

I am writing to tell you about recent changes to free school meals eligibility under Universal Credit. As you may be aware, Universal Credit will be replacing many benefits, e.g. jobseekers allowance, that currently entitle children of qualifying parents to free school meals. In light of this, the Department for Education has introduced new criteria for free school meals eligibility, with all families in receipt of Universal Credit and earning an annual income of £7,400 or lower entitled to free school meals.

From 1 April 2018, all **existing** free school meals claimants will continue to receive free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out (currently scheduled to complete in March 2022). This will apply even if their circumstances change and their earnings rise above the new threshold during the rollout period. In addition, any child who **gains eligibility** for free school meals after 1 April 2018 (e.g. in July 2019), will also continue to receive free school meals during the Universal Credit rollout period. This protection is referred to as transitional protection.

Once Universal Credit is fully rolled out, any existing claimants that no longer meet the eligibility criteria at that point (because they are earning above the threshold or are no longer a recipient of Universal Credit) will continue to receive free school meals until the end of their current phase of education (i.e. primary or secondary).

During the rollout of Universal Credit, the protection arrangements mean that **once a pupil has claimed free school meals and has been found eligible, there is no requirement from the Department for further eligibility checks to be undertaken**. Schools should continue to record pupils claiming free school meals – including those being transitionally protected – as eligible for free school meals on the termly school census, as they do now.

All local authorities have access to the Department's Eligibility Checking System (ECS), which provides a simple and rapid online portal for determining households' eligibility for free school meals, and other early education entitlements. Maintained schools, academies and free schools are all able to use the ECS through local authorities.

If a parent feels that the result returned by the ECS is inaccurate, they may provide the equivalent paper-based evidence to their local authority who must then complete a manual check. Manual checks will also be required for parents who are self-employed and claiming Universal Credit.

To help schools identify the number of pupils claiming free school meals, and those pupils receiving protection, schools will have the ability to check through the Key to Success download. This functionality will be available later this year, and further information will be provided by the Department for Education then.

For more information, please see the guidance published by the Department for Education at the following address:

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