

SCHOOL SUPPORT AND BENEFITS · GUIDE 2

Free School Meals: Who Qualifies and How to Apply

SHORT ANSWER

Every child should have a nutritious meal during the school day. From **September 2026, every child in England whose household receives Universal Credit qualifies for a free school meal** — whatever the household earns. Children whose families receive certain other benefits also qualify. Apply through your **local council** — and if you are struggling with the application, your child's school must help you.

Free for every young child

All children in **Reception, Year 1 and Year 2** at state-funded schools in England automatically receive a free school meal, whatever the family's income. Even so, if you receive benefits you should still apply for benefits-based free school meals — it brings **extra funding (pupil premium)** to your child's school.

New from September 2026

Eligibility has been expanded under the **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026**. There are now two categories: **Targeted** — Universal Credit households earning £7,400 or less a year (also brings pupil premium and holiday activities funding); and **Expanded** — all other Universal Credit households (free meals only). Old "transitional protections" have ended, so you may need to **re-apply**.

Who qualifies in England (benefits-based)

Free school meals are available to pupils who receive — or whose parents receive — one or more of the following:

- **Universal Credit** — from September 2026 there is **no earnings limit** (previously net earnings had to be under £7,400 a year)
- **Income Support**
- **Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance**
- **Income-related Employment and Support Allowance**
- **Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999**
- **The guaranteed element of Pension Credit**
- **Child Tax Credit** (provided you are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and your annual gross income is no more than £16,190)
- **Working Tax Credit run-on** — paid for four weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Families with **no recourse to public funds (NRPF)** may also qualify, subject to household income limits — ask your council

How to apply

- 1 **Check your eligibility.** Use your local council's website — find it via gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals.
- 2 **Apply through the council.** You will usually need your National Insurance number and date of birth. The council or school checks your eligibility with the Department for Education.
- 3 **Re-check each year.** From September 2026 eligibility is rechecked annually — respond promptly if the school or council contacts you, so your child doesn't miss out.
- 4 **Ask for help if you need it.** If you have trouble applying, contact your child's school — they can support you with the application so your child receives their meals. You can also contact The Traveller Movement.

Why applying matters — even if meals are already free

If your child is in Reception, Year 1 or Year 2 they already get a free meal — but registering for benefits-based free school meals means the school receives extra **pupil premium** funding (over £1,000 per child per year) to support your child's learning, and can unlock holiday activity programmes and other help with school costs.

Need advice?

Call The Traveller Movement on **020 7607 2002** or email us at info@travellermovement.org.uk