Staffordshire County Council

Schools Data Team
Additional Notes – Free School Meals Eligibility
For: All schools

Free School Meal Eligibility

This data is needed for on roll pupils.

To minimise the impact of the rollout of universal credit and the introduction of a net-earned income threshold to determine eligibility for free school meals, transitional arrangements have been put in place to ensure that no pupil loses a meal as a result of these changes.

Transitional protections ensure that any pupil in receipt of free school meals on 31 March 2018 or after, should continue to receive free school meals until the end of the universal credit roll out period, and then until their phase of education ends. This covers until at least March 2025 and applies even if their circumstances change and they would no longer meet the eligibility criteria.

You should not enter end dates unless:

- a parent has said that they do not wish the child to be recorded as eligible for free school meals and receive a free school meal
- a pupil transfers from another UK country – their non-English free school meals must have an end date
- a parent notifies the school that their support under the Immigration & Asylum Act 1999 or the pension credit has ended
- a parent notifies the school that they no longer qualify for free school meals under the criteria for families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

We use the following 3 data items to collect this information:

- free school meal eligibility start date
- free school meal eligibility end date
- country of UK (this will be system generated and will not require any data entry by schools)

Recording children receiving free school meals under the criteria for families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)

Since April 2022, free school meal eligibility was permanently extended to children from all groups with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), subject to the following income thresholds where applicable:

£22,700 per annum for families outside London with one child

£26,300 per annum for families outside London with 2 or more children

These children should be marked as receiving free school meals on the school census, in the same way that children who are eligible for free school meals under the benefits-based criteria would be.

You should retain any evidence of eligibility for audit purposes.

Collection periods

Term	Collection period
2026 Spring school census	started on or before 15/01/2026, where the free school meal end date is either not present or between 03/10/2025 and 15/01/2026 (inclusive)

Where schools have free school meals eligibility flagged for a pupil in their systems, they must ensure their systems include a free school meal start date ready for collection in census and transfer in common transfer files.

You can return multiple free school meals eligibility start and end dates falling within the periods above where applicable.

For example, a pupil had been eligible for free school meals from 1 September until 1 October in a school in Wales and moved to a school in England and claimed eligibility from the 2 October.

For the first period of eligibility, enter:

- a free school meal eligibility start date of 01/09/2025 and an 'FSM' eligibility end date of 01/10/2025. The UK country code must be recorded as 'WLS'.

For the second period of eligibility, enter:

- a free school meal eligibility start date of 02/10/2025 and no 'FSM' eligibility end date. The UK country code must be blank or recorded as 'ENG'.

Eligibility for free school meals

Schools should record periods of free school meals eligibility for pupils where a claim has been made by them or on their behalf and either:

- the relevant local authority or school has confirmed that they are entitled to free school meals
- the relevant local authority or school has seen the necessary documentation that confirms entitlement to free school meals

The Education (School Lunches) (Prescribed Requirements) (England) Order 2003 describes an additional requirement for children who have not attained compulsory school age but receive education in a maintained setting. Such children must be registered pupils and be 'receiving education both before and after the lunch period' before being eligible for free school meals.

It is not necessary for schools or local authorities to calculate a family's annual taxable income. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) performs this income calculation and this figure is used to determine free school meal entitlement.

Free school meals eligibility checking service

The free school meals (FSM) eligibility checking service streamlines the FSM eligibility checking process for both local authorities and parents.

Academies are not able to access the service directly. Some academies ask their local authority (often for a fee) to check eligibility via the eligibility checking service on their behalf. The service available, and its cost, varies between local authorities.