

Free School Meal (FSM) FAQ's

Who is eligible for benefits-related free school meals?

Free school meals are available to pupils whose parents/carers are in receipt of any of the following 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 guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child tax credit (provided you are 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
- Universal Credit - if you apply on or after 1st April 2018 your **additional net earned household income must be less than £7,400 a year approximately £616 per month** (after tax and not including any benefits you get)

In addition, the following pupils will be protected against losing their free school meals as follows:

- Pupils who were eligible on 1st April 2018 or who became eligible since then continue to receive free meals even if their household is no longer eligible under the benefits/low earnings criteria up until March 2025 and then until the end of their current phase of education.
- New Applicants for free school meals on or after 1st April 2018 who are in receipt of Universal Credit and have earnings above the earned income threshold (as noted above) will **not be eligible** for free school meals.

Can an infant pupil be eligible for benefit-related free school meals even though they receive Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM)?

Yes! Any pupil, who attends school for at least one full day a week and whose parents match the eligibility criteria, can receive benefits-related free school meals. An infant pupil who is eligible will then be protected (under transitional protection) and will continue to receive free school meals even when they are no longer eligible for UIFSM i.e. when they move to Year 3.

Schools should note the importance of checking early for benefits-related FSM eligibility as confirmed eligibility will mean schools also receive the Deprivation Pupil Premium funding.

Are nursery pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals?

If a pupil attends a maintained nursery (including academies), for at least one full day a week (before and after the lunch break) and their parents are in receipt of a qualifying benefit then the pupil is eligible for benefits-related free school meals. Eligibility should be checked in the same way as all other pupils by submitting the parent/carers' details to fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk You should also check separately for Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) with fundedearlyeducation@surreycc.gov.uk If they continue to attend at least one full day a week until the start of their last summer term in nursery they are protected into Reception. If an

eligible nursery pupil stops attending for at least one full day a week, (e.g. attends mornings only), they are no longer eligible for free school meals and are not protected.

Is everyone in receipt of Universal Credit eligible for benefits-related free school meals?

No, it depends on net earned household income which must be less than £7,400 a year or £616.66 a month (after tax and not including any benefits).

A parent/carer believes their child is eligible, but they have a false result what do I do now?

You should ask the parent/carer to produce paper-based evidence which you can then use to help calculate whether a parent is eligible or not. If they are claiming Universal Credit, please remember that if the annual net earned household income is more than £7,400, (£616.66 per month), they will not be entitled. If you are in any doubt, please send the documentation through to fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk and we can complete a manual check confirming either way if there is an eligibility or not.

One parent's details are false; can we use the other parents?

If both parents have parental responsibility for the specific pupil, we can use either parent's information to help determine eligibility, giving the pupil the best chance to receive free school meal entitlement.

How do I create a batch file to submit to the free school meal checking service?

Please click on the following link to watch a video [How to create a FSM Batch file](#)

Why was my .CSV file rejected?

If your CSV file was rejected, please check that you do not have any data in Column G and beyond in the spreadsheet as the Eligibility Checking System (ECS) will reject the file and the data will not be processed creating a nil return.

What should I do if a surname is double barrel, includes an apostrophe or has a space.

With surnames that are either double barrel, with an apostrophe or multiple names, it can be difficult to work out the combination that will enable the system to match the parent to an eligible claim.

- If a surname has a space, then the space should be counted as a character e.g. Da Silva. You should type Da and then hit the space bar.
- If a surname has an apostrophe, then the apostrophe should be counted as a character e.g. O'Connell. You should type O'C
- For a double-barrel surname, you should try the first three letters of the first surname e.g. for Johnson Smith type Joh
- If you are uncertain, please contact fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk

The result is showing as 'pending keep checking' What does this mean?

This claim will need to be re checked. This means that the ECS system has not yet had a chance to process the parent's details to match them to an eligible claim. Please resubmit the details regularly until you get a final - TRUE or FALSE result.

There is a ‘no trace - check data’ result for a parent What does this mean?

The parent may have entered the wrong National Insurance (NI) number/date of birth/surname. You should re-check with the parents that what they have put down on the application form is correct and then once this has been clarified the data can be re-checked. It is important to ensure that the parent is using the **exact** surname that is held for them by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the tax office or the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and appears on their benefit statement.

What is ‘Transitional Protection’?

The FSM protections policy, ‘Transitional Protection,’ was introduced in 2018 to protect those eligible for benefits-related free school meals from becoming ineligible while Universal Credit was being rolled out. This was originally set to last until March 2022 and was subsequently extended to March 2023. The end date for protection has now been extended until **March 2025** when Universal Credit rollout is expected to be completed. This means that a pupil who was eligible on 1st April 2018 or has become eligible under the benefits-related earnings criteria since then will continue to receive free school meals, even if their household income exceeds the eligibility threshold, up until March 2025, (unless the DfE extend the end date further), and then until the end of their current phase of education.

Year Group (eligibility as of March 2025)	Protection Ends
Nursery	End of Primary (Year 6)
Reception	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 1	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 2	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 3	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 4	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 5	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 6	End of Primary (Year 6)
Year 7	End of Secondary (Year 11/13*)
Year 8	End of Secondary (year 11/13*)
Year 9	End of Secondary (year 11/13*)
Year 10	End of Secondary (year 11/13*)
Year 11	End of Secondary (year 11/13*)

*Y13 providing student continues to study in funded education

I have a pupil who has transferred from another school, and they are showing as eligible on our MIS (Management Information Systems) (Sims/Arbor). Can I assume this means that they are still eligible?

If schools receive a Common Transfer File (CTF) from the pupil's previous school and there is an open FSM period, this is an indication that the pupil may have 'Transitional Protection' (see above for further information). However, we advise you to contact the previous school to check that they did complete an eligibility check for benefits-related free school meals and to provide written confirmation to you. The response should be kept on the pupil's file in case of a future school audit.

How often should I submit my .csv batch files for checking?

Ideally weekly.

When you receive your results file from fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk, ensure that you update your MIS to show start date of pupil's eligibility where a TRUE result has been received. This results file should now be saved for future reference i.e. should your school be audited.

All FALSE results should be saved in a new document for future checking together with any new applications added to this file which now becomes your 'master.' We recommend this master file is rechecked for eligibility on a weekly basis, which means you should not need to submit single checks as you will be adding new applicants to your new master file for weekly checking. We recommend all FALSE results remain in your master file until such a time as the pupil leaves your school, which will ensure a future TRUE result is never missed. Remembering all eligible pupils also bring an entitlement for pupil premium, extra funding for schools

I have checked a pupil who was previously TRUE but is now showing as FALSE. What does this mean?

The school should **not** be checking previously 'TRUE' results as these pupils are covered by the 'Transitional Protection' until March 2025 at the earliest. You should only be checking previously FALSE results and new applications.

We have a new Reception starter who has an older sibling with 'Transitional Protection.' Does this mean that the new starter is automatically eligible for benefits-related free school meals?

No. 'Transitional Protection' is put in place on an individual not on a family basis. This means that pupils will not automatically become entitled to free school meals simply because their sibling receives the 'Transitional Protection.' The new pupil must meet the eligibility criteria at the time the application for free school meals is made, to be entitled to free school meals.

For new Reception pupils you will need to complete a new free school meal check, (unless they are already entitled from their Nursery setting). If the family's circumstances have changed, the result may come back as FALSE. This is quite common whereby one sibling is eligible, and one is not.

A parent has come to me to say that they no longer wish for their child to receive free school meals. Can I just take them off the list?

Occasionally, parents decide they no longer want their child to be recorded as eligible for benefits-related free school meals and they are entitled to do so. If the parent decides to stop their child's eligibility, you must inform them that the 'Transitional Protection' will also stop and if they change their mind later, they will need to make a new application. If the parent wants the

eligibility to cease, please add an end date to the FSM eligibility period in your MIS (e.g. SIMS, Arbor). This is the only occasion where an end date should be added. Ensure the parents' wishes are recorded on the pupils file.

We have checked a new pupil and they are showing as FALSE, but their older sibling is showing as TRUE. Are we able to transfer across their eligibility to them?

No. Although one sibling may be eligible, a separate application must be made for each sibling. The reason they could be showing as false may be a change of circumstances since the check on the older sibling was completed.

If a parent has children in multiple schools, can they submit one claim and share the result with the other schools?

No. When a parent qualifies for free school meals, schools claim the Deprivation Pupil Premium via the school census for their children. As this is a claim for public funds, schools must be able to provide the evidence that they checked the parent's eligibility in case they are audited. Accepted evidence can be either the TRUE result via the Eligibility Checking System (ECS) or a note on the pupils record to state their eligibility was confirmed on the CTF provided by the previous school.

What is the difference between free school meal eligibility and pupil premium?

There are four types of pupil premium based on a pupil's circumstances.

- For any pupil who is eligible for benefit-related free school meals a school can claim the Deprivation Pupil Premium by recording the pupil as free school meal eligible on the school census
- Service Child Pupil Premium
- The Looked After Child (LAC) Pupil Premium (paid to the Virtual School)
- The Post Looked After Pupil premium (PLAC).

Please see the Department of Education website for further details. [Pupil premium: overview - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-overview)

Are Looked After Children (LAC) or Post Looked After Children (PLAC) automatically eligible for free school meals?

No. A pupil is only eligible for free school meals if their parent or carer is receiving one of the qualifying benefits or the pupil was eligible for free school meals previously then the eligibility will be protected under the Transitional Protection

Can a legal guardian apply for free school meals for a pupil?

Yes, if they have parental responsibility and believe they will meet the criteria then we are able to use their details to check for eligibility.

Are foster carers eligible for free school meals?

The rules around eligibility for free school meals work the same for carers and foster parents as they do for birth parents. However, if a pupil was eligible for free school meals previously then the eligibility will be protected under the Transitional Protection.

Are families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) eligible for benefits-related free school meals?

The government has permanently extended free school meal eligibility to pupils in all households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), subject to maximum income thresholds. Schools and local authorities are not able to use the Eligibility Checking System (ECS) to confirm eligibility for these families as they will not be in receipt of Universal Credit or legacy benefits. Please see the government guidance which explains who these groups are and how all schools can check their eligibility for free school meals. [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds \(NRPF\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/providing-free-school-meals-to-families-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds-nrpf)

Am I able to backdate a free school meal claim?

We would not advise you to do this. The eligibility should be from the date the initial claim was submitted and a TRUE result returned.

I submitted a check for a parent using a NASS number but result returned was FALSE Why?

The Eligibility Checking System (ECS) provided by the Department for Education (DfE) does not always give an outcome for families using a NASS number to apply so further evidence may be needed to verify eligibility. You would need to contact the parent and request a copy of their letter from the Home Office and/or their Application Registration (ARC) card. This should then be emailed to fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk

What should I do if the check is found to be 'not eligible,' but the parent believes they are eligible?

If an application is FALSE and the parent and school believe this may be incorrect, then please request a manual check from fsmcheck@surreycc.gov.uk