

Expanding free school meals: what parents need to know



Free school meals provide vital nutrition for children during the school day. We've just announced that many more families will be eligible. Here's what parents need to know.

Who will benefit from the expanded free school meals?

Over half a million additional pupils will become eligible for Free School Meals under the new eligibility criteria. The change means that all households receiving [Universal Credit](#), above the current £7,400 income cap, will qualify for this support.

This expansion builds upon the existing provision which already covers:

- 2.1 million disadvantaged children
- 90,000 low-income students in Further Education
- Around 1.3 million infants under the Universal Infant Free School Meals programme

When will these changes take effect?

The new eligibility will take effect in September 2026. Families receiving Universal Credit will be able to access free school meals starting from the 2026/27 school year. This will give schools time to prepare for the increased number of meals they'll need to provide.

How will this help families financially?

This expansion will provide significant financial relief for families. If your household receives Universal Credit, you could save up to £495 per year per child on school lunches. For families with multiple children, these savings can make a substantial difference to household budgets.

How will children benefit?

Beyond the financial benefits, this programme ensures children receive nutritious meals during school hours, which supports their learning and concentration in the classroom, physical health and development and overall wellbeing. The government is also acting quickly to revise the School Food Standards, so every school is supported with the latest nutrition guidance.

How do I apply for free school meals?

We expect the majority of schools will allow parents to apply before the start of the school year 2026, by providing their National Insurance Number to check their eligibility.

It's important to note that while eligibility will be automatically granted to all Universal Credit recipients, families will still need to actually apply to receive the benefit. The school will send out more information on how to apply as soon as we receive it.