

## Free School Meals – Detailed Parent FAQ (Changes from September 2026)

### 1. What exactly is changing in September 2026?

From September 2026, all children in households receiving Universal Credit will become eligible for Free School Meals—without the current £7,400 household income cap.

Previously, families on Universal Credit only qualified if their earned income was below £7,400 per year. This income test will be removed, significantly widening eligibility.

### 2. When does this change take effect?

The new eligibility criteria will come into force at the start of the 2026/27 academic year (September 2026).

Local councils are expected to open the new application window from the summer holidays in 2026 to ensure a smooth transition.

### 3. What is “transitional protection” and why is it ending?

Since 2018, children who became eligible for FSM under the old income rules were protected from losing that entitlement even if their household income increased. This “transitional protection” ensured stability during the national rollout of Universal Credit.

This protection will end in August 2026.

After that point:

- All families, including currently protected ones, will need to apply under the new Universal Credit-based criteria.

### 4. Will my child automatically receive FSM if I receive Universal Credit?

No — eligibility and entitlement are different.

- Your household being on Universal Credit = eligible
- But you still must apply to receive FSM

### 5. What do families need to apply?

Most councils will require:

- Your National Insurance number
- Your child’s full name, date of birth, and school
- Permission to check your Universal Credit entitlement electronically

Some councils may request additional identity verification depending on their systems.

### 6. Will this affect current Year 6 pupils moving to secondary schools?

Yes, potentially.

Because transitional protections are ending, local councils will no longer be able to confirm FSM status for secondary transfer based on existing protection.

Current FSM recipients will need to reapply under the new rules before they move to Year 7 in September 2026.

### **7. Will this change affect school funding or Pupil Premium?**

Yes — and this part is important.

- Newly eligible FSM pupils (under the UC-based change) will NOT automatically attract Pupil Premium funding unless their income falls below the old £7,400 threshold.
- Protected pupils will still attract Pupil Premium for up to six years under the existing “FSM6” rule.
- The government has allocated over £1 billion to cover the cost of providing the extra free meals.

### **8. How will this benefit families financially?**

The Government estimates that families can save up to £495 per child each year on school lunches. For families with multiple children, this represents a significant cost reduction.

### **9. What meals will my child receive?**

Children receiving FSM receive the same meals as all other pupils, from the main school menu.

Schools are also expected to follow updated School Food Standards, which the government is revising to support the expanded eligibility.

### **10. Do I need to reapply if my child already receives Free School Meals?**

Yes.

All families—including currently protected FSM families—must reapply in summer 2026 to receive FSM from September 2026 onwards.

### **11. What if we don't receive Universal Credit?**

Children in families not receiving Universal Credit will not generally qualify under the new scheme.

However:

- Some children may still qualify under separate criteria (e.g., asylum support or NASS support).
- Universal Infant Free School Meals for all Reception–Year 2 pupils remain unchanged.

### **12. What if my family situation changes after applying?**

Eligibility is based on being a Universal Credit claimant. If your UC status changes, your child's eligibility will change too. Unlike previous years, there will be no transitional protection to maintain FSM after September 2026.

### **13. Will schools need to handle more children at lunchtime?**

Yes. The Government has said schools should prepare for larger numbers of FSM-eligible pupils and may need to adjust meal processes or catering capacity.

### **14. Who can I contact for help?**

- Your local council's Free School Meals team (online application portals)
- Your child's school office, which can guide you through the process

- Local authority advice pages as linked in national communications