

Research Briefing

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School Meals and Nutritional Standards (England)



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Summary

- 1 School food standards
- 2 Funding for school meals
- 3 Free school meals
- 4 Breakfast clubs

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Summary

Free school meals

Free school meals are for children whose parents receive certain benefits (or who are receive those benefits themselves). These are:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for four weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit - with household income of less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits) from 1 April 2018, with transitional protections for existing claimants

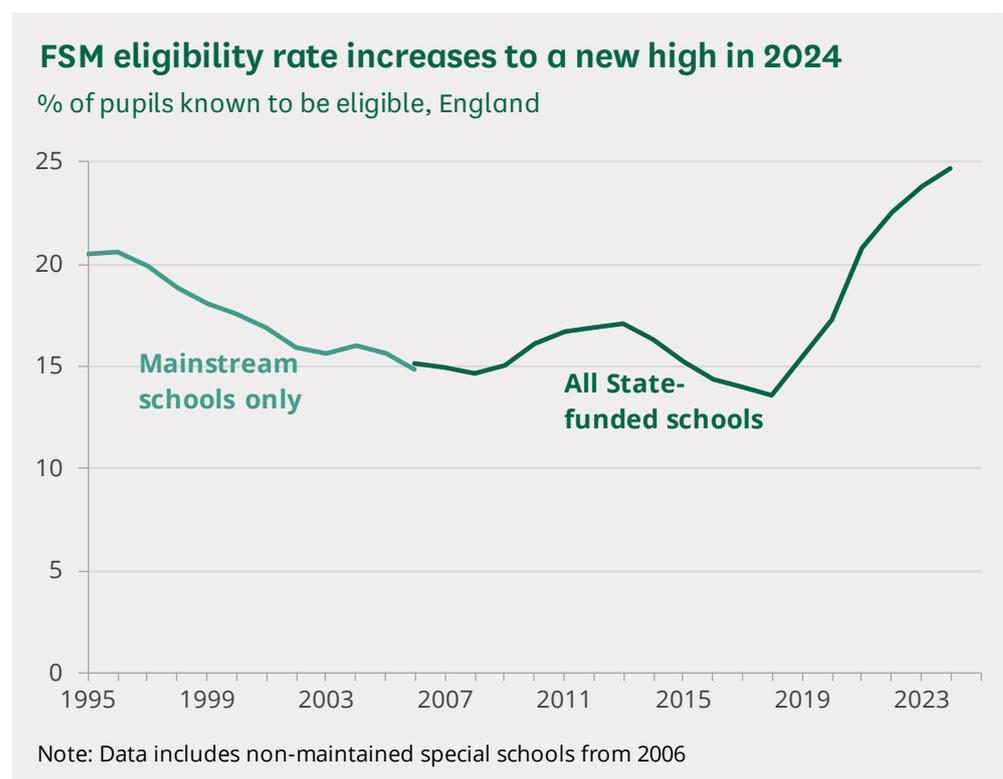
Since September 2014, free school meals have been provided for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

Since April 2018, households receiving Universal Credit with annual net earnings of over £7,400 no longer qualify for free school meals. The Government has estimated that, once benefits income was considered, this threshold equated to an overall household income of between £18,000 and £24,000.

Free school meals may also be available to pre-school children and those in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, and further education colleges.

How many pupils are eligible?

In January 2024, there were around [2.1 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM](#). This means there has been an increase in the proportion eligible to 24.6% of state-funded pupils. The rate has increased each year since its low of 13.6% in January 2018.



This increase could be driven by many factors including the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#). These are policies which preserve the eligibility status of pupils who could get free school meals before the universal credit income threshold was introduced.

School breakfast clubs

Schools are not currently required to provide breakfast clubs, although many do so. Funding is available for schools in disadvantaged areas to receive a 75% subsidy for the food and delivery costs of breakfast club provision.

The planned Children's Wellbeing Bill announced in the 2024 King's Speech will include provision to require free breakfast clubs in all primary schools.

In her [speech to Labour conference](#) in September 2024, the Chancellor announced that up to 750 state-funded schools in England will be able to take part in an early adopter scheme, to launch in April 2025.

The Department for Education have published information on the [Breakfast clubs early adopters scheme](#), including how schools can express an interest in the scheme.

Nutritional standards

[Nutritional standards](#) are in place for state-funded school meals in England. They aim to ensure that the food given to pupils is nutritious and of high quality, and to promote good health and eating behaviour.

Funding for school meals is mostly provided through the Dedicated Schools Grant.

Meals during the school holidays

The [Holiday Activities and Food Programme](#) (HAFP) is funded by the Department for Education and is being extended to all local authority areas in England. It covers Easter, summer, and Christmas school holidays and continues in 2024.

Education is a devolved issue and this briefing relates to mainly to England, although the rules on free school meals in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are provided.

1 School food standards

1.1 Background

Nutritional standards for school meals were first established in the 1940s in England but abolished in 1980. Subsequently, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 gave the relevant Secretary of State the power to make regulations setting nutritional standards and other nutritional requirements for school meals.

The 1998 Act also placed a duty on Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and the governing bodies of schools maintained by LEAs, to make sure any free school meals they provide are in line with the standards.

In April 2001, statutory nutritional standards for school lunches were reintroduced by the Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) Regulations 2000 (since superseded).¹

Research carried out in 2004 by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Food Standards Agency showed that while schools and caterers responded positively to the standards, in practice, children and young people continued to make unhealthy choices. Statistics from the Annual Health Survey for England 2004 showed that the levels of obesity for children had risen over the previous 10 years. Ongoing concerns led to the publication in 2004 of the DfES's guidance, Healthy Living Blueprint for Schools, and the Government's white paper, Choosing Health: Making Healthy Choices Easier.

In March 2005, the then Labour Government announced measures to improve school meals, which were followed in May 2006 by the new nutritional standards for school meals. The [Education \(Nutritional Standards for School Lunches\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#) introduced these changes. Over the following years, interim standards for school lunches and other school food (such as in tuck shops and breakfast clubs) were developed and replaced by final standards in September 2009.

The School Food Standards were further revised under the Coalition Government, and the revised set came into force in January 2015.

¹ The [Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](#) are the current regulations.

1.2 The School Food Plan

In April 2012, the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, asked John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby, the founders of Leon restaurants, to conduct an independent review of school food. In July 2013, Vincent and Dimbleby published the [School Food Plan](#), which gave schools steps to increase the take-up of school meals, improve the quality of school meals, and take other measures such as teaching pupils about cooking and ingredients.²

1.3 Revised school food standards since January 2015

Development

The [School Food Plan](#) proposed revised food standards, intended to be easier to implement and enforce. The Plan stated that if the new standards were agreed to be effective from a practical and nutritional standpoint, the Secretary of State had agreed to make them mandatory across all types of school.³ The Government ran a [consultation on revised standards](#) between March and April 2014.⁴

In June 2014, the Education Secretary announced a [new set of standards for food served in schools](#), alongside the Government response to the spring consultation.⁵ The Secretary of State said the revised standards were “designed to make it easier for school cooks to create imaginative, flexible and nutritious menus,” and that they were mandatory in maintained and free schools, and new academies.⁶

Application

The reformed standards were implemented through [the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](#). The regulations came into force on 1 January 2015.

The Government published [advice for schools on the new regulations](#) on 8 January 2015, and the most recent update was published in June 2023. It applies to:

² Department for Education, [The School Food Plan](#), 30 July 2013

³ Ibid., p9

⁴ Department for Education, [Revised standards for food in schools](#) [accessed 23 June 2021]

⁵ Department for Education, [Revised standards for food in schools – Government response](#), 17 June 2014

⁶ Department for Education, [New school food standards](#), 17 June 2014

- Maintained primary schools
- Maintained secondary schools
- Maintained special schools
- Maintained nursery schools
- Maintained boarding schools
- Pupil referral units
- Academies and free schools
- Non-Maintained special schools

The Department for Education has published a summary of [what food should be provided](#) (for example, one or more portions of fruit every day; a portion of meat or poultry on three or more days each week, or a portion of non-dairy protein on three or more days each week for vegetarians and vegans).

A series of [resources for schools](#), including a practical guide to meeting the standards, are also published.

Allergy guidance

The Department for Education has published [Allergy guidance for schools](#), most recently updated in September 2024.

The guidance highlights that under [section 100 of the Children and Families Act 2014](#), schools have a duty to support pupils at their school with medical conditions. This could include ensuring that a child with an allergy is able to eat a school lunch. Statutory guidance on [supporting pupils at school with medical conditions](#) provides further details.

The [allergy guidance](#) also provides practical advice and further resources on managing allergies within schools.

School food standards: Calls for reform

A parliamentary question response on 26 April 2021 set out recent developments on the standards. The then Minister Vicky Ford, said that an advisory group including stakeholders in food, nutrition and health had got together in May and November 2019, to discuss updates to the standards. However, the Minister said that the current priority, given the pandemic-related disruption, was to ensure current standards were being followed, rather than updating them:

Ministers have been clear throughout that schools should continue to ensure that the existing school food standards are fully adhered to across the school day. On 24 March 2021 I wrote to all schools to remind them of their obligations

under the standards and encouraging the provision of hot meals where possible.⁷

In May 2024, the schools minister, Damian Hinds, said that “The department [for education] believes that the standards provide a robust yet flexible framework for school food provision.”⁸

Levelling Up White Paper: School food standards and cooking plans

The Conservative government’s White Paper, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), published in February 2022, stated the Department for Education would, working with the Food Standards Agency, adopt recommendations from the [National Food Strategy](#)⁹ to “design and test a new approach for local authorities in assuring and supporting compliance with school food standards.” Pilot schemes are intended to begin in September 2022.¹⁰

Also prompted by the recommendations of the National Food Strategy, the White Paper stated that the Government would “invest up to £5m to launch a school cooking revolution, including the development of brand new content for the curriculum and providing bursaries for teacher training and leadership.” Further investment of up to £200,000 would be used pilot new training for school governors and academy trusts on a “whole school approach to food.” The Paper set out the aim for every child leaving secondary school to know at least six basic recipes that will support healthy living into adulthood.¹¹

The White Paper stated that the Government would encourage schools to complete a statement on their school websites setting out their whole school approach to food, and that when schools could do this effectively it would become a mandatory requirement.¹²

⁷ [PQ 914739 \[Schools: Food\]](#), 26 April 2021

⁸ [PQ 25843 \[School Meals: Processed Food\]](#), 16 May 2024

⁹ Henry Dimbleby, [National Food Strategy: An Independent Review for the Government](#), July 2021

¹⁰ UK Government, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), CP 604, February 2022, p204-205

¹¹ UK Government, [Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), p205

¹² As above

2 Funding for school meals

2.1 Overview

The Government removed the ring-fence from the funding of school meals after the previous School Lunch Grant ended in April 2011. Since then, schools fund benefit-related Free School Meals through the Dedicated Schools Grant, which is the main block of funding for schools.

The following response to a parliamentary question in 2011 sets out the then government's position:

Nick Gibb: The funding for schools provided through the school lunch grant has not been abolished, but continues to be available through the Dedicated Schools Grant in 2011-12. This will allow schools to make their own decisions about the use of this funding. This is in line with the Government's drive to devolve responsibility for making decisions about the best use of resources to professionals in schools. Consistent with our philosophy of reducing bureaucracy and increasing the professional autonomy of schools, we have no plans to collect information from individual local authorities of the impact of freeing up resources in this way.¹³

A separate [universal infant free school meals \(UIFSM\) grant](#) provides funding for the meals provided to all pupils in reception, year 1, and year 2.

2.2 Estimated funding

As outlined above, funding for free school meals has not been ring-fenced since 2011. Funding is available to schools through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), and through the Universal Infant Free School Meal Grant for pupils in years reception to year two. The Department for Education publishes DSG allocations on an annual basis, but breakdowns of certain items (such as FSM) are not published. This means it is not possible to identify the amount of funding allocated for free school meals.

However, it is possible to make a **rough estimate**.

The National Funding Formula (NFF) FSM factor value for 2024-25 is £490 per pupil (£480 in 2022-23).¹⁴

¹³ HC Deb 28 Jun 2011 530 c760-1W

¹⁴ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024

NFF allocations operate in an “indirect” format where the allocations are notional. Local authorities can adjust these notional allocations according to a local formula, and this means the NFF allocations may not be what individual schools receive. In addition, as outlined above this funding is not ring fenced and so schools may choose to spend different amounts on free school meals.

As noted above, in January 2024 there were around 2.1 million pupils known to be eligible for benefit-based free school meals.¹⁵ On this basis, and using the £490 figure, benefit-based free school meals funding in 2023-24 can be broadly estimated at around £1 billion.

¹⁵ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2023](#), 8 June 2023, [custom table](#)

3 Free school meals

3.1 Who is eligible?

Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals and applications must be made through the relevant local body.¹⁶

Parents or carers currently meet [the eligibility criteria](#) if they receive any of the following:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on (paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit)
- Universal Credit (from 1 April 2018 **only in cases with household income of less than £7,400 a year**¹⁷, with [transitional protections](#) for existing claimants)

During the coronavirus outbreak, [eligibility for free school meals was extended](#) to **some** groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). In March 2022, the government announced that this extension would be permanent.¹⁸

¹⁶ The gov.uk website publishes [up-to-date information on eligibility for free school meals](#).

¹⁷ After tax and not including any benefits

¹⁸ Department for Education, [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds](#), 9 June 2022; UK Parliament, [Update on Children with no recourse to public funds: Statement UIN HCWS714](#), 24 March 2022

Children who themselves get any of the qualifying benefits (instead of through a parent or guardian) can also get free school meals.

Children under the compulsory school age who are in full-time education may also be eligible.

Free school meals are available to pupils in school sixth forms (maintained or academies) on the same basis as children of compulsory school age and this requirement was extended to [further education institutions](#) in 2014/15.¹⁹

Changes related to Universal Credit

Before 1 April 2018, all Universal Credit claimants were eligible for free school meals. The following protections are in place for claimants since then:

- From April 2018, all existing claimants can continue to receive free school meals while Universal Credit is rolled out. This will apply even if their earnings rise above the new threshold during that time.
- In addition, any child who becomes eligible for free school meals after the threshold has been introduced, will be protected against losing free school meals during the Universal Credit rollout period.
- No further eligibility checks are required for protected families during this period.
- 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) will continue to receive protection until the end of their current phase of education (such as primary or secondary)
- New claimants earning above the threshold after April 2018 are not eligible for free school meals.²⁰

Free school meals in academies and free schools

Then Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb set out the position on free school meals in academies and free schools when answering a parliamentary question on 27 June 2011:

Free schools and academies are governed by a funding agreement with the Secretary of State. The funding agreement provides the framework within which these schools operate and requires free schools and academies to provide free school meals to eligible pupils aged up to 18 years. This

¹⁹ Department for Education, [16 to 19 funding: free meals in further education funded institutions for 2023 to 2024](#), 8 August 2023

²⁰ Department for Education, [Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit](#), February 2018, p9

requirement also applies to pupils in these institutions who are aged 19 or over, if their course of study began before they attained the age of 18.²¹

3.2 2018 changes to free school meal eligibility under Universal Credit

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 and is being rolled out to replace means-tested social security benefits and tax credits for people of working age. Universal Credit replaces:

- Working Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Support
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Housing Benefit

Universal Credit affects free school meal eligibility as it abolishes several of the qualifying benefits. This has broader significance as free school meal eligibility is used as a measure of disadvantage in other school funding, such as the Pupil Premium.²²

In April 2018, an earnings threshold was introduced to qualify for free school meals. Households receiving Universal Credit with annual net earnings of over £7,400 no longer qualify for free school meals. The Government estimated that, once benefits income was considered, this threshold equated to an overall household income of between £18,000 and £24,000.

The Department for Education estimated that around 50,000 more pupils would become eligible for free school meals by 2022, if the threshold was household income between £18,000 and £24,000. The Department's methodology in reaching the 50,000 figure is [set out in an appendix](#) to a report of the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee.²³

²¹ HC Deb 27 June 2011 c571W

²² The [Pupil Premium](#) is additional funding for schools intended to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Pupils who are eligible for free school meals, or have been eligible in the past 6 years, are eligible for a payment to their school.

²³ [Appendix 1](#) to House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee [20th Report of Session 2017-19](#), 1 March 2018, HL Paper 82

Consultation

During the initial period of roll out for Universal Credit, all recipients qualified for free school meals. The Government, however, did not intend for this to be the final position, and stated that it was considering how to determine free school meal eligibility as the roll out progressed (see, for example, Edward Timpson's [response to a parliamentary question](#) in February 2017).²⁴

In November 2017, the Department for Education published a [consultation on eligibility for free school meals](#), as well as eligibility for the Early Years' Pupil Premium, under Universal Credit. The consultation ran until January 2018.²⁵

The consultation proposed to introduce the net earnings threshold of over £7,400 in April 2018, and for the threshold to remain constant until the end of the Universal Credit rollout period. The Government said this protection for existing claimants was because the changes would otherwise mean that some currently entitled households would lose out.²⁶

Government response

The government published its [response to the consultation](#) on 7 February 2018.²⁷

The announcement confirmed that the Government intended for the proposals set out in the consultation to become law.²⁸ The [Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance \(Amendments Relating to Universal Credit\) \(England\) Regulations 2018](#) were laid before Parliament to implement the change, and came into force on 1 April 2018. Transitional arrangements are provided for in [The Welfare Reform Act 2012 \(Commencement No. 30 and Transitory Provisions\) Order 2018](#).

IFS analysis: The 50,000 increase explained

On 5 April 2018, the Institute for Fiscal Studies published an [analysis of the changes](#) to eligibility for free school meals (FSMs) under Universal Credit, funded by the Office of the Children's Commissioner.²⁹

²⁴ [PQ 63835, 20 February 2017](#)

²⁵ Department for Education, [Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit](#), November 2017, p9

²⁶ Department for Education, [Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit](#), February 2018, p11

²⁷ Department for Education, [Eligibility for free school meals, the early years pupil premium and the free early education entitlement for two-year-olds under Universal Credit: Government consultation response](#), March 2018

²⁸ Department for Education, [Government responds to consultation on disadvantage support](#), 7 February 2018

²⁹ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Free school meals under universal credit](#), 5 April 2018

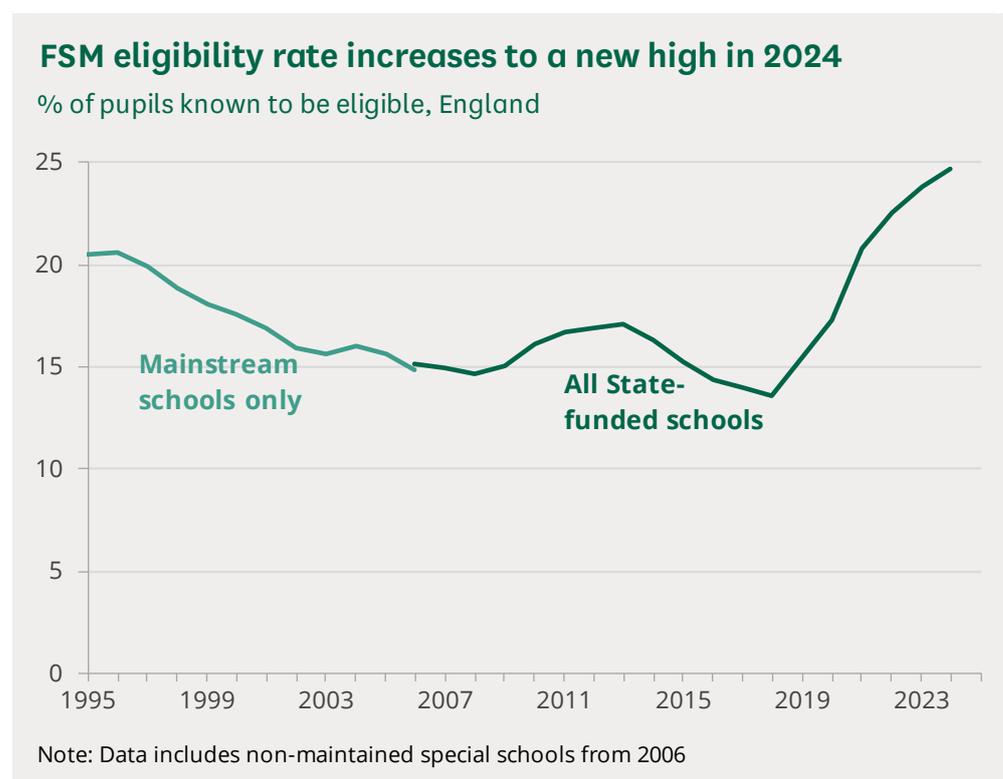
The analysis found that the 50,000 (around 4%) increase was not a simple expansion. While some pupils became eligible, others would potentially lose eligibility as they, or their families, moved onto Universal Credit.

The analysis found that the 50,000 increase, costing £20 to 30million per year, was due to an increase of **210,000** pupils who would not have been eligible under the legacy system (before Universal Credit). But **160,000** (or one in eight) of those who would have qualified under the former system would lose eligibility when moving to Universal Credit.³⁰

3.3 How many pupils receive free school meals?

A pupil is recorded in the school census as eligible for free school meals (FSM) if they meet [the eligibility criteria](#) and their parents make a claim. The statistics in this section only include pupils that are eligible for and claiming free school meals.

In January 2024, there were around 2.1 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM, representing 24.6% of state funded pupils.³¹ This eligibility rate has increased sharply since 2018 and is now at the highest rate recorded since this data was first collected in 1993.³²



Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#): various years

³⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Free school meals under universal credit](#), 5 April 2018

³¹ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024

³² The data in the chart goes back to 1995. [Overall eligibility rates](#) were 20% in 1993 and 21% in 1994.

The recent increase could be driven by many factors including the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).

More details about the impact of UC on free school meal eligibility are in section 3.2.

As in previous years, a higher proportion of state-funded primary school pupils (24.3%) were eligible compared with secondary pupils (22.1%), although the gap has fallen in the last three years.³³ However, the highest rates by far were in non-mainstream settings (almost half of pupils in state-funded special schools and around 60% of pupils in [pupil referral units and other state-funded alternative provision schools](#) were eligible).

Pupils known to be eligible for FSM		
January 2024, England		
	Number	% of pupils
State-funded nursery	3,000	8.1
State-funded primary	1,121,000	24.3
State-funded secondary	885,000	24.1
State-funded special	74,000	47.4
Non-maintained special	1,000	30.1
State-funded AP school	10,000	60.7
Total	2,094,000	24.6

Note: AP schools include maintained pupil referral units, and alternative provision free schools and academies

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 8 June 2023, [custom table](#)

The Commons Library briefing paper [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#) includes data on the average attainment of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in section 3.3. The briefing paper [Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England](#) includes analysis of data on access to higher education for young people who were eligible for free meals while at schools, as well as drop out rates and outcome measures after graduation.

Regional and local variations in eligibility rates

In January 2024, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM across England was 24.6%.³⁴ However, this is an average and masks considerable regional and local authority variation.

³³ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 8 June 2023, [custom table](#)

³⁴ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024

The North East of England recorded the highest eligibility rate (6.6 percentage points above the national average). The South East, South West and East of England regions had the lowest rate (4.9 to 4.1 percentage points below the national average). This regional pattern has been established for some time.



Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024, [custom table](#)

There is much more variation in eligibility rates between local authorities compared to regions. In January 2024, Manchester was the local authority with the highest eligibility rate (44.3%), and Isles of Scilly the lowest rate (2.8%).

Local authorities with the highest and lowest levels of FSM eligibility

January 2024, % of state-funded pupils

Highest			Lowest		
1	Manchester	44.3	1	Isles of Scilly	2.8
2	Islington	44.0	2	Wokingham	10.0
3	Camden	42.2	3	Rutland	12.0
4	Hackney	42.1	4	Bracknell Forest	12.7
5	Blackpool	42.0	5	Richmond upon Thames	13.5
6	Knowsley	40.9	6	Central Bedfordshire	13.7
7	Middlesbrough	40.7	7	Windsor and Maidenhead	14.1
8	Westminster	40.3	8	Surrey	14.3
9	Tower Hamlets	40.1	9	Kingston upon Thames	14.4
10	Newcastle upon Tyne	40.1	10	Buckinghamshire	14.6

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024, [custom table](#)

Ethnicity of pupils eligible for FSM

In January 2024, 59.2% of pupils receiving free school meals belonged to the White British ethnic group. The second most common group were Black African pupils (5.9% of pupils receiving free school meals) followed by those from any other White background (5.6%), and those from Pakistani backgrounds (4.9%).³⁵

However, this does not account for differences in the number of children belonging to each ethnic group. On this basis, the ethnic groups with the highest eligibility rates were Travellers of Irish Heritage at 64.9% of pupils, followed by Gypsy/Roma pupils (58.3%), and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils (44.8%) and Black Caribbean pupils (44.7%). Indian and Chinese pupils had the lowest eligibility rates (7.3% and 7.5% respectively). White British pupils were broadly in line with the national average (23.8% of this group were eligible for FSM).³⁶

3.4

Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM)

Introduction, funding, and advice for schools

A duty to provide free school meals for all pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 was put in place through section 106 of the [Children and Families Act 2014](#).

³⁵ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024, [custom table](#)

³⁶ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2024](#), 6 June 2024, [custom table](#)

This took effect from September 2014 and is applied to maintained schools, academies and free schools. [Advice from the Department of Education](#) on fulfilling this duty is available for schools, including funding information.

The policy of universal free school meals for infant pupils (UFSM) was [recommended in the School Food Plan](#) and announced by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, in September 2013.³⁷

Funding

The [conditions of grant for 2024/25](#) set out that each meal taken by an eligible pupil attracts £2.53 for the school. The allocation assumes that pupils will take 190 school meals over an academic year, providing £480.70 per eligible pupil to schools.

Since the policy was introduced in academic year 2013/14 the amount of funding each eligible pupil attracts per meal has increased three times. It increased for the first time in seven years from £2.30 to £2.34 in 2020/21, then to £2.41 in 2022/23, and again to £2.53 in 2023/24.³⁸

3.5

School meals during the holidays

Private Member's Bill (2017)

Concerns have been raised regularly about children who receive free school meals during term time but may not receive adequate meals during the holidays.

In September 2017, Frank Field presented the [School Holidays \(Meals and Activities\) Bill 2017-19](#) to Parliament. The Bill would have required local authorities to support schools and other organisations to deliver free meals and activities for children during school holidays. A [Library briefing](#) was prepared ahead of the Second Reading debate which covers the Bill's proposals in more detail.³⁹

Frank Field withdrew the Bill after the Government committed to research and pilot programmes.

³⁷ Department for Education, [Free school lunch for every child in infant school](#), 17 September 2013

³⁸ Department for Education, [Universal infant free school meals \(UFSM\): conditions of grant: various years](#)

³⁹ House of Commons Library, [School Holidays \(Meals and Activities\) Bill - 2nd reading](#), 12 January 2018, CDP 2017/064

Ministerial response: Research and pilots

The then Children's Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, stated during the debate on Frank Field's Bill that, while the Government would oppose the Bill, it would be conducting research into how to make provision in this area:

Nadhim Zahawi: ...the Government will support the right hon. Gentleman's proposal to investigate the best way to ensure that the most disadvantaged children have access to activities and healthy meals in the school holidays. The research programme will include funding for a targeted pilot programme, as he and I have discussed. That will allow the Government to consider if and how they should intervene in the long term.⁴⁰

On 28 March 2018, the Government [announced £2million for research into ways of supporting disadvantaged families](#) through "healthy meals and enriching activities" during the school holidays. This was to be paid for through the Holiday Activities and Food Research Fund, which focused on:

- testing the effectiveness of interventions;
- looking at take-up of provision;
- identifying the costs involved; and
- considering whether there are particular areas where this kind of programme would be most effective.⁴¹

More [detail on the pilot schemes](#) was announced by the Department for Education on 27 July 2018. The schemes would provide free meals as well as activities such as football and cooking classes. They would operate "across the country including the North East, Birmingham and London."⁴²

The Department for Education published statistics on [holiday food and activities schemes during the summer 2018 school holidays](#) in November 2018.

In [2019](#)⁴³ and [2020](#)⁴⁴, the Government extended the pilot scheme, with £9 million announced each year to provide holiday clubs for disadvantaged children during the summer holidays.

England-wide programme (2021)

In November 2020, alongside wider support for families during the coronavirus pandemic, the Government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food Programme would be expanded from its previous pilots to [cover the](#)

⁴⁰ [HC Deb 19 Jan 2018 c1247-48](#)

⁴¹ Department for Education, [Boost to support disadvantaged families during the holidays](#), 28 March 2018

⁴² Department for Education, [Free holiday activities and meals for disadvantaged families](#), 27 July 2018

⁴³ Department for Education, [Extra support for disadvantaged children during school holidays](#), 21 December 2018

⁴⁴ Department for Education, [Free meals and summer holiday activities for children](#), 4 January 2020

[whole of England](#), during the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays in 2021.⁴⁵

Funding for the programme since 2022

As part of the Budget announcements in October 2021, the Government announced over £200 million a year for the continuation of the holiday activities and food programme over the following three years.⁴⁶

Information on the [Holiday Activities and Food Programme for 2023](#) was published in December 2022, and [information on the 2024 programme](#) followed in March 2024.

Overall, local authorities are expected to offer the equivalent of 6 weeks' holiday food and activities to eligible children, focused mainly on those who receive benefits-related free school meals, during the Easter, summer, and Christmas holidays.

3.6 Checking eligibility for free school meals

Online eligibility checking system (ECS)

The online [eligibility checking system](#) (ECS) launched under the Coalition Government can be used to assess eligibility for free school meals. A response to a parliamentary question asked in December 2014 explained that all local authorities in England had signed up to this scheme.⁴⁷

The [Eligibility Checking Service](#) can be accessed online. It is necessary to log in to use the service, but eligibility can be checked for free school meals using a pupil's name and postcode.

Guidance on the [Eligibility Checking Service for Local Authorities](#) (PDF, 193 KB) is also available.

Digital Economy Bill amendment

During the Commons Committee Stage of the Digital Economy Bill 2016-17, an Opposition amendment, New Clause 19, was tabled by Labour's Kevin Brennan. It aimed to include a provision for councils to share data on benefits with schools, so that eligible children would be automatically enrolled to receive free school meals.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Department for Work and Pensions, [New winter package to provide further support for children and families](#), 8 November 2020

⁴⁶ HM Treasury, [Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021](#), October 2021, p98

⁴⁷ [PQ 216678, 1 December 2014](#)

⁴⁸ [PBC Deb 28 Nov 2016 c1330](#)

The then Minister, Matt Hancock, spoke in favour of permitting, rather than requiring, this data sharing, and stated that existing provisions in the Bill clarified that local authorities could do this and facilitated further expansion of the practice. He said that such data sharing was already provided for through the ECS.⁴⁹

Using housing benefit data

Following up from the proposed amendment to the Digital Economy Bill above, Frank Field asked a parliamentary question about using housing benefit data to check eligibility for free meals. The then Minister said the Government did not see this solution as sustainable:

Edward Timpson: We understand that some local authorities have found this approach can be an effective tactic. However, it does not provide a complete or sustainable solution to automatic registration for FSM. We do not consider further legislation to be necessary for this particular approach.

To support FSM registration, the department provides an online eligibility checking facility; and a model registration form for schools to use within their enrolment process.

The department is exploring what opportunities exist in the longer term to make FSM registration processes more efficient.⁵⁰

Auto-enrolment pilot

From September 2024, Middlesbrough Council are [piloting a scheme of automatic enrolment](#) for children who are eligible, comparing information about families who are eligible for council tax reduction to information from schools about their pupils.⁵¹

3.7

Free school meals in elsewhere in the UK

Scotland

Children can get [free lunches in school](#) if their parent receives:

- [Universal Credit](#) (where monthly earned income is not more than £796)
- [Income Support](#)
- income-based [Job Seeker's Allowance](#)

⁴⁹ [PBC Deb 28 Nov 2016 c1344](#)

⁵⁰ [PQ 56826, 13 December 2016](#)

⁵¹ Middlesbrough Council, [Free School Meals](#); BBC News, [Free school meals auto-enrolment trial announced](#), 27 June 2024

- income-based [Employment and Support Allowance](#)
- support under [Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999](#)

Children are also entitled to free school lunches if where their parents receive:

- [Child Tax Credit](#), but not [Working Tax Credit](#), and their income is less than £19,995
- both Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit and have an income of up to £9,552

Children may also receive free meals where their parents are experiencing financial hardship, which could be because:

- their immigration status means they cannot get help from the government
- they are still waiting on your first Universal Credit notice

A child may also be able to get a free lunch if at any point since they were aged 2 they've been:

- looked after
- had a Kinship Care Order
- had a Guardianship Order⁵²

Universal free school meals at primary level

Universal free school meals are provided for children at local council schools during term-time in primary 1 to 5.

The Scottish government had previously committed to expanding this to all children in primary school [later in the current parliamentary term](#).⁵³ However, September 2024 [the government announced](#) that funding currently would be targeted at expanding the benefit only to P6 and P7 pupils whose families are in receipt of the Scottish child payment.⁵⁴

Wales

Children whose parents receive the following support payments are [entitled to receive free school meals](#) in maintained schools in Wales:

- Income Support

⁵² Scottish Government, [School meals](#), 24 Jun 2022

⁵³ Scottish Government, [Scottish Budget 2022 to 2023](#), Chapter 7, December 2021

⁵⁴ BBC News, [Ministers ditch universal free school meal pledge](#), 4 September 2024

- Income Based Jobseekers Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and their annual income does not exceed £16,190
- Guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Working Tax Credit 'run-on' - the payment someone may receive for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit with net household income of less than £7,400⁵⁵

Young people who receive Income Related Employment and Support Allowance, Universal Credit, Income Support or Income Based Job Seekers Allowance in their own right may also be eligible to receive free school meals.

Universal primary-level Free School Meals

The Welsh Government has announced that [all primary school children in Wales will get free school meals by 2024](#).

The Government has announced a phased implementation with information available from local authorities on rollout in their area, and has said that some primary schools will need time to prepare and arrange the advance work needed to build catering capacity.⁵⁶

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, parents or guardians can [apply for free school meals](#) if their son or daughter is in full-time education and if they are in receipt of one of the following benefits:

- Income Support;
- Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance;
- Income Related Employment and Support Allowance;
- Guarantee Element of State Pension Credit;
- Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit with an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less;

⁵⁵ Welsh Government, [Find out about free school meals](#) – provides links to information from local authorities

⁵⁶ Welsh Government, [Universal Primary Free School Meals \(UPFSM\)](#), August 2023

- Universal credit and have net household earnings not exceeding £14,000 per year.

Or:

- if they are an Asylum Seeker supported by the Home Office Asylum Support Assessment Team (ASAT); or
- if their child has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet⁵⁷

London

In February 2023, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced a one-off fund of £130m to provide [free school meals for all primary school children](#) in the academic year 2023/24. The announcement stated that this would support around 270,000 primary school children.⁵⁸

The announcement was widely welcomed, with many charities and education unions pleased at the [additional support for families](#).⁵⁹ However, concerns were raised that the [funding may not be sufficient](#) to cover all the meals, meaning schools would need to fund the difference from existing budgets.⁶⁰

In January 2024, it was announced that the Mayor planned to spend £140m in his 2024/25 budget to [extend free school meals for primary school children for another year](#) from September 2024.

London boroughs

Since September 2023, free school meals have been [provided to all pupils at state-funded schools](#) in the London borough of Tower Hamlets.⁶¹

In Westminster, [children up to age 14](#) currently receive free school meals.⁶² In January 2024, Southwark [also announced it would extend free school meals](#) to secondary pupils from families in receipt of Universal Credit, regardless of earned income.⁶³

⁵⁷ Education Authority Northern Ireland, [Free School Meals / Uniform Grant Eligibility](#), 29 March 2022

⁵⁸ Mayor of London, [Mayor announces every London primary schoolchild to receive free school meals](#), 20 February 2023

⁵⁹ BBC News, [Free school meals: London's mayor launches £130m scheme for primary pupils](#), 21 February 2023

⁶⁰ Schools Week, [Schools could face £39m shortfall over London free school meals plan](#), 20 February 2023

⁶¹ Tower Hamlets Council, [Free School Meals](#); BBC News, [First area gives free secondary school meals for all](#), 26 May 2023

⁶² Westminster Council, [Westminster starts expanded free school meal scheme, feeding 14,000 children in the city](#), 6 September 2023

⁶³ Southwark Council, [Free healthy school meals: Southwark extends anti-poverty measure to secondary school children in need](#), 5 January 2024

4 Breakfast clubs

Schools are not currently required to provide breakfast clubs, although many do so.

4.1 Free breakfast clubs in primary schools

In their [manifesto](#) ahead of the 2024 General Election, the Labour Party said that if elected it would “fund free breakfast clubs in every primary school, accessible to all children,” with the aim of improving behaviour, attendance, and learning.⁶⁴

The planned Children’s Wellbeing Bill announced in the 2024 King’s Speech will include:

free breakfast clubs in every primary school to ensure that every child, no matter their circumstances, is well prepared for the school day and can achieve their full potential.⁶⁵

The government has not confirmed a timetable for introducing the bill, or for the full implementation of the measure on breakfast clubs in primary schools. A response to a Parliamentary Question states:

Stephen Morgan: The government is committed to making quick progress on delivering breakfast clubs in every primary school. Breakfast clubs will remove barriers to opportunity, by providing a supportive start to the day, ensuring every child, no matter their circumstances, is well prepared for school and ready to achieve.

The department has already taken decisive action by announcing in the King’s Speech that, under the Children’s Wellbeing Bill, every primary school in England will offer a free breakfast club. Legislating for breakfast club provision will give schools the certainty they need to plan for the future. Before the legislation comes into force, the department will work with the sector to make sure the right support, including funding, is in place.⁶⁶

In her [speech to Labour conference](#) in September 2024, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, announced that up to 750 state-funded schools in England will be able to take part in an early adopter scheme, to launch in April 2025.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ [Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#)

⁶⁵ [King’s Speech briefing notes](#), July 2024, p63

⁶⁶ [PQ 1566 \[Breakfast clubs: primary education\], 30 July 2024](#)

⁶⁷ Labour Party, [Rachel Reeves speech at Labour Party Conference 2024](#), 23 September 2024

The Department for Education have published information on the [Breakfast clubs early adopters scheme](#), including how schools can express an interest in the scheme.

4.2 DfE guidance for schools

In March 2017, the Department for Education published a briefing for school leaders on [how to set up and sustain a breakfast club](#).⁶⁸

The briefing was prepared by ICF Consulting and published alongside a report evaluating the impact of breakfast clubs (see section 4.4).

4.3 Funding 2021-2025

In March 2021, the DfE announced that £24 million would be provided for breakfast clubs, through to 2023. In response to a parliamentary question on 22 June 2021, then Minister Vicky Ford said that “the current contract is due to complete in July 2021, and the new procurement will enable our provision to continue seamlessly”.⁶⁹

In July 2021, details were published about the programme’s [funding to July 2023](#). The announcement stated that up to £24million would be provided, and that:

All participating schools will receive a 100% subsidy for Breakfast Club Provision until 31st March 2022. The subsidy will then be reduced to 75%, allowing schools to contribute 25% from other funding streams. All pupils in participating schools are to be offered breakfast supplies at no cost to them or their parents.⁷⁰

Funding has subsequently been extended to the end of July 2025. All participating schools receive a 75% subsidy for the food and delivery costs of breakfast club provision.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Department for Education, [Breakfast Clubs Setup and Implementation: Briefing for School Leaders](#), March 2017

⁶⁹ [PQ 17741 \[on Breakfast Clubs\]](#), answered 22 June 2021.

⁷⁰ Department for Education, [Breakfast clubs programme 2021-2023](#), 9 July 2021

⁷¹ Department for Education, [National school breakfast club programme](#), 4 March 2024

4.4

DfE evaluation of breakfast clubs in schools with high levels of deprivation

The Department for Education published an [evaluation of the impact of breakfast clubs on schools with high deprivation levels](#) in March 2017, prepared by ICF Consulting.

The report evaluated the programme implemented by the charity Magic Breakfast and found it “was successful in terms of the numbers of schools recruited; the high proportion continuing with a breakfast club and the positive impacts which schools perceived for their pupils.”⁷²

It also raised concerns about some schools’ ability to attract children on free school meals to attend, with around a fifth of schools involved finding lower proportions attending than were on the school roll.⁷³

The report made a series of recommendations for any future extension of the programme, including:

- Expert involvement to select schools for inclusion and provide support on the ground for during the first year
- Breakfast clubs should be free for free school meal pupils, with low or no charges for others
- That any expansion should consider including high FSM eligible schools who already have breakfast clubs but which could be expanded.⁷⁴

A full list of recommendations is provided on pages 8-9 of the [report](#).

⁷² Department for Education, [Evaluation of Breakfast Clubs in Schools with High Levels of Deprivation](#), March 2017, p7

⁷³ As above, p8

⁷⁴ As above, p9

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