FSM expansion grant will not affect a school's allocation through the pupil premium, national funding formula, or, with the exception of the universal infant FSM grant, any other source of existing funding in 2026 to 2027.

Mainstream schools

Local authorities must pay the FSM expansion grant funding to each:

- maintained primary and secondary school
- all-through maintained mainstream school

Local authorities must pass on the amount shown in the school-level allocations to these settings.

Local authorities must comply with the condition above irrespective of any deficit relating to the expenditure of the school's budget share.

We will publish the school-level allocations in February 2027.

In all settings, the FSM expansion grant funding for mainstream schools is not part of:

- maintained schools' budget shares
- the individual schools' budget
- academies' general annual grant

It is not to be counted for the purpose of calculating the minimum funding guarantee

for 2026 to 2027.

Special and AP schools

Local authorities are reminded that high needs top-up funding can reflect the provision and facilities required by individual pupils and students. These include the cost of any specific additional support to meet the individual's needs, or free school meals for those entitled to receive them.

Local authorities must ensure that that they pass on the FSM expansion grant funding to those eligible special and AP schools in which they have placed pupils, if those schools incur additional free meal costs as a result of the expansion to FSM eligibility from the 2026 to 2027 academic year. They must use, at a minimum, the rates and eligible pupil data on which their FSM grant allocations have been calculated.

This will require local authorities to ascertain, for each of the special and AP schools in which they have placed pupils whether the pupils they have placed are included in the expanded FSM data the school has reported in the October 2026 school census. If so, the local authority must also ascertain whether the school is already funded for providing a free meal to those pupils, through the high-needs top-up and other funding^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} the school receives

For those pupils whose meals are not already funded, the FSM expansion grant funding must be passed on to schools as soon as possible after local authorities receive notification of their allocations, and in any case before 31 March 2027. This is in addition to existing top-up funding from the authority.

The FSM expansion grant funding can be set against the local authority's existing contribution to the costs of meals through the top-up funding allocated when the school is already being funded to provide a free meal, because either:

- the existing top-up funding arrangements automatically recognise the additional costs of all those pupils eligible for a free meal, including those who will gain eligibility from September 2026
- a free meal is provided, regardless of the pupil's eligibility and without any expectation of parental contribution

Permitted use of funding

Eligible spend

Mainstream academies must only spend the FSM expansion grant funds received directly from DfE or, in the case of special and AP academies, through a local authority, for the purposes of the school.

Local authorities must:

- ensure that their maintained schools only spend the FSM expansion grant funds for the purposes of the school
- spend and certify their allocation of FSM expansion grant in accordance with the requirements set out under [local authority duty](#)

Assurance

Carry forward

In all schools, FSM expansion grant funds may be carried forward past 31 March 2027.

Records required

Local authorities and settings are required to maintain and keep clear records of income and expenditure in relation to this grant, including evidence of the use of funds.

Further information

Books, other documents and records relating to the recipient's accounts shall be open to inspection by the Secretary of State and by the Comptroller and Auditor

General.

The Comptroller and Auditor General may, under section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983, carry out examinations into the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which the recipient has used its resources.

Local authorities and schools shall provide information as may be required by the Secretary of State to determine whether they have complied with these conditions.

Variation

The basis for allocation of grant may be varied by the Secretary of State from that set out above, if so requested by the local authority or setting.

Recovery of funding

If a local authority or setting fails to comply with the terms and conditions set out in this document, the Secretary of State may recover some or all of the FSM expansion grant that has been allocated. This will be notified in writing to the local authority, school or college.

Recoveries will be made by invoice or by offsetting the amount against subsequent payments due from DfE.

The recipient must notify DfE immediately through the [customer help portal](#) if it becomes aware of any instance of error, suspected fraud or financial irregularity in the use of the funds.

Overpayments

If a setting or local authority identifies that it has been overpaid, it must contact DfE to arrange repayment of the excess. Where DfE identifies an overpayment, it may seek to recover the excess. The local authority or setting will be notified of this in writing.

Enquiries

For queries relating to these terms and conditions, use the [customer help portal](#).

1. “Other funding” does not include the universal infant FSM grant as, in June 2026, a one-off adjustment will be made to the methodology for calculating the universal infant FSM grant provisional payment for September 2026 to March 2027 to reflect the expansion of free school meals. You can find further information at [free school meals: guidance for schools and local authorities](#). ↩

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