



July 2025

Free school meals extension

The DfE published in June 2025 updated guidance for schools on eligibility for free school meals (FSM).

Transitional protections for free school meals have been in effect since 1 April 2018. This has meant that pupils becoming eligible for free meals under the benefits-based criteria can continue to receive this entitlement, even if their household circumstances had changed. These protections were introduced alongside the below £7,400 earned income threshold for households on universal credit to be eligible to receive FSM.

Current situation

The arrangements described above have been extended. For a further year, all pupils becoming eligible for FSM under the benefits-based criteria will continue to receive this entitlement, regardless of any change in household circumstances or phase of education until the end of the 2025/26 school year.

The DfE has announced that transitional protections will end in August 2026. Eligibility for all pupils will effectively revert to whether they meet the eligibility criteria, regardless of whether they were previously protected.

Future system

It has long been a concern that the income threshold was too low, meaning that many children living in poverty miss out on FSM. For example, there have been persistent advocacy for an extension of eligibility from the School Food Review Working Group for a number of years.

Now the DfE has announced it will be introducing new eligibility criteria from the start of the 2026/27 school year, which will mean that all children from households in receipt of universal credit will be entitled to a free meal. Further, this means that pupils who have just one parent or carer receiving universal credit will be eligible, regardless of their total household income. The announcement has been well received by professional associations, by the National Governance Association and a number of other educational organisations.

- The government predicts that this extension means that more than 500,000 more children will get free meals.
- The Department for Work and Pensions believes that by 2030, the expansion will pull around 100,000 children out of poverty.
- The DfE estimates that the annual cost of providing the additional meals will be around £250 million.

Pupil premium

The DfE makes it clear in the guidance that these 'extra' FSM children will not automatically also attract pupil premium funding.

On the other hand, pupils currently qualifying for pupil premium support on the existing FSM threshold will continue to do so. There has been some speculation that schools might actually see their pupil premium funding reduce as a result of the scrapping of protections. The DfE has said that these fears are groundless,

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saying that no-one will lose pupil premium eligibility in 2026/27 as a result of this policy change.

However, since the DfE has recently said that it intends to review at some future point how it allocates pupil premium and related funding to schools and local authorities (LAs), it is not possible to say for certain that schools will not lose out in the longer term.

Impact on schools and LAs

From September 2026 onwards, schools and LAs will need to keep FSM eligibility under continued review. This means in effect that schools and LAs should recheck eligibility for all pupils in receipt of FSM ahead of the October 2026 census.

The responsibility for checking the eligibility of applicants for FSM rests with the individual school, but many schools will choose to work with LAs to carry out these checks via the DfE's eligibility checking system.

The guidance describes how this system operates but also gives details of how parents can still submit paper-based evidence.

However, school leaders have been asked to only re-check eligibility from then onwards once every 12 months, to avoid 'any sudden loss of entitlement during the school year'.

Education Policy Institute report

Coincidentally, a week after the publication of the updated DfE

guidance, the Education Policy Institute issued a report on 12 June 2025 looking at how free school meals practices in England differ across place and time.

The report, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, shows significant variation in how FSM and free early years meals are accessed across schools and LAs. There are perceptible differences in who is identified as 'disadvantaged' and therefore who accesses FSM and other associated benefits to which they are entitled.

It calls upon the government to eliminate those inequalities by introducing a national auto-enrolment scheme, meaning that all eligible families would automatically be registered by the government for FSM.

(Such a scheme, if implemented, could build on the 5 June government announcement but at the same time remove the need for individual LAs and schools to undertake initial eligibility identification.)

The report finds that:

- Where a child lives or goes to school determines how easy or hard it is to register for FSM. This is often because different LAs operate different registration practices, some of which are more complicated than others.
- Children under five can miss out, partly because not all LAs see

the provision of free meals to eligible children as obligatory. But also FSM provision only applies to maintained nurseries. The majority of under-fives attend either voluntary, private or independent settings and are therefore not eligible.

- Vulnerable families, including those with English as an additional language, and those with 'no recourse to public funds' face multiple barriers in registering for FSM.
- Stigma also continues to prevent families from applying for the FSM to which they are entitled.
- The most inclusive approach is in LAs who already use local auto enrolment. Some of these LAs have reported discovering quite large numbers of unregistered eligible children.

The report recommends:

- Introducing a national system of auto-enrolment. As well as being fairer, this would significantly reduce the time and resources required by LAs and schools to promote FSMs and maximise registration.
- Clarifying the free early years meals policy and supporting all types of early years settings to provide it for all children who meet the criteria.

Ofsted reforms

Ofsted consulted earlier this year through the 'Big Listen' on changes to education inspections and the introduction of a new report card.

On 11 June 2025, a DfE press release stated that the online Ofsted consultation questionnaire had received over 6,500 responses from parents, education professionals and representative bodies. Ofsted also conducted 200 test visits to schools, early years settings and other

educational institutions. The inspectorate will continue with test visits to the end of this term.

At the same time, YouGov has carried out extensive independent polling and focus groups with parents and professionals.

Feedback so far

- Parental feedback on the new look report card was overwhelmingly positive.

- 90% of parents said the report cards are easy to understand.
- 70% said they preferred report cards to Ofsted's current inspection reports.
- Sector feedback, however, raised concerns about the number of evaluation areas to be considered on inspection. The model report cards, as they currently exist, will judge schools

on eight areas, plus safeguarding. Each of the new areas will be rated using a five-point traffic light system.

- Recent Ofsted test visits also suggest this number of areas could be streamlined to make inspections more workable for all involved.
- There will be six judgment areas for ITE inspections.

Delayed response

A formal response to the consultation was originally intended for the summer term. However, the Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver, wrote to the Education Secretary on 11 June, confirming that the scale of feedback received was such that the final response will now not be published until September 2025.

However, the launch of the new inspection framework will still be in November 2025. This is despite Ofsted previously telling schools that they would have a term's notice between its final plans being published and inspections starting.

AI guidance

The government has just released a range of new guidance on the safe and effective use of artificial intelligence (AI) in schools. These are free support materials for staff and leaders in schools and colleges, developed by the Chiltern Learning Trust and the Chartered College of Teaching. The guidance explores the potential of AI to reduce workload and enhance learning while also highlighting the importance of maintaining human oversight and discretion. The materials balance the need for staff and students' safety with the opportunities created by AI.

Two sets of material

- There is a whole new range of power point slides, videos, information summaries, recommended activities and

In her reply to Sir Martyn's letter, the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, expressed disappointment that schools will not see finalised plans for new inspections until after the summer break. She wrote that while we 'share a determination to ensure the new arrangements provide the rigour, consistency, transparency, granularity and fairness that parents, carers and professionals need and expect ... at the same time it is important that Ofsted delivers to the expected timescales to build confidence in the inspectorate'. In the same letter she announced the appointment of Dame Christine Gilbert as the new chair of Ofsted.

Next steps

- The consultation response, toolkits and related material will now be published in September 2025.
- No routine Ofsted inspections will take place in September and October 2025.
- Comprehensive briefings for educational professionals will be run by Ofsted during the first half of the 2025 autumn term.

templates that are presented in a series of modules for use in training school and college staff.

The idea is that staff work through the modules, using them to gradually build up knowledge and confidence. Probably the most important module for staff, with whatever level of AI expertise, is module 3, which contains important safety considerations.

- In addition, there is a range of material, designed specifically for school and college leaders designed to help them make informed decisions about using AI effectively and safely.

We summarise below the key points from the leadership materials, which

- There will be a programme of training events and roadshows for providers, such as schools, and every provider will be invited to nominate an individual to attend a training session.
- Sector facing webinars will also continue.
- Inspector training materials will continue to be made publicly available.
- Routine inspections will start under the new framework in November.
- ITE inspections will resume in January 2026.

Professional associations have called for a delay to the implementation of the new inspection system, possibly until September 2026.

Ofsted has said that it will publish an independent assessment of the impact of the new inspection approach on professionals' wellbeing in order to minimise the pressure of inspection.

are entitled 'The safe and effective use of AI in education'. These are contained in four videos, the most detailed of which is video three about safety.

Main points

A fundamental underlying principle of the guidance is to urge schools not to feel pressured to buy into AI. It is important for leaders to learn enough about AI first so that they can decide how the school wants to use AI to serve the learning process.

The guidance recommends that schools:

- Consider forming an initial vision statement for AI and in the process consult a wide range of stakeholders in forming the statement.

- Carry out an internal audit to check their current position across key areas of AI use, including strategy, policies, staff training, curriculum, students' use and procurement. This initial snapshot should assist schools in identifying strengths and gaps.
- Embed AI as part of the school's wider digital strategy and include it in the overall school vision, align it with the school development plan and ensure the school's infrastructure can support safe, effective use of AI.
- Invest in staff training so that they can use AI confidently and critically.

Challenges

The integration of AI into education presents both significant challenges and transformative opportunities. Educational leaders must address a number of factors in order to harness the benefits of AI while mitigating potential risks.

In particular, the guidance emphasises the limitations of AI under a series of headings.

The generation of inaccuracies

AI can be inaccurate due to 'hallucinations', which are inaccuracies in an otherwise factual output – caused by an AI system guessing something such as a fake fact or a made-up quote based on patterns in the data it has been trained on.

The potential for bias

This can be a) because there was bias in the data the AI tool was trained on or b) the developer could have intentionally or unintentionally introduced bias or censorship into the model.

The associated complexities of data protection

Data protection is of paramount importance when introducing AI into a school or college.

Under UK GDPR there must be a lawful basis for processing personal data. So before using an AI tool, it is essential to ensure that it does comply with UK GDPR. The guidance advises that a school creates an approved list of tools, that have safe terms and conditions of use, so that they can ensure that there are careful processes in place for the selection of AI tools in order to protect the safety of the school community.

The challenge to intellectual property

Before using AI to generate or manipulate content based on someone else's work, permission must be obtained from the rights holder – even if that person is a student.

Also schools need to be aware of copyright infringement, which could happen if AI products are trained on unlicensed material and the outputs are then used in educational settings or published more widely.

Safeguarding

The Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance highlights the importance of online safety as a core safeguarding responsibility for schools. Staff must be trained to recognise risks such as cyber bullying, inappropriate content, online radicalisation and child exploitation.

Safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone and should be the top priority when deciding whether and how to use generative AI in an educational setting.

The guidance gives a series of hints and suggestions so that schools can reduce risks and encourage responsible AI use.

Opportunities

One section deals with the opportunities presented by the use of AI in education. It explores how AI tools can be used to reduce workload for staff and enhance learning for all students. Strategic

use of AI can cut down administrative tasks for leaders, teachers and support staff, particularly in areas such as data analysis, lesson planning, report generation and correspondence.

AI in the curriculum

As generative AI tools become more prevalent, integrating AI literacy and critical thinking into existing lessons and activities should be considered. The guidance suggests that, as part of their PSHE/personal development or computing programme, schools should consider incorporation of AI ethics and digital citizenship into these courses, creating opportunities for students to discuss ethical implications such as bias, privacy, and transparency.

Who to contact

CEFM provides a full range of services to schools. Information on our support services can be found at www.cefm.co.uk. We also provide information to subscribing schools via CEFMi, our comprehensive policy, guidance and advice web service, which can also be found at www.cefm.co.uk.

For further information, please contact: CEFM on 01494 459183.

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