

Dear Colleagues,

The Department for Education has announced changes to Free School Meal eligibility from September 2026. These changes will affect all families currently receiving or applying for FSM.

### **What is changing from September 2026?**

#### **End of transitional protection – We require a new application for all pupils**

- Current transitional protections for pupils eligible for Free School Meals will remain in place until the end of the 2025/26 academic year.
- From September 2026, transitional protections will end and eligibility will be determined by a pupil's current household circumstances.
- As a result, **all pupils currently receiving Free School Meals will be required to submit a new application**. Some pupils who are currently eligible under transitional protection may no longer be eligible if they do not meet the criteria.

#### **Expansion of eligibility & new FSM categories**

From September 2026 there will be two benefits-based FSM categories: **Targeted FSM** and **Expanded FSM**.

- **Targeted FSM eligible –**

Children will be eligible where their household is in receipt of Universal Credit and annual household earnings are £7,400 or less.

Pupils in this category will:

- Receive Free School Meals
- Attract Pupil Premium and other disadvantage funding
- Be eligible for associated benefits previously linked to FSM eligibility, such as the holiday activities and food programme (HAF). The 'extended rights' element of school travel assistance, will be based on targeted free school meals.

Children **may** also be eligible for Targeted FSM if their household is in receipt of one of the below benefits:

- Income Support
  - Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
  - Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
  - Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
  - The guarantee element of Pension Credit
  - Child Tax Credit (provided you're not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
  - Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for four weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
  - No Recourse to Public Funds
- **Expanded FSM eligible –**

Children will be eligible where their household is in receipt of Universal Credit and annual household earnings exceed £7,400.

Pupils in this category will:

- Receive Free School Meals
- **Not** attract Pupil Premium funding or other entitlements linked to Targeted FSM status including the HAF programme.

School census returns must accurately differentiate between Targeted and Expanded criteria. This distinction is important for schools' financial planning, reporting and family communications.

### **Ongoing eligibility checks**

- We will continue to review the eligibility of children throughout the academic year. Schools should ensure their Synergy list is correct and review pupil eligibility status' daily.
- A pupil's eligibility status may change throughout the academic year as household circumstances change. Schools should ensure that local processes support timely applications, reviews and communication with families. This includes ensuring that any in year new starters' eligibility has been confirmed by either the SBC Free School Meals Team or the student's previous education setting.
- Pupils who meet the eligibility criteria will remain eligible until the end of the academic year, at which point all applications will be re-checked.
- Pupils who are no longer eligible will continue to be rechecked at regular intervals throughout the year and once eligible will benefit as above.

## What schools need to do

- Ensure all families receive the parent communication attached.
- Encourage families to make an application as soon as possible. We are accepting applications for September now. Applications can be made through the Swindon Borough Council website: [Free school meals | Swindon Borough Council](#)
- For families unable to access the online application, please ask them to complete Annex A attached. For schools who receive a large volume of paper applications, we ask the information is collated on to the Bulk Eligibility Check by School Template document attached. This will help us ensure all applications are processed before the October census.
- Plan for an increased number of applications and a higher FSM uptake. It is believed that under the Expanded eligibility criteria, 500,000 children nationally will become eligible.

The DfE are holding a Free School Meals guidance webinar tomorrow which is available to Headteachers, School Business Manager's and any other staff involved in the delivery of FSM. Please refer to the Eventbrite website for further information: - [Free School Meals guidance - Session Two Tickets, Friday, June 5 • 3 PM - 4 PM GMT+1 | Eventbrite](#)

For any queries, or to discuss the above further, please contact [SchoolLunches@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:SchoolLunches@swindon.gov.uk) or 01793 464025.

Yours sincerely,

Free School Meals Team

Swindon Borough Council