

FREE SCHOOL MEALS ELIGIBILITY CHECKING SERVICE – Frequently asked questions

What is the Eligibility Checking Service (ECS)?

The Department for Education (DfE) provides a website for local authorities to verify if applicants for FSMs meet the eligibility criteria for entitlement. The ECS checks data from the Department of Work and Pensions, the Home Office and HMRC (Revenue and Customs) and this is compiled in one central point.

What does a “TRUE” result mean?

A ‘TRUE’ response indicates that the applicant is eligible for free meals and matches the eligibility criteria.

From 1st April 2018 the Government’s FSM policy changed due to the continued roll out of Universal Credit. The original guidance on this policy and the transitional protection can be sought via this link.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools-and-local-authorities>

Further statements on 7 June 2018, by the Work and Pensions Secretary, announced a revised date for completion of the UC rollout to March 2023 and the Government’s commitment to extend transitional protection for FSM eligibility. Consequently children identified for FSMs will retain eligibility until March 2023.

Further eligibility will be guaranteed until the end of the phase of education that they are in as at March 2023. Phase of education is defined as year 6 for primary and year 11 for secondary. This means that if a child moves from Primary to Secondary School during the roll out of Universal Credit, they will retain eligibility until the end of Year 11, regardless of any change in circumstances. The same protection applies to students in Further Education who will continue to receive protection until they complete their 16 to 19 funded education.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions>

Please note transitional protection covers the child not the parent.

Parents can make new applications for free school meals for siblings and, if eligible, they will also have the transitional protection described above providing that they apply before the Universal Credit roll out is completed (i.e. before March 2023)

What does a “FALSE” result mean and what do I do if this comes up?

A ‘FALSE’ response generally indicates that the applicant is not eligible for free school meals but please also carry out the following checks:

1. Firstly check the 3 key pieces of information provided on the application form were correct with the parent/carer and then input onto the CSV file correctly. Check the National Insurance Number (NINO), Date of Birth (DOB) and first 3 characters of their surname. Resend the CSV file once corrected.
2. If a ‘FALSE’ result is returned for a new applicant check that the applicant has received a benefit award notice detailing they are in receipt of any of the benefits listed in the eligibility criteria 1 on the reverse of the application form. This will be either an award notice from the DWP (Department of Work and Pensions) or from the HMRC (Revenue & Customs). If they have only just applied for a benefit or tax credit it takes a few weeks for the award to be made and the information added to the DfE ECS.

3. If the applicant disputes the 'FALSE' result please contact the FSM Checking Team who can perform further checks to establish eligibility via the DWP for benefits or the HMRC for Tax Credits. These checks may require more applicant information which should be emailed over in an encrypted email via Egress Switch or given over the phone to a member of the Babcock 4S FSM Checking Team. It is not necessary to ask applicants for paperwork unless requested by Babcock 4S.

How often do I have to get the parents/carers to complete the application form?

The application form only needs to be completed once and held on file. A new form would need to be completed if circumstances change i.e. their Surname or if the child(ren's) parent/carer changes. Additional siblings joining the school can be added to the original signed form.

Is it necessary to have the application form signed and dated?

Yes - to ensure that SCC/Babcock 4S and Government Data Protection guidelines are adhered to, the claimant(s) MUST sign and date the form stating the information supplied is correct and giving permission for the school/Babcock 4S to use the personal details provided to verify the claim. FSMs cannot be awarded until a legal application has been made and the application cannot be verified via Babcock 4S ECS until this paperwork is complete and submitted by the parent. This paperwork should be securely stored in each school office. It is essential you retain application forms and results for audit purposes. Also please ensure compliance with your local authority guidance on timelines for the retention of financial information.

Will you carry out odd checks throughout the year?

If you have new individual checks throughout the year please add the new applicant data to your master CSV file, save it with a new date and resend to us.

When will you do the termly checks?

Checks should be carried out termly at the very least and will be processed and returned in a timely manner as and when we receive them.

Are Nursery Children entitled to FSM?

Nursery children in state maintained nurseries whose parents/carers are eligible for FSM can have a meal providing the nursery children meet the following criteria:-

- Rising 4s (the term after their 3rd birthday)
- Attending Nursery School for a minimum of 12 ½ hours per week
- Receiving 'education' before and after lunch. There is a distinction between 'care' and 'education'
- The after lunch education need only be for half an hour

Can we backdate claims for parents/carers and provide a refund if necessary?

The Department for Education states that claims can only be backdated to the point that the FSM application was made and no further.