Changes to eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM)

In April 2018, the criteria used to determine which pupils are eligible for free school meals in England was updated to reflect the introduction of Universal Credit and the phasing out of other income-based benefits. The updated criteria are being introduced following a public consultation.

Updated eligibility criteria under Universal Credit

The Government is simplifying the welfare system by gradually replacing a number of income-related benefits with Universal Credit.

This means that a number of the legacy benefits that previously entitled families to free school meals are being phased out and will cease to exist. As a temporary measure, Universal Credit was added to the list of qualifying benefits for free school meals in 2013, pending the introduction of new eligibility criteria. The temporary criteria were designed to ensure that families moving onto Universal Credit in the early stages of rollout did not lose their entitlement to free school meals.

The Department has now made amendments to the eligibility criteria for free school meals to reflect the introduction of Universal Credit. These new criteria will come into force on 1 April 2018.

Who is eligible for free school meals?

Free school meals are available to pupils in receipt of, or whose parents are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit (provided you have an annual net earned income of no more than £7,400, as assessed by earnings from up to three of your most recent assessment periods)
- 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

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

- From 1 April 2018, all existing free school meals claimants will continue to receive free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out. This will apply even if their earnings rise above the new threshold during that time.

- In addition, any child gaining eligibility for free school meals after 1 April 2018 will be protected against losing free school meals during the Universal Credit rollout period which at present is expected to be complete by March 2022.

- Once Universal Credit is fully rolled out, any existing claimants that no longer meet the eligibility criteria at that point (because they are earning above the threshold or are no longer a recipient of Universal Credit) will continue to receive free school meals until the end of their current phase of education (i.e. primary or secondary).

The Universal Credit rollout is currently expected to complete in March 2022.
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 where they are enrolled or by the local authority.

A separate claim must be made for each qualifying pupil, schools cannot automatically mark siblings as eligible for FSM if another sibling is eligible, evidence of the outcome for each pupil must be sort.

SIMS

During the transitional period it is expected that schools will only record FSM end dates in SIMS if the parent has withdrawn the FSM claim or the pupil has transferred from a school in Scotland or Wales where the FSM entitlement regulations are different.

We have created a report that schools can import which will identify any pupils with a FSM end date on or after 1 April 2018. The report can be downloaded from our website.

Report Def File

Further information and useful links

DfE FSM Guidance for schools and local authorities

FSM & Pupil Premium Registration Form

Government response to FSM & EY entitlements under Universal Credit