

## **Free school meals information sheet**

**If your child is in school, they might qualify for free school meals - and it's more than just a free lunch. It means your child gets a nutritious meal every day, your family can save money, and you could gain access to free holiday clubs and other support. Plus, your child's school receives extra funding to help boost their learning.**

**This summer, Sunderland City Council and our Children's Services partner, Together for Children, will be reviewing existing school and Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support records to identify families who may be eligible from the new school year (September 2025).**

**We've included a helpful FAQ section to answer common questions and guide you through the process.**

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### **Why are you checking who can receive free school meals?**

In Sunderland we want to make sure that every child who qualifies for free school meals gets the support they're entitled to. We know that not every parent who is entitled to free school meals will apply for them, so we are starting by contacting families we believe are in receipt of Housing Benefits and/or Council Tax Support. This helps children receive the healthy meal at school that they are entitled to, access free holiday clubs, ensures schools receive extra funding and helps families to save money. This means more families are being supported, and more children are getting the nutrition they need to thrive.

These changes are part of a wider effort to improve access to healthy food and reduce the burden on families and will come into effect from September 2025.

### **Who is eligible for free school meals?**

Children are entitled to a free school meal if their parent or carer receives one or more of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit (provided you have an annual net earned income of no more than £7,400, as assessed by earnings from up to three of your most recent assessment periods)
- 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 Guarantee element of State Pension Credit

- Child Tax Credit, provided you are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have a yearly household income of less than £16,190
- Working Tax Credit 'run-on' - the payment someone may receive for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit

### **What are the benefits of getting free school meals?**

Getting free school meals means your child enjoys a healthy lunch at school every day, helping them stay focused and ready to learn. It can also save your family around £500 a year, which you might otherwise spend on packed lunches. Many children are more likely to eat at school when their friends do, and they often try new foods they might not try at home - making mealtimes more enjoyable and varied.

Being registered can also give your child access to our free holiday programme across the city from the new school year onwards. These clubs run during school holidays and include fun activities like football, cheerleading, swimming, science, performance and arts and crafts, and always include a healthy meal. Schools currently provide supermarket vouchers to families during the Spring, Summer and Winter school holidays to help with the cost of food during the break.

Your child's school also receives extra funding to support their learning. Even if your child prefers to take a packed lunch to school, or your child already gets free meals in Reception, Year 1, or Year 2, applying for free school meals based on your eligibility can unlock all these extra benefits.

### **I think my family qualifies – how do I register?**

You do not need to do anything. To make sure your child doesn't miss out, we are going to check your eligibility for you over the summer. Your child's school will let you know if they are eligible when they return to school in September 2025.

If however, you do not wish for your child to receive free school meals and associated benefits, you can opt out. To do so please email: [reeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk](mailto:reeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk) using the email title 'Opt Out' and provide your name, your child/ren's name and your address. Please contact us by 17th August 2025.

If you do not want to wait for us, you can check your eligibility through the Sunderland City Council Family Portal - the same site you may have used to apply for a school place.

Visit: [www.togetherforchildren.org.uk/free-school-meals](http://www.togetherforchildren.org.uk/free-school-meals)

### **I already receive free school meals – do I need to do anything?**

If your child is in Year 3 or above and already receives free school meals, you don't need to do anything – they will continue to receive them as usual.

Children in Reception, Year 1, and Year 2 automatically get free school meals in England. However, it's still important to register. Registering ensures you receive additional benefits such as free holiday activity programmes and may include supermarket vouchers during the Spring, Summer and Winter holidays.

It also helps your child continue receiving meals as they grow and allows their school to receive extra funding to support their learning.

### **How will you determine if I'm eligible for free school meals?**

Over the summer, at Sunderland City Council and Together for Children we will be securely checking information we already hold - like school and housing benefit and/or council tax support records - to see if your child might qualify for free school meals. This helps make sure families who are entitled to support don't miss out.

If you are a family where two-parents or carers feature on the information that Sunderland City Council holds, you may both have received this letter, but we will only process one application.

### **What does checking who qualifies for free school meals involve?**

To see if your child can get free school meals, we will check some basic information - your surname, date of birth, and National Insurance number. This is done through a secure government system, which gives us a simple yes or no answer as to whether you qualify.

We don't see any other personal details about you or your family, and we can't ask for extra information from the Department for Work and Pensions or HMRC.

This process uses your data safely and follows strict UK data protection laws.

### **If my child qualifies, how do I tell the school?**

You don't need to contact the school yourself. If your child qualifies for free school meals, we'll inform the school directly - just like we do when families apply on their own.

The school will receive a secure and confidential list of all eligible children in September 2025. Once they have this information, they can arrange a meal for your child straight away, if you'd like them to have one.

Each school may have its own system for providing meals (such as pre-paid cards, digital accounts, or meal tokens). Your school will explain how it works in practice and guide you through the next steps.

### **How do schools get extra funding?**

Schools receive extra government funding called Pupil Premium for every child who qualifies for free school meals. This is reported during the school's Census Day in October and is worth £1,455 per primary pupil and £1,035 per secondary pupil every school year.

This could include help with the cost of uniforms, books, or school trips, running free breakfast clubs, or providing extra learning support like speech therapy or mentoring.

The funding must be used to help children thrive, which is why applying for free school meals - even if your child already gets a meal in early school years - can make a big difference.

### **How do I access the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) sessions?**

From September 2025 children we identify through this process and who receive free school meals in Sunderland can access free holiday sessions through the Holiday Activities and Food

(HAF) programme, known in Sunderland as Wear Here 4 You. These clubs run during the Spring, Summer and Winter school holidays and offer a wide range of fun activities like sports, arts and crafts, science, cooking, and more - plus a healthy meal each day. To join, eligible families can view and book sessions through the Together for Children website at [www.togetherforchildren.org.uk/HAF](http://www.togetherforchildren.org.uk/HAF).

**I live in Sunderland, but my child doesn't go to a school in Sunderland – can I still apply?**

If you live in Sunderland but your child goes to a school outside of Sunderland, you'll need to contact their school directly to apply for free school meals, as their school will manage their own application process.

**What if I don't want to apply or be auto-enrolled for free school meals?**

If you don't want us to use school and housing benefit and/or council tax support records to check eligibility, that's absolutely fine - we won't use it if you tell us not to.

However, please note that schools can only receive Pupil Premium funding once free school meals are awarded. Your information is kept secure and confidential, and neither the council nor the school will use it for any other purpose. Please rest assured there are thousands of children in our city receiving free school meals and they are not identified or treated differently in school.

If you do not wish for your child to receive free school meals and associated benefits, you can opt out. To do so please email: [freeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk](mailto:freeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk) using the email title 'Opt Out' and provide your name, your child/ren's name and your address.

If we don't hear from you by 17th August, we will begin the eligibility check.

**What happens if my circumstances change, and I am no longer entitled to free school meals?**

The Government requires us to reassess everyone who is in receipt of free school meals once a year. In Sunderland this will happen at the end of the 2025/2026 school year, and at the same time in each ongoing year.

If your situation changes between now and then and you're no longer eligible, your child will still get free school meals and you'll still be able to access free holiday activities until the start of the 2026/2027 school year. This is to make sure no child suddenly loses their meals.

**CONTACT DETAILS**

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet – if you have any questions please email [freeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk](mailto:freeschool.meals@togetherforchildren.org.uk) or call **0191 561 1417**.