



## **Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit.**

To: England

For info: Contacts from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### **Key Issues**

On the 16 November 2017 the Government announced a consultation regarding the eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit.

APSE is seeking views in relation to the consultation questions set out in Appendix 1 in order to provide a response to the government on behalf of the APSE Membership.

### **Introduction**

The Government is currently in the process of rolling out changes to the benefits system and introducing a phased roll out of Universal Credit. The consultation, [Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit](#), is inviting views on the passported benefits that sit under this benefit

The current criteria for assessing eligibility for free school meals is based on the number of hours worked. The consultation document states that this is disadvantaging some of the most low-income households and it is the government's intention that the entitlements reach the most disadvantaged households in a way that is consistent, fair and simple.

This briefing outlines the details contained within the consultation document and highlights the key points. Full details of the consultation can be viewed using the following link: - ['Eligibility for free school meals'](#)

## **Background**

Local authorities have had the power to provide free school meals to vulnerable children since the early 1900's and the current arrangements were set out in the Education Act 1980 that outlines details of the eligibility criteria which is based on the family's receipt of income-related benefits.

Pupils in maintained schools, academies and free schools, as well as 16 to 18-year old students in further education are entitled to receive a free school meal if their parents or guardians are in receipt of certain benefits. Under the new arrangements, these benefits will cease to exist therefore there is a requirement to introduce new criteria to assess the eligibility.

Since 2013, for areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out there has been a temporary measure in place to ensure that no-one lost their entitlement to a free school meal.

## **Consultation Proposals**

### **1. Proposed eligibility criteria for free school meals.**

The proposed criteria for assessing eligibility is to be based on the net earnings of a household per annum and the threshold is being set at £7,400. The Department for Education (DfE) has used data from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and has taken into consideration factors such as the impact of the National Living Wage and the forecasted number of people expected to claim benefits in the future to set the threshold. Using these factors in conjunction with the data the DfE has estimated that setting the threshold at £7,400 will make around 50,000 more pupils eligible for a free school meal.

The proposal states that a typical family earning around £7,400 per annum would, depending on their exact circumstances, have a total household income of between £18,000 and £24,000 once benefits are taken into account.

The new threshold is set to be introduced in April 2018 and after this date any new claimants earning above £7,400 will not be eligible. The government are also proposing to keep this threshold constant until the Universal Credit roll out has been completed and after that point, it will be kept under review to ensure those who most need the support are benefiting.

### **2. Protecting entitlements for free school meals**

It is intended that no pupil currently eligible for a free school meal will experience a sudden loss of their free school meal. To support this intention the Government is proposing that every pupil eligible at the point at which the criteria is changed or new claimants that fall under the thresholds during the roll out of Universal Credit will continue to be eligible until the full Universal Credit roll out is complete.

In addition, existing pupils who are currently eligible for free school meals but based on the new criteria become ineligible will still continue to receive their entitlement until the rollout of Universal Credit is complete.

Details of the proposals relating to how Universal Credit claimants will be protected include: -

- From April 2018, all existing claimants should continue to receive free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out, even if earning rise above the new threshold.
- Any child gaining free school meals eligibility after the threshold has been introduced should be protected against losing free school meals during the Universal Credit rollout.
- No further eligibility checks would be required for protected families during this period. To enable this to take place schools will be required to flag the pupils as protected on their management information systems.
- Following the full roll out of Universal Credit, where a pupil is no longer eligible for a free school meal they will continue to receive their entitlement until the end of their phase of education.
- New claimants earning above the threshold after April 2018 would not be eligible for free school meals.

### **3. Supporting families and local delivery**

#### **Existing support for checking households' eligibility**

The Government will be updating the Eligibility Checking System used by local authorities to enable them to check the eligible of new claimants and academies will also be able to access the system to check the eligibility of a pupil.

To support the process the government will be producing a model registration form and guidance that can be used by schools as part of the enrolment process to ensure they receive their funding for the pupil premium.

#### **Additional support under the new eligibility criteria**

There are proposals set out in the document which are looking to ensure that local authorities, schools and further education providers have the required information to assist families in understanding the changes in eligibility. These include: -

- A letter template for parents and guidance will be provided to all education providers
- Education providers will be provided with a comprehensive information pack about Universal credit.
- Details of the changes will be communicated to all parties.
- Local authorities will be given further guidance regarding when eligibility checks are required and what evidence is needed to prove eligibility if providers are not using the system.

In conjunction with these measures the government outlines its intention to ensure that as many eligible children claim for their free school meal and will look at highlighting and disseminating best practice from schools and local authorities that have high take-up.

### **4. Other Implications**

The increase in eligibility will have an impact in the number of meals that schools need to provide and to assist local authorities to recognise this increase, details will be flagged on the data systems so they can determine funding allocations. In addition, the proposals recognise that there is a lag time in the funding system and the difficulties this will present in the short term. To reduce this impact the government are intending to put in place financial support.

Local authorities currently use the eligibility for free school meals as a criterion for further benefits which will be impacted, these include grants for school uniforms, free access to music lessons, support with school trips and access to leisure centres. The revised eligibility criteria will also have an impact on free home-to -school transport.

Furthermore, eligibility for free school meals is also used in performance data, the changes and the phased nature of the roll out of Universal Credit will make it difficult to make a direct comparison in some cases. The consultation is seeking views on how the explanation can be best presented to assist schools and those who work with schools to use and interpret the data.

### **Universal Infant Free School Meals**

**In introduction to the consultation document it states the proposal set out do not impact on the current arrangements for Universal Infant Free School Meals.**

### **APSE COMMENT**

The roll out of the Universal Credit represented an opportunity to review the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals. The consultation documents set out the proposals for setting eligibility criteria based on an income threshold rather than a threshold based on the number of hours worked which will provide much needed assistance to working families on low incomes that are facing poverty and previously fell outside the hours threshold.

APSE supports the statement set out in the document regarding the current arrangement for Universal Infant Free School Meals not being impacted by the proposals set out in the consultation.

The consultation sets out details of how the criteria will be assessed and sets out the requirement that families will need to apply for the for a free school meal. The Department for Education figures report that 11 percent of pupils who are eligible have not applied for a free school meal and this rises to as high as 30 percent in some areas.

APSE is concerned that by continuing to use an application process rather than using a system of auto registration there are children missing out on vital support that is available and needed not only with the provision of a free school meal but other benefits such as home to school transport and uniform grants. In addition, those families who are eligible but are not applying for Free Schools Meals are impacting on the Pupil Premium allocated to schools to support disadvantaged children. The introduction of Universal Credit presented an opportunity to review the options for introducing an auto enroll system, that could negate the need for applying for the benefit and reduce some of the stigma associated with applying.

On a final point, APSE would like to see the government invest in the future generation by providing a free school meal to every primary school pupil because providing a healthy lunchtime meal not only helps families that are in poverty but will contribute to saving resources and expenditure on obesity related conditions in the future.

APSE will be holding the Facilities, Catering and Building Cleaning Seminar on the 25 and 26 January 2018, where there will be the opportunity to gain information about how local authorities are delivering their school meal services and discuss the current issues with experts in the sector. For further details please click here

[APSE FM, Catering and Building Cleaning Seminar](#)

## **Appendix 1 - Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit – Consultation Questions.**

### **Question 1:**

Do you agree with our proposed net earning threshold to determine eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit?

### **Question 2:**

Do you agree with our intention to protect those pupils who would otherwise lose their entitlement to free school meals, and those children who would otherwise lose their entitlement to the early years pupil premium, under the new eligibility criteria?

### **Question 3:**

Do you feel that the proposals in this consultation may adversely affect any children who share one or more of the relevant protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010?

### **Question 4:**

Do you have any views on the proposed management of the changes to the disadvantage measures or on the metrics we publish for the measurement of disadvantaged pupils' performance?