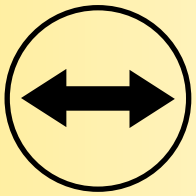
Proposals for Electronic Scheme for Determining Eligibility for Free School Meals

Consultation Document



LEA Responsibilities

Date of Issue: **8 January 2007**
Action Required: **Responses by 19 February 2007**

Yr Adran Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau
Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Title of document:	Proposals for Electronic Scheme for Determining Eligibility for Free School Meals
Audience:	Local Education Authorities, Local Authorities Caterers Association.
Overview:	This consultation is to give information and seek views on the proposed electronic scheme for determining eligibility for free school meals. This is intended to reduce bureaucracy, particularly for schools, to encourage take-up of entitlement by removing the stigma from the application process and to reduce the capacity for fraud and error. The aim is for a national scheme, based on LEA checking, in place of the various systems operating at present.
Action required:	Responses by **19 February 2007**.
Further information:	Mr Llion Hughes Additional Needs and Inclusion Division Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Welsh Assembly Government Cathays Park Cardiff CF10 3NQ Telephone no: 029 2082 3003 Fax no: 029 2080 1044 E-mail address: Appetiteforlife@wales.gsi.gov.uk
Further copies may be obtained from:	See Further Information above.
Related documents:	Appetite for Life

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PROPOSALS FOR AN ELECTRONIC SCHEME FOR DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

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Summary
This consultation is to give information and seek views on the proposed electronic scheme for determining eligibility for free school meals. This is intended to reduce bureaucracy, particularly for schools, to encourage take-up of entitlement by removing the stigma from the application process and to reduce the capacity for fraud and error. The aim is for a national scheme, based on LEA checking, in place of the various systems operating at present.

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

1 Background and Context

1.1 Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, launched a report on 4 July 2001 entitled “The Project to Reduce the Bureaucratic Burden on Schools in Wales”. One of the 16 recommendations contained in that report was “All schools connected to the Internet and able to undertake administrative tasks electronically”.

1.4 Section 110 of the Education Act 2005 allows data-sharing for the purposes of determining eligibility for free school lunches and milk. This will allow for data from Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) to be passed to the National Assembly for Wales and LEAs, in order to implement an electronic scheme for determining eligibility for FSM.

The Existing System

1.5 The existing systems for administering FSM vary across LEA areas, but all involve the manual checking of often complicated documentation by LEA or school staff, or sometimes both. This process is being made more difficult by changes in the way that benefits are being paid, for example, by the introduction of Tax Credits and benefits being paid directly into bank accounts.

1.6 We believe that it is necessary to remove the responsibility for checking eligibility from school staff and to introduce a new, efficient system which will reduce bureaucracy from LEAs and schools, reduce the stigma associated with the application process, and reduce the capacity for fraud and error.

2 The Proposals

An Electronic System

2.1 We propose to replace the many existing systems for determining eligibility for FSM with one secure, electronic system. LEA officials would register for use of the system, and would then have access to run simple checks on a claimant’s eligibility for FSM. This would be done by entering the claimant’s name and National Insurance number (NI no), and the system would return a result of ‘eligible’ or ‘not found’. The system would also be designed to handle bulk enquiries to facilitate easier processing, particularly for renewals.

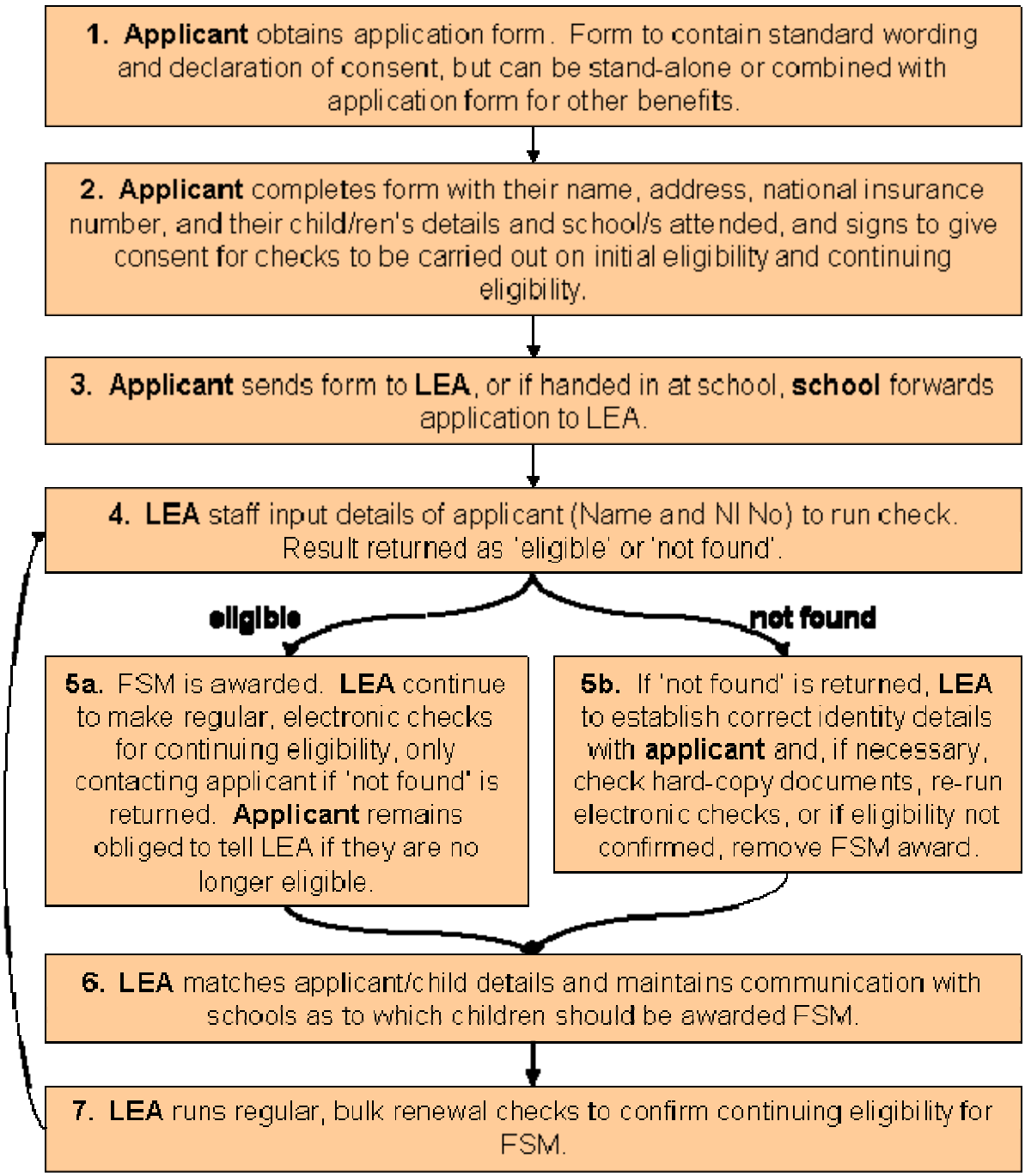
2.2 The objectives for the new scheme are to:

- reduce bureaucracy from schools and LEAs;

- reduce the stigma associated with the application process; and
- reduce the capacity for fraud and error.

2.3 Bureaucracy would be reduced by eliminating the need for school staff to carry out eligibility checks. Instead, a simple form would be completed by the claimant and LEAs would carry out quick electronic checks without the need for lengthy checking and analysis of complicated documents. The scheme would reduce the incidence of human error in checking documents and reduce fraud by eliminating the opportunity to claim by showing forged documents. The stigma associated with the application process would be reduced as applicants would no longer need to take documentary proof of eligibility into schools, but instead complete a brief form to be posted to the LEA offices.

2.4 This consultation is designed to inform LEAs of developments, and canvas views on the design of the new system in order to make it as valuable and efficient as possible for the end users. The current proposal for how the new system will work is shown in the following flowchart, with each stage discussed in more detail below:



2.5 *Applicant obtains application form. Form to contain standard wording and declaration of consent, but can be stand-alone or combined with application form for other benefits."*

Application forms should be made available at the most accessible places in the community for potential applicants – this could be the LEA offices, schools, local community centres etc. Standard wording will be strongly advised, particularly for the applicant's declaration, as it is not permitted to run checks without consent from the applicant.

2.6 *"Applicant completes form with their name, address, national insurance number, and their child/ren's details and school/s attended, and signs to give consent for checks to be carried out on initial eligibility and continuing eligibility."*

Forms will need to record the applicant's name, address and NI no, as well as the names of their child/ren and schools attended. The applicant must sign to give consent for an electronic check to be made, and this must be the person who is in receipt of the qualifying benefit. Partners would not be permitted to sign for consent on the applicant's behalf

Question 1: Would any further information normally be asked for in an application for free school meals (other than evidence of benefits paid), and if so, how would that information be used?

Question 2: Would you be happy to adopt standard wording for the application form, if advised in Welsh Assembly Government guidance?

Question 3: Are your current application forms for free school meals stand-alone forms, or do you combine with application forms for other benefits (e.g. housing benefit, council tax benefit, school uniform grants etc)?

2.7 *"Applicant sends form to LEA, or if handed in at school, school forwards application to LEA."*

We propose that under the new arrangements, the entire application process will be handled by the LEA, in order to meet the objective of reducing school paperwork. Therefore, the forms would be issued with an instruction to return to the LEA. This could be by post, in person, or electronically if the LEA were prepared to receive an electronic signature or confirmation of consent. If forms were returned to a school in error, the school could be asked to forward them to the LEA for processing, but we would not expect schools to be involved any further in determining eligibility.

2.8 There may currently be LEAs that are not involved in the process of determining eligibility for free school meals, with schools taking on this responsibility. It is important to note that we would expect these LEAs to make arrangements to take back this function. LEAs should also be aware that funding for determining FSM eligibility is a centrally retainable item within an authority's 'schools budget' as defined by Welsh Assembly Government regulations.

Question 4: Are schools in your area currently involved in checks, and if so, what are your opinions on returning this function to the LEA? If schools are currently involved in checking, please describe the extent to which they carry out this function.

2.9 *"LEA staff input details of applicant (Name and NI No) to run check. Result returned as 'eligible' or 'not found'."*

It is proposed that LEAs would be invited to nominate officials to register for use of the electronic system. This would be password-protected, and users would be expected to sign up to terms and conditions of use. Once registered, officials would be able to run checks by entering the name and NI no of the claimant concerned, and receive a response as to whether that individual is eligible, or not found on the database. We also propose to design the system so that it can either hold bulk details to be checked regularly or accept bulk uploads from a spreadsheet. This should enable LEAs to make checks on new applications and on continuing eligibility with minimum effort.

Question 5: Does your LEA have full internet access, and how many registrations would be required?

Question 6: Do you foresee any potential problems with the process outlined above?

2.10 *If eligible – "FSM is awarded. LEA continue to make regular, electronic checks for continuing eligibility, only contacting applicant if 'not found' is returned. Applicant remains obliged to tell LEA if they are no longer eligible."*

Once a claimant has given signed consent for his/her eligibility to be checked electronically, we propose that checks on continuing eligibility could be run without further need for paperwork. Further 'renewal' checks could be carried out in the same manner as initial checks, after an agreed period of time. Claimants would remain responsible for notifying the LEA if their circumstances change.

Question 7: How often should renewal checks be carried out, and what period would your audit department agree to?

2.11 "*If 'not found' is returned, LEA to establish correct identity details with applicant and, if necessary, check hard-copy documents, re-run electronic checks, or if eligibility not confirmed, remove FSM award."*

If the database returns a 'not found' result, we would ask LEAs to make further enquiries with the applicant. Their personal information would need to be verified – particularly the NI no, as any discrepancies would return a 'not found' result. If the details were correct, a further check could be run, or the applicant could provide documentary proof of a qualifying benefit. If 'not found' is returned on a renewal check, this may indicate that the claimant is no longer eligible, and contact should be made to remove FSM entitlement.

2.12 *"LEA matches applicant/child details and maintains communication with*

schools as to which children should be awarded FSM."

The details that will be entered onto the new system to determine eligibility for FSM will be the details of the person who is in receipt of a qualifying benefit. The legislation allows for information on these claimants to be passed to LEAs, but not to schools. Therefore, the LEA will have the responsibility of matching the claimant details to the child details, and informing schools which children are entitled to FSM. Information on individual benefit recipients must not be passed to schools, as this would not be a permitted use of the data under the proposed legislation. We would expect the list of children in receipt of FSM to be managed and updated by the LEA, possibly via the School Management Information System.

Question 8: Is this a reasonable approach to use the Schools Management Information system to manage data on FSM eligibility between LEAs and schools, and do you foresee any practical difficulties or have suggestions for other solutions?

2.13 *"LEA runs regular, bulk renewal checks to confirm continuing eligibility for FSM."*

We intend to design a system that will either hold bulk lists, or is able to upload lists for checking from a spreadsheet. This will enable renewal checks to be run at regular intervals with minimum effort. Currently, renewals are carried out at varying intervals in different LEA areas. We propose to recommend that renewal checks are spread throughout the year, and at a frequency taking account of current arrangements and the level of fraud experienced – views on this are requested below.

Question 9: Are you happy for renewal checks to be spread throughout the year, and at what frequency would you suggest?

Question 10: Please give an indication of any estimate of fraud associated with claiming FSM, what measures are taken to combat and prevent fraud and whether you attempt to recoup costs in any instances of proven fraud.

Question 11: Please give any other thoughts on the proposed system outlined above, and indicate whether you would be prepared to sign up for the new system.

Request for further Information

2.14 It would be very helpful if LEA respondents could provide the following information for their LEA:

- Number of 'new' FSM applications processed per year, by school and

LEA;

- Please describe the current process for handling new applications for FSM, including when peaks and troughs of workload occur.

- Number of 'renewal' FSM applications (i.e. for continuing eligibility) processed per year, by school and LEA;

- Please describe the current process for handling 'renewal' applications for FSM, including when peaks and troughs of workload occur, and how often each applicant is checked for continuing eligibility.

3 How to Respond

3.1 You can respond by completing the response form, and returning by post or email to:

Mr Llion Hughes
Additional Needs and Inclusion Division 2
Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
Welsh Assembly Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Email: Llion.Hughes2@Wales.GSI.Gov.UK

4 Additional Copies

4.1 Additional copies will be available from Llion Hughes on 029 2082 3003, or at the address above.

PROPOSALS FOR AN ELECTRONIC SCHEME FOR DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

RESPONSE FORM

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

The information you send to us may need to be passed to colleagues within the Department for Education Lifelong Learning and Skills or the Department for Work and Pensions and/or published in a summary of responses received in response to this consultation. We will assume that you are content for us to do this, and that if you are replying by e-mail, our consent overrides any confidentiality disclaimer that is generated by your organisation's IT system unless you specifically include a request to the contrary in the main text of your submission to us.

Please tick if you want us to keep your response confidential ☐

Name

_____

Organisation

_____

Address

_____

_____

_____

Email Address

_____

Telephone

_____

Question 1: "*Applicant completes form with their name, address, national insurance number, and their child/ren's details and school/s attended, and signs to give consent for checks to be carried out on initial eligibility and continuing eligibility"*

Would any further information normally be asked for in an application for free school meals (other than evidence of benefits paid) and if so, how would that information be used?

Comments:

Question 2: Would you be happy to adopt standard wording for the application form, if advised in the Welsh Assembly Government's guidance?

Comments:

Question 3: Are your current application forms for free school meals stand-alone forms, or do you combine with application forms for other benefits (e.g. housing benefit, council tax benefit, school uniform grants etc)?

Comments:

Question 4: Are schools in your area currently involved in checks, and if so, what are your opinions in returning this function to the LEA? If schools are currently involved in checking, please describe the extent to which they carry out this function.

Comments:

Question 5: Does your LEA have full internet access, and how many registrations would be required?

Comments:

Question 6: Do you foresee any potential problems with the process outlined above? (Paragraphs 2.4-2.9)

Comments:

Question 7: How often should renewal checks be carried out, and what period would your audit department agree to?

Comments:

Question 8: Is it a reasonable approach to use the Schools Management Information System to manage data on FSM eligibility between LEAs and schools, and do you foresee any practical difficulties or have suggestions for other solutions?

Comments:

Question 9: Are you happy for renewal checks to be spread throughout the year, and at what frequency would you suggest?

Comments:

Question 10: Please give an indication of any estimate of fraud associated with claiming FSM, what measures are taken to combat and prevent fraud and whether you attempt to recoup costs in any instances of proven fraud.

Comments:

Question 11: Please give any other thoughts on the proposed system outlined above (paragraphs 2.4-2.13), and indicate whether you would be prepared to sign up for the new system.

Comments:

Request for Information

It would be very helpful if LEA respondents could provide the following information for their LEA:

Number of 'new' FSM applications processed per year, by school and LEA:

By School: | **By LEA:**

Please describe the current process for handling new applications for FSM, including when peaks and troughs of workload occur:

Number of 'renewal' FSM applications (i.e. for continuing eligibility) processed per year, by school and LEA:

By School: ☐ **By LEA:** ☐

Please describe the current process for handling 'renewal' applications for FSM, including when peaks and troughs of workload occur, and how often each applicant is checked for continuing eligibility:

☐

During further development of the electronic system, we may require volunteers for further assistance during the development and testing process, or for any potential pilot of the system. Please indicate whether you would be happy to be contacted again for this purpose:

Yes: ☐ **No:** ☐

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge individual replies unless you tick the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply: ☐