

# Free school meals expansion from September 2026: Targeted FSM and Expanded FSM

## 1. Purpose

This briefing summarises the Department for Education’s updated guidance on the expansion of free school meals from the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

Schools should use this briefing alongside the DfE free school meals guidance, the operational readiness checklist and the relevant school census guidance.

## 2. Key change from September 2026

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, free school meal eligibility will expand to include all children from households receiving Universal Credit who attend schools in scope.

There will be two categories of benefits based free school meals:

Category	Who this covers	What this means
<b>Targeted FSM</b>	Pupils from households receiving Universal Credit with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less, alongside other eligible groups set out in DfE guidance	Free meal entitlement and continued link to pupil premium, Ever 6 FSM, disadvantage funding and relevant linked entitlements
<b>Expanded FSM</b>	Pupils from households receiving Universal Credit who do not meet the Targeted FSM threshold	Free meal entitlement only

Expanded FSM does not attract pupil premium. Other linked entitlements, including Holiday Activities and Food and extended rights for school travel, will continue to be based on Targeted FSM.

## 3. Transitional protections

Current transitional protections end at the end of the 2025 to 2026 academic year.

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, pupils must meet the relevant eligibility criteria to continue receiving free school meals. Schools should not assume that every pupil currently receiving benefits based free school meals will continue to be eligible in the same category from September 2026.

Where a pupil no longer meets any FSM eligibility criteria when transitional protections end, they may still remain in the Ever 6 FSM cohort for disadvantage funding and accountability purposes, but they will not continue to receive free meals unless they meet the new eligibility criteria.

#### **4. Claims and eligibility checks**

A pupil is only eligible to receive a free school meal where a claim has been made and eligibility has been verified by the school.

Schools should prepare to accept new applications as soon as possible. Families found eligible on or after 1 June 2026 will be entitled to receive provision for the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

Eligibility checks should be completed as soon as possible from 1 June 2026 and before the start of the academic year. This will help ensure that families have advance notice of any change to entitlement and that eligible pupils can receive free meals from the start of the autumn term.

All pupils in receipt of FSM should have a valid eligibility check recorded between 1 June and 1 October 2026 inclusive. This is required for FSM and associated funding purposes in 2027 to 2028.

#### **5. School census and recording**

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

Schools should ensure that:

1. current FSM pupils are rechecked
2. new applications are processed promptly
3. Targeted FSM and Expanded FSM are recorded accurately
4. the most recent eligibility check date is recorded correctly
5. autumn census returns reflect the correct FSM category

Accurate recording is important for pupil entitlement, school funding and future disadvantage measures.

#### **6. Operational readiness**

Most schools are likely to see an increase in the number of pupils eligible for free meals. Schools should use the summer term to assess likely demand and prepare operational arrangements, including catering capacity.

Families with children in reception, year 1 and year 2 should still be encouraged to apply for benefits based FSM. These pupils already receive a free meal under universal infant free school meals, but a successful Targeted FSM claim may attract additional funding for the school.

## 7. Funding

DfE has confirmed that additional funding will be provided through the FSM expansion grant in 2026 to 2027.

For mainstream schools, the grant will be based on the difference in FSM eligibility between the October 2025 and October 2026 census. The annual rate is £505 per pupil. As funding will be paid for the seven month period from September 2026 to March 2027, the pro rata rate for that period will be £295 per pupil.

DfE will publish school level allocations in February 2027. Local authorities will receive funding for maintained schools in February 2027 and academies will receive funding in March 2027.

Funding arrangements for school based nurseries and maintained nursery schools will be confirmed by DfE in due course.

## 8. Parent communication

BCC will provide separate suggested wording for parents and carers, which schools may adapt for newsletters, websites and direct communications. This is provided as optional support only. Schools remain free to communicate with parents and carers in the way that best meets their local context.

## 9. Actions for schools

<b>Action</b>	<b>Suggested lead</b>	<b>Timing</b>
Read the updated DfE FSM guidance and operational readiness checklist	Headteacher, business manager	Now
Identify current pupils receiving benefits based FSM	Business manager, data lead	Before 1 June 2026
Prepare to accept and process new FSM applications	Business manager, office team	From 1 June 2026
Recheck all pupils currently receiving FSM	Business manager, office team	1 June to 1 October 2026
Ensure MIS records distinguish Targeted FSM and Expanded FSM	Data lead, business manager, MIS provider	Before autumn census

Review catering capacity and likely meal uptake	Headteacher, caterer, site team	Summer term 2026
Communicate key changes to families, including early years families	Headteacher, office team	Summer term 2026
Keep records of applications, verification and eligibility outcomes	Business manager, office team	Ongoing
Check autumn census recording before submission	Headteacher, data lead	Autumn census 2026

## 10. Source documents

Schools should refer to the following DfE documents:

1. [Free school meals: guidance for local authorities, local authority maintained schools, academies and free schools](#)
2. [Operational readiness checklist for schools, Annex D](#)
3. [Evidence of eligibility for free school meals, Annex B](#)
4. [Pupil premium 2026 to 2027 technical note](#)
5. [Free school meals expansion grant, 2026 to 2027: conditions of grant](#)

