

Free School Meals Administration



Service Level Agreement 2026/27

Introduction from Service Lead

Dear Headteacher, Chair of Governors and School Business Manager

Welcome to the Service Schedule for Free School Meals Administration, which contains all of the information you will need about our service.

We look forward to working with you.

Sam Bradley

Performance and Integration Manager, Learning and Skills, People Directorate

Please note: The Free School Meals Administration offer for 2026/27 has not had any significant changes to the previous year, however from September 2026 the DfE are changing the free school meals eligibility criteria, making all children in households claiming Universal Credit eligible for FSM. They are also redesigning the system that's used to check eligibility – ECS. The processes detailed within this SLA are based on the current eligibility criteria and checking system. When more details are released from the DfE regarding the changes in 2026, information will be circulated to schools at that time.

Description of our service

The Performance and Integration Team in Learning & Skills provides a comprehensive administrative support service to schools in respect of the processing and checking of benefits-related free school meal applications. This includes utilising the National Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service (ECS), a web portal that schools do not have access to. The use of this service allows us to process applications quickly and efficiently.

Our software platform allows parents/carers to easily apply online and they are able to view a preliminary eligibility result at the end of their application. For parents/carers who are unable to access the internet or complete online forms, other methods of application are available.

Our website contains information for schools/parents/carers regarding the eligibility criteria and details on how to apply.

Schools who sign up to the Free School Meals Administration Service Level Agreement have access to a live (real-time) portal to view the details of students in their school who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals (where an application has been submitted to the local authority).

Eligibility guidance:

Free School Meals

Statutory entitlement to Free School Meals only applies to children in maintained schools, including the extended eligibility criteria for those in reception, Years 1 and 2 (Universal Infant Free School Meals). Academies and free schools are required to follow the Free School Meals legislation as if it applied to them by virtue of their funding agreements. Free School Meals requirements do not apply to children in the private, voluntary or independent sector.

A pupil is only eligible to receive a free school meal when a claim for the meal has been made on their behalf, and their eligibility has been verified by the school/local authority where they are enrolled.

In order to qualify for Free Schools Meals:

- A child must be a registered pupil of a school
- If the child is under compulsory school age, the child must be receiving full time education, or if part time, receiving education before and after the lunch break
- Under current criteria the child's parent/carer must be in receipt of any one or more of the following benefits:
 - Income support (IS)
 - Income-based jobseeker's allowance (IBJSA)
 - Income-related employment and support allowance
 - Support under Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
 - The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
 - Child Tax Credit (but not Working Tax Credit) and have an annual income not exceeding £16,190, as assessed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
 - Working Tax Credit four-week run-on (the payment someone receives for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit)
 - Universal Credit - from 1 April 2018 if a parent is entitled to Universal Credit they must have an annual net earned income equivalent to and not exceeding £7,400, assessed on up to three of the parent's most recent Universal Credit assessment periods, to be eligible.
- A child who is in receipt of a qualifying benefit in their own right is also entitled to Free School Meals.

School Nursery Children and Free School Meals

The child must be a registered pupil of the school. Pupils attending a local authority maintained, academy or free school nursery are entitled to free school meals, as long as they are either in full time education or receive education both before and after the lunch break and meet the benefits based free school meal eligibility criteria.

If the parent/carer meets the eligibility criteria by being in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits, the pupil will appear on your School Access Module (SAM) showing as being eligible for Free School Meals, but the school will need to check if the pupil meets the additional criteria regarding the qualifying sessions attended.

Schools with a Sixth Form

The 1996 Education Act requires maintained school and academy sixth forms to provide free meals to disadvantaged students aged over 16. The parent/guardian or student themselves needs to be in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits.

Transitional protection

Transitional protection arrangements introduced in the 2018 to 2019 academic year continue to apply. A pupil who was free school meals eligible on 1 April 2018, or who has become eligible under the benefits/low-earnings criteria since then, will continue to receive free meals until the end of the school year in 2025/26 (July 2026).

From the start of the 2026/27 school year, the Department for Education will introduce new eligibility criteria meaning that all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit will be entitled to receive a free meal. It is their intention to end transitional protections alongside this change in threshold, with eligibility for all pupils reverting to whether they meet the eligibility criteria regardless of whether they were previously protected. The DfE will issue further guidance ahead of September 2026.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

The DfE has permanently extended free school meal eligibility to children in all households with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), subject to maximum income thresholds. The DfE guidance explains the full eligibility criteria [Families with no recourse to public funds \(NRPF\) | Shropshire Council](#) The ECS checking system can't be used to determine NRPF free school meals eligibility, a specific application form need to be completed and eligibility assessed manually. For pupils who qualify for free school meals under NRPF criteria, the transitional protections don't apply – eligibility needs to be re-checked regularly.

Individual responsibilities of our staff

Roles	Responsibilities
Service Manager, Business Support, Learning & Skills	Management of the traded service detailed in this schedule.

Our obligations and requirements

What we will do for you:

Ref.	
P1	Support parents/carers in applying for free school meals online via the Shropshire Council website, by hard copy application form or by telephone through Customer Services.
P2	Provide all the relevant forms and links to information relating to free school meals eligibility together with support and advice on the criteria for parents/carers and schools.
P3	Process all applications received and check eligibility against the legal requirements.
P4	Communicate with parents/carers by notifying them of the result of the eligibility check or if further information is required to determine eligibility. Help answer questions relating to the criteria. Upon request from the parent/carer, look into and determine the reason behind the result of the Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) check.
P5	Schools who subscribe to the Free School Meals Service Level Agreement have access to a live portal (School Access Module) to view the details of students in their school who are eligible for benefits-related FSM (where an application has been submitted to the local authority). The portal provides information to show if an application has been made for a pupil and the outcome of the application at that time.
P6	Provide a comprehensive support service that allows for immediate responses to eligibility queries via the local authority's access of the National Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service (noting schools do not have access to this web portal).
P7	Review and monitoring of the eligibility of existing claims based on Department for Education guidance.
P8	Additional support for schools, where required, to establish eligibility for children with transitional protection for free school meals, where they have transferred from out of area schools.
P9	Secure storage in line with the Shropshire Council Corporate Retention Schedule.

What we require from you...

Ref.		Date required (if applicable)
C1	Signpost parents/carers to the comprehensive service rather than having to manage and process the applications in the school.	
C2	Forward any free school meals applications received in the school at the earliest opportunity.	
C3	Cross-reference the information held on the School Access Module showing students who are eligible for Free School Meals against the school's own management information system and update the records accordingly.	
C4	Inform us when a new student starts school who has transferred from an out of area school and the CTF indicates that the student may be transferring with ongoing, transitional protection for free school meals.	

Days/times during which services are to be available

Agreed days as per delivery schedule	Service operating hours Monday to Friday 08:45 – 17:00
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Charging and enquiries

For details on the various packages available for this service, including pay-as-you use options, or if you have any queries or issues regarding your service arrangements, please contact us on the below contact details.

Contact information

For more information	
Contact name	Anne Cholmondeley or Janet Gregson-Pike
Role	System Co-ordinators - Free School Meals
Telephone	01743 254494 or 01743 254677
Email	fsm@shropshire.gov.uk