

The HAF programme provides eligible children and young people with healthy meals and enriching activities during school holidays benefiting their health, wellbeing, and learning.

This document is for : Local Authorities, HAF coordinators

Aim: To support local authorities (LAs) in understanding and communicating how Free School Meal (FSM) changes from September 2026 will impact HAF eligibility and operational implications.

What's new?

From the academic year 2026 to 2027, the government will extend Free School Meals to all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit. This represents a significant expansion of food support to households, reaching over half a million children.

HAF eligibility **will not** expand in line with this change. HAF will remain a **targeted programme**, aligned to the existing FSM threshold (targeted FSM), to ensure the programme continues to reach those it is designed to support.

Key terms

Targeted FSM

Free school meals for children in households with household income below the existing threshold which is £7400. **This group remains eligible for HAF.**

Expanded FSM

From September 2026, FSM will also be available to all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit who have a household income of more than £7400. **This expansion does not include HAF eligibility.**

What you need to know

HAF Eligibility will remain at the current threshold

HAF will continue to be targeted at children who meet the targeted Free School Meals criteria, not expanding with Free School Meals. This is a continuation of existing HAF eligibility arrangements and ensures the programme reaches children and families it is designed to support.

Discretionary spending.

LAs have flexibility to use up to 15% of their funding to support other children and young people who may benefit from HAF in line with local need and priorities. Including those with SEND

Transitional protections

Transitional protections have been in place since 2018 to ensure no one who gained FSM eligibility would lose it while Universal Credit is rolled out. **These protections end at the end of 2025-2026 academic year.**

This means some children who currently access HAF because of FSM protections will no longer be eligible **after** the 2026 summer holiday.

This is because their family circumstances mean they no longer meet the Targeted FSM threshold

HAF sits within a broader package of support

- The expansion of FSM
- The rollout of free breakfast clubs
- Wider action through the child poverty strategy.

Where children are not eligible, families may be signposted to:

- Other local holiday provision
- Universal Credit or Tax-Free Childcare
- Wider local support services
- The Crisis Resilience Fund (CRF) can complement HAF by providing flexible, short-term support to families

Checking HAF eligibility

FSM eligibility can be verified quickly and easily through the new FSM Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) which has replaced the existing checking system made available by DfE, with improvements to support families, schools, and local authorities with eligibility checking for HAF and free school meals.

It is now available for all LAs to use through DfE sign-in to confirm whether a pupil is eligible for FSM and if so, which category they are eligible under. We are working with all vendors in the market to ensure they can connect to the new service and provide accurate results confirming whether pupils meet the targeted or expanded FSM criteria. Pupils who are eligible for targeted FSM will retain HAF eligibility for the full school year.

We strongly encourage HAF coordinators to work with the relevant colleagues when conducting checks for FSM eligibility.

HAF teams should be closely involved in local planning for these changes and ensure relevant colleagues and providers understand the implications for HAF delivery.