Department
for Education

Guidance

# Free school meals: guidance for local authorities, local-authority-maintained schools, academies and free schools

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**Applies to England**

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# Main points

The government recognises the benefits of providing a healthy school meal to the most disadvantaged pupils.

The Education Act 1996, as amended, places a duty on maintained schools, academies and free schools to provide free school meals (FSM) to pupils of all ages that meet the criteria. This includes pupils in school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools.

A comparable duty to provide FSM to eligible pupils is placed on non-maintained special schools by the Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015.

## Changes for the 2026 to 2027 academic year

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit attending these schools will be entitled to receive a free meal.

We have made this a legal requirement through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 and intend to lay additional regulations extending this duty to maintained nursery schools.

Going forward, there will be 2 categories of benefits-based free school meals:

- **Targeted FSM**, which continues to be based on the existing threshold, covering pupils in households in receipt of Universal Credit with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less
- **Expanded FSM**, a new category covering pupils who do not qualify for targeted FSM, but who are in households receiving Universal Credit

> As a one-off arrangement for the autumn 2026 census, settings may complete FSM eligibility checks up to and including 2 November 2026, rather than the usual 1 October deadline. FSM eligibility checks completed by this

date and recorded through the autumn census will be factored into funding allocations.

**Ever 6 FSM Cohort**
Pupils who are, or have been, eligible for FSM over the last 6 years are part of the 'Ever 6' FSM cohort. This is used for disadvantage funding and accountability purposes. Following the expansion of FSM, Ever 6 FSM will be based on targeted FSM.

## Ending transitional protections

Transitional protections for free school meals have been in effect since 1 April 2018. This has meant that pupils becoming eligible for free meals under the benefits-based criteria have retained their entitlement, even if their household circumstances have changed.

Transitional protections apply until the end of the 2025 to 2026 academic year. All pupils eligible for free school meals under the benefits-based criteria before the end of the 2025 to 2026 academic year should continue to receive this entitlement until the end of that academic year.

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, transitional protections for free school meals will end. Households must meet the FSM eligibility criteria from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year to continue receiving provision.

## Rechecking eligibility

Going forward, FSM eligibility should be monitored by schools and local authorities on an ongoing basis through annual rechecks.

Rechecks should confirm that pupils in receipt of FSM continue to meet the eligibility criteria set out in this guidance, and the category of eligibility they fall under (either targeted or expanded).

Checks should be completed ahead of the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year. This is to allow all pupils to be ready to receive FSM from the start of the autumn

term. Pupils will not attract FSM funding if they do not have a valid recheck of eligibility ahead of the October census each year.

## Planning for increases

The new FSM entitlement will result in most schools experiencing an increase in pupils qualifying for free meals. Some will be taking school meals for the first time.

To plan effectively, we encourage schools to estimate how many additional pupils will:

- become newly eligible for FSM
- need to be served

Depending on information already held, schools may wish to survey families, including any families using nursery provision, on whether they:

- are in receipt of Universal Credit
- take a meal currently
- intend to take up meals from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year

> A summary of key changes to FSM that schools and local authorities need to take account of is included in the checklist in Annex D.

# Eligibility criteria for free school meals

The Education Act 1996, as amended, places a duty on maintained schools, academies and free schools to provide free school meals to pupils of all ages that meet the criteria. This includes pupils in school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools. A comparable duty to provide free meals to eligible pupils is imposed on non-maintained special schools by the Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015.

Eligibility for free meals is primarily based on being in receipt of certain benefits.

Specific eligibility criteria for benefits-based free meals are set out in the following section of this guidance. In this guidance, ‘free school meals’ (FSM) refers to meals provided to pupils whose households receive certain benefits.

In addition to meeting eligibility criteria set out in the Education Act, pupils attending school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools must be receiving full-time education, or if part time, must be receiving education both before and after the lunch period.

All pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 in state-funded schools are entitled to free meals under the universal infant free school meals policy.

Students enrolled in further education institutions funded by the Department for Education (DfE) are also entitled to receive free meals.

# Who is eligible for benefits-based free school meals

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, we are expanding FSM eligibility to all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit regardless of household earnings. Free school meals are available to pupils in receipt of, or whose parents 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 pupil is only eligible to receive a free school meal where both:

- a claim for this support has been made
- their eligibility has been verified by the school where they are enrolled or by the local authority

Households may also be entitled to a meal if they:

- are in receipt of income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- receive the guarantee element of Pension Credit
- meet criteria set out in separate guidance for families with no recourse to public funds

# Targeted FSM

Children from households in receipt of Universal Credit with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less (the existing threshold for FSM prior to the expansion), will be eligible for targeted FSM. In addition to receiving free meals, pupils eligible for targeted FSM will attract pupil premium and other disadvantage funding for their schools.

Pupil premium and other disadvantage funding is currently allocated in respect of pupils who are recorded in school census returns as eligible for FSM, or have been recorded as eligible for FSM in the past 6 years (referred to as Ever 6 FSM). From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, Ever 6 FSM will be based on targeted FSM. This cohort is also used for accountability purposes.

Other education entitlements previously linked to eligibility for FSM, such as the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) and the 'extended rights' element of school travel assistance, will also continue to be based on targeted FSM.

Households qualifying for free meals because they are in receipt of support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 will also be eligible for targeted FSM.

Households in receipt of Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or the guarantee element of Pension Credit or households with families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) may also be eligible for targeted FSM.

# Expanded FSM

Children from households in receipt of Universal Credit, with annual household earnings exceeding £7,400 will be entitled to expanded FSM (meals only).

# Transitional protections

Transitional protections for free school meals are in effect until the end of the 2025

to 2026 academic year[footnote 1]. This policy prevents loss of FSM entitlement for households whose circumstances change. It works in the following way.

Since 1 April 2018, all existing free school meals claimants have continued to receive free school meals while Universal Credit is rolled out. This applies regardless of any change in household circumstances, including if their earnings rise above the threshold during that time. Protections remain in place until the end of the 2025 to 2026 academic year.

All transitional protections for free school meals will end alongside the new entitlement applying to all households in receipt of Universal Credit. Pupils must meet the eligibility criteria for free meals to continue receiving this provision. Eligibility for free meals should be kept under regular review through annual rechecks. This guidance clarifies how DfE expects this process to run.

Pupils who stop being eligible for FSM when transitional protections end will still receive disadvantage funding through the pupil premium and the National Funding Formula (NFF), since they will still form part of the Ever 6 FSM cohort.

## Children receiving education otherwise than at school (EOTAS)

Under section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014, local authorities can arrange for 'any special educational provision' for children and young people otherwise than in school in circumstances where it would be 'inappropriate' for the provision to be made in school – referred to as 'EOTAS[footnote 2]'. These packages of support are put in place by local authorities, typically as part of a child's education, health and care plan.

No specific provision is made in legislation for free school meals to be provided to children who are in receipt of EOTAS.

We expect local authorities to consider making equivalent food provision for children who are receiving EOTAS under section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014 who meet both of the following criteria:

- the child would meet the criteria for targeted or expanded free school meals if they were in a state-funded school
- the meals would be provided in conjunction with education and would, in line with

the aim of free school meal provision, be for the purpose of enabling the child to benefit fully from the education being provided

Once this consideration has been made, local authorities should then assess the individual circumstances of the child to decide whether and how such provision can be made.

**Choosing the right approach**
In considering their approach to making food provision for relevant children, and in making decisions on particular cases, local authorities should act in accordance with the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights and comply with the public sector equality duty.

Local authorities may draw upon the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) in order to fund such food provision. Paragraph 34 of Schedule 2 to The School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2026, permits expenditure incurred in relation to, or in connection with, education provided other than at a school or post-16 institution under section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014 to be retained centrally from the DSG by a local authority.

# Checking FSM eligibility

From September 2026 onwards, FSM eligibility should be rechecked annually ahead of the October census.

For the 2026 to 2027 academic year, checks should be completed before the start of the autumn term so that all eligible pupils are ready to receive free school meals from the start of the academic year. This includes any pupils currently using any early years provision or due to start using early years provision from September 2026.

As a one-off arrangement for the autumn 2026 census, settings may complete FSM eligibility checks up to and including 2 November 2026, rather than the usual 1 October deadline.

Schools are responsible for ensuring checks are completed for their pupils but will need to work with local authorities to carry out these checks using the digital system made available by DfE.

The check result is valid for the full academic year.

## The new checking service

Since 1 June 2026, local authorities have been able to access the new checking service at Manage eligibility for free school meals.

This replaces the previous eligibility checking system (ECS) made available by DfE.

If a local authority or school currently make checks through in-house software, you can continue to do this.

We are working with all vendors in the market to ensure they can connect to the new service and provide accurate results confirming whether pupils meet the targeted or expanded FSM criteria.

## Making checks from September 2026

As of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, the checking service will be extended to provide a more flexible model for local authorities or schools to make checks, including a model where schools can make checks directly on the system.

We will provide more information in due course. Both schools and local authorities will access the service through DfE Sign-In.

Schools and local authorities will need to input specific data including claimant:

- surname
- date of birth
- National Insurance number

The checking service will then confirm whether families meet the targeted or expanded FSM eligibility criteria by verifying receipt of Universal Credit and annual earnings.

> A template for FSM applications (Annex A) is available alongside this guidance. This is designed to capture the information that schools and local authorities need to verify entitlement for FSM through the DfE checking service.

## Encouraging claims

To receive FSM, a claim must be made for this support by a pupil, their parent, or another responsible adult, as a condition of eligibility.

Schools and local authorities should record the date on which they receive the initial application for free school meals from a parent or guardian. Eligibility checks should be carried out promptly to ensure that families are able to receive free meals as soon as possible.

A family is only eligible for free meals either:

- once their claim has been verified through the checking service
- through provision of other acceptable evidence

Further information about other acceptable evidence is available in Annex B.

Schools may choose to receive applications by paper or online. While online applications can be more efficient, schools and local authorities should have an alternative system for those who cannot access an online system.

# New FSM claims

Many families will become eligible for the first time under the expanded FSM criteria. To ensure that those families can receive free meals from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, schools and local authorities should:

- promote awareness of the new FSM entitlement so families, including families using early years provision, know about support they might be able to receive
- begin accepting new FSM applications as soon as possible – we have provided a model registration form (Annex A) that schools and local authorities can use to support this activity
- prepare to start processing new applications as soon as possible from 1 June – families found eligible for FSM on, or after, 1 June are entitled to receive provision

for the whole of the 2026 to 2027 academic year

## Expectations for eligibility rechecks

Eligibility checks should be completed as soon as possible from 1 June and before the start of the academic year. This is to ensure families have advance notice about potential changes to their FSM entitlement and allow pupils to receive FSM from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

These should then be recorded in the October school census.

Rechecks should confirm whether pupils continue to be eligible for FSM, and whether they meet the targeted or expanded eligibility criteria.

Where rechecks carried out during the summer term show that a household no longer meets any eligibility criteria for FSM, DfE encourages provision to be made until the end of that academic year.

**Updating checking software**
As set out earlier in this guidance, DfE is making its FSM eligibility checking service available to all local authorities by 1 June. We have also provided an updated technical specification to the providers that offer checking services to schools and local authorities. These providers have indicated that they will carry out the technical work by 1 June, allowing their systems to provide targeted and expanded results.

In order to perform checks, local authorities will need to accept any software updates. If there are any issues with the software update process, local authorities can use DfE's free service themselves to conduct checks.

If local authorities are having issues taking the software update, we would recommend they speak to their provider initially, or if they have serious concerns contact DfE.

**Sign up for weekly updates**
DfE is providing weekly email communications to all local authorities on the rollout of the new web-based checking service before the launch on 1 June.

If you work in a local authority you can sign up to the eligibility checking system mailing list to receive updates.

Schools may also use this link to register their interest in receiving future communications about DfE's FSM checking service. We will run webinars before launch to run through the functionality of the system.

**Making checks through third parties**
Some schools also make checks themselves through third-party providers. If schools are worried that their vendors are unable to provide checking services by early June, advice in the first instance is to contact their local authority to conduct checks.

If this is not appropriate for schools, contact DfE and we will provide you with a mechanism to conduct checks.

## Recording FSM eligibility in the school census

Schools must ensure that they return accurate information about the FSM eligibility of their cohort of pupils through the school census.

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

Eligibility for all pupils in receipt of FSM should be checked as soon as possible from 1 June and before the start of the academic year.

A 'last verified' date (referring to the most recent check of FSM eligibility) in the school census returns between and inclusive of 1 June and 1 October 2026 is normally required for a pupil to be deemed as eligible for FSM and for their school to receive associated funding in 2027 to 2028.

As a one-off arrangement for the autumn 2026 census, settings may complete FSM eligibility checks up to and including 2 November 2026, rather than the usual 1 October deadline. This applies to both annual rechecks and new FSM claims.

# Funding for free meals

Schools and other settings will receive additional funding to reflect the increase in FSM eligibility from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year. The distribution mechanism for this additional funding will vary across age ranges and settings.

Mainstream schools and special and alternative provision (AP) schools, will receive their additional funding through a new grant – the 'FSM expansion grant' – in 2026 to 2027.

Funding arrangements for school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools are set out in the Early years free school meals (EYFSM) expansion grant.

> It is crucial that schools capture all eligible pupils through their October school census return for this to be accounted for in their funding allocations.
>
> It is also important that eligibility is rechecked for all pupils. As a one-off arrangement for the autumn 2026 census, settings may complete FSM eligibility checks up to and including 2 November 2026, rather than the usual 1 October deadline. Eligibility checks completed by this date, and recorded through the autumn census, will be factored into funding allocations. Only pupils whose eligibility has been verified between 1 June and 2 November will attract funding in 2027 to 2028.

## Mainstream schools

Mainstream schools (for pupils from reception to key stage 4), would normally receive funding in respect of free school meals as part of their core funding allocations. However, since core funding is allocated on a lagged basis, it will not include funding for the FSM expansion in 2026 to 2027.

The 2026 to 2027 FSM expansion grant will therefore provide schools with additional funding to help them meet the costs of providing more pupils with free meals before the lagged funding system has caught up.

It will be calculated based on the difference in FSM eligibility between the October 2025 and October 2026 census, at a per pupil rate of £505 per annum.

As funding will be paid for 7 months of the 2026 to 2027 financial year (from September 2026 to March 2027), the pro rata rate for that period will be £295 per

pupil.

**Allocations and payments**
Allocations will be published in February 2027 and payments will be issued to:

- local authorities for their maintained schools in February 2027
- academies in March 2027

Academies will continue to receive funding through the FSM expansion grant from 1 April to 31 August 2027, at a pro rata rate of £210 per pupil.

From 2027 to 2028 onwards, mainstream schools will receive funding for both targeted and expanded FSM pupils through their core funding allocations.

This will come into effect from:

- 1 April 2027 for local-authority-maintained schools
- 1 September 2027 for academies

## Special and AP schools

The FSM expansion grant funding for special and AP schools will be allocated to local authorities. They will pass on the funding to special and AP schools if they incur an additional cost in providing a free meal for a pupil who falls within the expanded FSM pupil cohort.

The same school census data and per-pupil rate will be used as for mainstream schools. The funding should be passed on as a supplement to the high needs top-up funding that local authorities allocate in respect of individual pupils they place at these schools.

Pupils at special and AP schools who are temporarily attending or attending part-time, and are sole or main registered at another school, will attract FSM funding to that other school.

The school they are registered at should therefore pass the relevant funding to the special or AP school as appropriate.

**From 2027 to 2028**
From 2027 to 2028, the FSM expansion grant funding will be included in local

authorities' allocations of high needs funding as part of their dedicated schools grant (DSG). This is so they can continue passing on the funding for additional free meals costs through the high needs top-up funding paid for pupils placed in special and AP schools.

## Early years

We will publish details of how funding will be allocated to local authorities in respect of the free school meals expansion in 2026 to 2027 in due course. This funding will be available for school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools.

We are consulting on changes to how early years funding is allocated and distributed to ensure funding continues to match need. We will use this consultation to inform our approach to distributing this funding for 2027 to 2028 onwards.

## Further education free meals grant

FE institutions and school sixth forms will receive additional funding through the existing further education free meals grant.

The free meals in further education funded institutions guide: academic year 2026 to 2027 provides detailed information on:

- eligible institutions
- funding allocations and payments
- returning census and individualised learner record data

## Universal infant free school meals (UIFSM)

Children in reception, year 1 and year 2 will continue to be entitled to free meals, regardless of the earnings or benefit status of their households. This support is made available under the universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) programme.

Families with children in reception, year 1 and year 2 should still be encouraged to

apply for benefits-based FSM. If they are eligible for targeted FSM, they could attract additional funding for their schools.

**Funding for UIFSM**
UIFSM funding is provided through a separate grant outside of core funding allocations.

Funding for UIFSM is provided for infants who:

- are not eligible for FSM through the benefits-based criteria (through either targeted FSM or expanded FSM)
- take up the offer of a free meal

As FSM eligibility expands, a number of infants will switch from being funded for UIFSM to being funded for expanded FSM. As a result, the number of infants funded through UIFSM will decrease.

Temporary revisions to the allocation of the UIFSM grant will be made to reflect the fact that infants currently receiving UIFSM will become eligible for the new FSM entitlement and receive funding in respect of the new entitlement instead.

Each year, the UIFSM grant is paid in one instalment. This is comprised of a provisional allocation for the next academic year based off infant take-up of meals in the current academic year, and a final allocation for the current academic year based off infant take-up of meals in the current academic year.

The provisional payment for the UIFSM grant in 2026 to 2027 will be adjusted downwards by 20%, based on departmental estimates of infant pupils becoming eligible for the new FSM entitlement. This is not a reduction in overall funding, but instead a transfer between 2 different funding streams.

Detailed information about the changes to UIFSM, as well as the allocations for the 2026 to 2027 financial year, will be published in June.

# Arrangements for providing meals

## Alternative arrangements to providing meals in

## school

In meeting their legal duties to provide free meals to eligible children, we expect schools to routinely offer a healthy and nutritious meal in school for their pupils.

We recognise, however, that in limited exceptional circumstances, this may not always be possible – such as during school closures as a result of unavoidable school building closures or attendance restrictions.

For such temporary circumstances, where education is still being provided, alternative arrangements can be made such as the provision of food parcels or vouchers.

## Duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled children

There may also be specific instances where the individual needs of pupils on roll at a school restrict them from accessing meals. This may be as a result of their disability.

Schools have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled pupils to prevent them being put at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with pupils who are not disabled [footnote 3].

For schools, this includes taking reasonable steps to avoid a disadvantage arising from a provision, criterion or practice applied by them and, where the absence of an auxiliary aid would give rise to a disadvantage, to take reasonable steps to provide the auxiliary aid.

This is an anticipatory duty, meaning schools must proactively consider whether reasonable adjustments are needed in order to prevent disadvantage from arising.

Schools are required to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils on roll at a school to ensure they are not put at a substantial disadvantage in relation to accessing meals. This includes disabled pupils who are eligible for free school meals.

**Making adjustments to access free school meals**
Schools are required to make such adjustments as are reasonable to enable such pupils to access their free school meal entitlement.

Schools should work with the pupil, their family and any other professionals involved to agree the necessary support.

Schools are best placed to determine the exact nature of a reasonable adjustment in relation to food provision, taking into account the individual circumstances of the child and their family, as well as schools' obligations under the school food standards.

It is good practice for the school to make a record of what reasonable adjustments have been agreed and ensure that all staff who work with the individual pupil are aware.

It is also recommended that the reasonable adjustments are regularly reviewed to make sure they are effectively helping individual pupils while at school. The support should be adjusted if the individual pupil's needs change.

Where a child has Special Educational Needs (SEN) and is either in receipt of SEN support or has an education, health and care plan, the disadvantage they experience may be overcome by support received under the SEN framework.

In other cases, a disabled pupil may need reasonable adjustments to be made in addition to their special educational provision.

While reasonable adjustments are a separate legal duty, it may be appropriate and helpful to review these adjustments as part of processes relating to SEND provision.

## Illustrative examples of reasonable adjustments (not exhaustive)

**A child has Autism which results in sensory processing difficulties leading to a restricted diet.** As a result, the child is unable to access free school meals which comply with the relevant food standards. The school, having engaged with the parents or carers and the child, determines that a suitable reasonable adjustment would be to issue food vouchers to the child's parents so they can provide a packed lunch that the child will eat.

**A child has Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) and therefore will only eat a particular type of sandwich.** The child is therefore unable to access free school meals that the school provides which comply with the relevant food standards. The school, having engaged with

the parent/carers and the child, determines that a suitable reasonable adjustment would be to provide the particular type of sandwich that the child eats on a daily basis, enabling them to access a meal during the school day.

## Making alternative arrangements for non-disabled children

Schools are not obliged to make reasonable adjustments for children who do not have a disability.

However, Section 100 of the Children and Families Act 2014 places a duty on governing bodies of maintained schools, proprietors of academies and management committees of PRUs to make arrangements for supporting pupils at their school with medical conditions. These may be food-related, for example a pupil may have a food allergy.

Schools should similarly therefore take appropriate action in supporting such pupils to access food provision.

## Early years nutrition

School-based early years providers (including local-authority-maintained schools, non-local-authority-maintained schools, local-authority-maintained nursery schools, free schools and academies) must also take into account the Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance especially:

- portion size for children aged 1 to 5 years
- considering dietary requirements in early years
- communicating with parents or carers
- developing a food and nutrition policy
- meeting the needs of all children, including children with additional support needs and other special diets
- allergies, intolerances, and coeliac disease

- food for religious faith and beliefs
- safely managing special dietary requirements

## Further information and advice on reasonable adjustments

For more information on reasonable adjustments see:

- Equality Act Guide for Schools – Council for Disabled Children
- Reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils – Guidance for Schools in England – Equality and Human Rights Commission

For more information on supporting pupils with medical conditions and allergies see:

- Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school
- School food standards: allergy guidance for schools
- School food standards: resources for schools
- Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school

1. Where a child was eligible for the extended rights element of school travel assistance on 31 March 2025 and remains eligible at the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, DfE expects local authorities to continue providing assistance until the child leaves their current phase of education or changes schools and is reassessed (whichever comes first). This reflects the fact that parents have already chosen schools based on their understanding of their travel assistance entitlement. ↩
2. EOTAS is distinct from elective home education, where parents have chosen to provide education for their children at home or elsewhere instead of sending them to school full time. ↩
3. Equality Act 2010 ↩

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