

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

Key change from September 2026

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility will expand to include all children from households receiving Universal Credit who attend eligible schools.

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

Category of FSM	Which pupils are covered	What this means
Targeted FSM	Pupils from households receiving Universal Credit with annual household earnings of £7,400 or less, alongside other eligible groups set out in DfE guidance.	These pupils are entitled to a free daily meal in school and schools will receive Pupil Premium for them. When/if they cease to be Targeted FSM eligible, they will be tracked as Ever 6 FSM. They will also be eligible for Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) and may be eligible to linked entitlements such as school transport.
Expanded FSM	Pupils from households receiving Universal Credit who exceed the Targeted FSM income threshold	These pupils will receive a free daily meal in school only. Schools will not receive Pupil Premium and, when/if they cease to be Expanded FSM, they will not be considered Ever6. They are not eligible for linked entitlements such as HAF or school transport.

Transitional Protection, which has been in place since April 2018, will finish at the end of this academic year.

To qualify as either 'Targeted' or 'Expanded' FSM, 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 from September 2026.

If a pupil who was classed as Transitional Protection no longer meets any FSM eligibility criteria when transitional protections end, they will become Ever 6 FSM for tracking and funding purposes, but they will not continue to receive free meals unless they meet the new eligibility criteria.

Pupils in Reception to the end of Year 2 will continue receiving meals funded by the Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) scheme. Parents of these pupils should continue to apply for means tested FSM to identify those eligible for linked entitlements.

Eligibility checks, reporting and census recording

From September a pupil will only be eligible to receive a free school meal where they have been checked under the new criteria (see above). No new consent to check is needed, as the prior consent will cover the new checks.

Once the new software is in place (SAM report will show use of the terms Expanded and Targeted), schools should actively encourage parents of new students, those who do not have a current status of 'Transitional Protection' or 'Not Eligible', or those who we do not hold re-check information for (we will be contacting schools in July to notify them of who these pupils are) to apply as soon as possible using the application on the Lincolnshire County Council website: [Apply for free school meals – Lincolnshire County Council](#). Please note that schools will no longer be able to use the FSM school snap survey as requests may trigger a status change which is not necessary.

Pupils found newly eligible under the '**Expanded**' criteria, on or after 1 June 2026 will only be entitled to receive meals from September 2026 for the full academic year. From 1st June these will show on your SAM module as 'Eligible' until the new software comes into place and will then change to 'Expanded'. Please note that the start date should be entered as 01/08/2026 meaning no meals should be given until September.

Any newly eligible pupils who fit the '**Targeted**' criteria will continue to be updated on your SAM module as usual, initially as 'Transitional Protection' then as 'Targeted' after updates. These pupils can start receiving meals and other related entitlements such as HAF immediately. If their start date is between 1st June and 1st October 2026 then this will be their status until the end of the 2026/27 academic year.

Lincolnshire County Council are aiming to complete all re-checks before the end of the summer term. As current Transitional Protections and eligibilities carry through until the end of term and for HAF, please ensure you keep details of pupils with Transitional Protection on your pupil management software. You may also wish to download a copy of your SAM report so that you can refer to it once re-check statuses start showing on your report, as these will reflect eligibility for September.

Once re-checks have been made, all FSM pupils should have a valid eligibility check recorded between 1 June and 1 October 2026. These will show on your SAM report along with which FSM category they will be.

Please ensure that every FSM child on your Pupil Management Software has this new date entered as their eligibility verification date (a new field for census) before the October Census. This is required for FSM and associated funding purposes in 2027 to 2028.

Schools will also need to specify whether pupils are 'Expanded' or 'Targeted' in their software for Census returns.

Any pupils previously Transitionally Protected who are not either 'Expanded' or 'Targeted' need to have an FSM end date of August 2026 recorded.

If a child is not-eligible, Lincolnshire County Council will re-check monthly in case family circumstances have changed. If they are subsequently found eligible then this will show on your

SAM report and then they will not be automatically re-checked again for the rest of the academic year.

Please note: If a parent re-applies (this may be to add a sibling or due to a change in circumstance) then their child may be found to be not-eligible in the latest check and this would become their new status. Provision may continue to be made at the discretion of the school.

Communicating with Parents

Schools are encouraged to ensure parents are informed as soon as possible if their child is eligible for a Free School Meal along with information on how to order meals.

Those who previously had meals under Transitional Protection and are no longer eligible need to be informed as soon as possible so they can make plans for purchasing meals or providing a packed lunch.

A template letter that you may wish to send to parents explaining the changes has been made available.

School Food Standards

All meals provided by schools should comply with mandatory School Food Standards. The standards are currently being updated with changes to be in place starting September 2027. For more information please email FoodEducation@lincolnshire.gov.uk. Template packed lunch policies are also available.

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.

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.

Early Years FSM

Guidance on Early Years Free School Meals (EYFSM) funding will be issued shortly to clarify arrangements for state-funded school-based Early Years provision. This deprivation-targeted grant will be fully passed on to eligible providers and used only to deliver free meals to expanded and targeted early years FSM pupils meeting the criteria. Further information will be distributed once guidance has been published.

Children in care

We are still awaiting final confirmation about eligibility for Children in Care. Until further information is provided, Lincolnshire County Council will continue to suspend Free School Meal eligibility for those children who are in Lincolnshire placed funded foster care arrangements. This is due to the food element of the foster carer allowance.

Pupils with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

Schools with NRPF pupils (this is likely to include those entering the UK as Asylum seekers who do not have National Insurance number) will need to re-check evidence before the October census and reaffirm that they are satisfied they fulfil the NRPF criteria.

If a formerly NRPF pupil's parent or carer now has a National Insurance number, they will need to be re-checked using the NI number as any other family and will then cease to be NRPF.

As usual, schools need to retain the evidence and the date of the evidence re-check needs to be entered in 'last checked date' and logged as between 01/06/26 and 01/10/26.

See below DfE document links (items 6 and 7) for eligibility criteria and application form.

Mid-year admissions from September

As currently, if a CTF from another school, or evidence such as a letter can be provided that confirms eligibility with a start date from 1 June and 1 October 2026, then a pupil can retain their FSM status until the end of the academic year without being re-checked. If a parent re-applies then their child may be found to be not-eligible and this would become their new status. Provision may continue to be made at the discretion of the school.

At the end of the academic year they will need to be re-checked and will need to be prompted to reapply using the application on the Lincolnshire County Council website, [Apply for free school meals – Lincolnshire County Council](#).

If there is no FSM eligibility evidence, please encourage parents to apply as above.

Actions for schools

Summer Term 2026

- Once new software is in place, encourage parents of new to school, existing pupils without a current status of 'Transitional Protection' or 'Not-Eligible' and those who we do not hold re-check information for, to apply for Free School Meals at [Apply for free school meals – Lincolnshire County Council](#)
- Identify any pupils on roll who are currently eligible for Free School Meals under No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and conduct re-checks

After re-checks completed

- Contact parents of 'Targeted' or 'Expanded' FSM pupils to notify them of their eligibility and provide meal ordering information
- Notify parents of pupils who previously received meals due to Transitional Protection but who are now not eligible for FSM so that they can make alternative arrangements

Before October Census – to be updated on Pupil Management Software. Please ensure:

- All FSM pupils have an eligibility start date between 01/06/2026 and 01/10/2026
- All FSM pupils are identifiable as 'Expanded' or 'Targeted'
- Any previously Transitionally Protected pupils who are now neither 'Targeted' or 'Expanded' FSM have an end date

Mid-year admissions

- Use evidence to retain FSM criteria but at the end of academic year, remind parents to re-apply on Lincolnshire County Council website
- If no FSM evidence is available, encourage application as soon as possible

If you have any questions regarding this guidance, please contact free_school_meals@lincolnshire.gov.uk for assistance.

Education Support, Lincolnshire County Council

Schools should refer to the following DfE documents:

1. [Free school meals: guidance for local authorities, local-authority-maintained schools, academies and free schools - GOV.UK](#)
2. [Operational readiness checklist for schools \(Annex D\) - GOV.UK](#)
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](#)
6. [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds \(NRPF\) - GOV.UK](#)
7. [Application_form_for_free_school_meals_from_families_with_no_recourse_to_public_funds_NRPF.docx](#)