



Online Free School Meals Project

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Hub Users

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1 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

These FAQs are aimed at local authority users of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Free School Meals (FSM) Hub. This document will be reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis by the DCSF FSM Administrator. If you would like to add to these FAQs please send details to fsm.admin@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk. If your suggestion is accepted by the DCSF FSM Administrator it will be added to a subsequent version of this document.

1.1 Who is entitled to Free School Meals?

Children whose parents/carers receive any one of the following qualifying benefits are entitled to free school meals:

- Income Support (IS)
- Income Based Job Seekers Allowance (IBJSA)
- An income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA (IR))
- Support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual taxable income (as assessed by HM Revenue and Customs) that as of 6 April 2009 does not exceed £16,040. **Note:** From 1 May 2009 where a parent/carer is entitled to Working Tax Credit during the four-week period immediately after their employment ceases, or after they start to work less than 16 hours per week, their children are entitled to free school lunches.
- The Guaranteed element of State Pension Credit

Children who receive Income Support or Income Based Job Seekers Allowance in their own right are also eligible to receive free school meals.

Please Note – DWP introduced the new benefit, Employment Support Allowance (Income Related) (ESA (IR)) on 27 October 2008. There is no anticipated increase in the number of claimants for FSM as ESA (IR) is based on new claims only and is intended to replace other benefits, for example income support, on a like for like basis. It is also possible to use the Hub to check FSM applications for those in receipt of ESA (IR).

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1.2 What data does the Hub check against?

The Hub checks data from DWP, HMRC and the Home Office. Home Office and HMRC each provide updated data files on a weekly basis. Checks for DWP records are made in real-time via a direct link to DWP's CIS database.

1.3 If I receive a 'not found' or 'false' response do I refuse a claimant free school meals or stop an existing claimant's meals?

No, further investigation must be carried out for any 'not found' or 'false' results.

First, retry the claim and ensure all details are correct. If the claimant is still not found and you believe that they should be, then based on which records you believe the claimant should be found in then carry out the following:

- For applications based on tax credit entitlement HMRC advice in the case of a 'not found' response is to ask the claimant to provide their latest tax credit statement form TC 602. If there is still uncertainty after this is seen, please call the HMRC LA Priority Line on 0845 300 3944. You will be asked to confirm that you have checked both the Hub and form TC602.
- For applications based on IS, IBJSA and ESA (IR), DWP advice in the case of a 'not found' response is to ask the claimant to produce their paperwork that confirms they are in receipt of the relevant benefit. If there is still uncertainty after this is seen, please provide full details of the record to fsm.admin@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk, to enable us to pursue with DWP.
- A NASS number is only allocated to those who are in receipt of the relevant support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. If a NASS number has not been allocated the claimant is not in receipt of the relevant support and is not, therefore, eligible for FSM. Claimants with a NASS number should be returned as 'found' by the Hub. If this is not the case please report this, providing details of the record to fsm.admin@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

Please Note: The data files provided by HMRC and Home Office do not hold surname history. Please check that you have the latest surname for the applicant.

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1.4 What format does a NASS number have to be entered into the system?

A NASS number should be entered as a 9 digit number. If there are any separators (/) in the number they should not be entered, e.g. if the NASS number is 12/12/12345 then it should be entered as 121212345.

1.5 If the Hub shows a ‘not found’ or ‘false’ response but I have proof that the claimant is receipt of a qualifying benefit can I award free school meals?

Yes, if you are satisfied that the person is in receipt of an eligible benefit.

1.6 The Hub shows a ‘not found’ result although there is evidence to prove that the claimant is in receipt of Child Tax Credit, is under the threshold and is receiving no Working Tax Credit. However, the claimant is receiving interest from money in a building society account. Could this be the reason for the system returning a ‘Not Found’, or is eligibility strictly dependent on the income on the TC602.

HMRC take into account all income a claimant is receiving when determining which benefits they are entitled to. Therefore, the income stated on a TC602 is a claimant’s income as assessed by HMRC and the income which should be used to determine free school meal eligibility.

1.7 If an Applicants income for the previous tax year ie: (2008-2009) was over the allowed threshold of £16,040 but their forecast income for the current tax year ie: (2009-2010) is below the threshold for eligibility or zero, can FSM be granted on the Forecast Income?

Yes, the Income forecast for the current tax year must always be the figure taken into account when deciding on eligibility as that is the applicants income status now, at the time of application. If that person’s income situation changes during the current tax period, then they must make that new figure known through the normal channels.

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1.8 Is there a period from the time that a persons Working Tax credit ends to when they are allowed to apply for Free School Meals?

No, there is no set time limit. As soon as a person's Working Tax Credit ends, they are able to apply for Free School Meals.

1.9 How often is data updated?

Home Office and HMRC each provide updated data files on a weekly basis. Checks for DWP records are made in real-time via a direct link to DWP's CIS database.

1.10 Do you need parental consent prior to checking their entitlement?

You will need the consent of the claimant to use their data to check FSM entitlement. Please see a suggested form of wording below. However, we recommend that you check this and any associated record keeping arrangements with your auditors.

'I agree that you will use the information I have provided to process my claim for free school lunches and will contact other sources as allowed by law to verify my initial, and ongoing, entitlement.'

Where appropriate – 'I understand that the results of any free school lunch eligibility check may also be used to assess my entitlement to receive [enter name of any additional 'benefits' e.g. free travel to school; uniform grant; free school milk].'

1.11 What do I do if a parent or carer has concerns about data security?

Where a parent or carer has concerns about data security LAs can reassure them by referring to the data use requirements stipulated in legislation - s110 of the Education Act 2005 requires that data is only used for its intended purpose, i.e. to determine eligibility for free school meals [and milk], and that improper use of information is an offence. All LA users are required to sign a declaration to confirm that they will only use data for its intended purpose.

1.12 Can the eligibility checking system be used by schools?

The Hub is a tool which is only available to local authorities it can't be accessed by schools.

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1.13 Why can't schools use the Hub to check eligibility?

The main reason for the development of the Hub is to reduce free school meal associated burdens on schools. This is as a direct result of a Cabinet Office study and report that called for a minimisation of the involvement of school staff on free school meal issues. We appreciate that some schools have a devolved budget and therefore a duty to provide school meals and that some schools assist with FSM checks. However, this does not mean that schools are responsible for determining FSM entitlement. This responsibility rests with the local authority and the Hub is designed to reflect this position.

1.14 My authority has outsourced free school meal processing to a strategic partner. Can this partner have access to the Hub?

Yes, provided the strategic partner is contracted to the relevant LA and the LA makes a formal request (in writing) on the partner's behalf and outlines that they have outsourced this function. If a partner wants to undertake free school meal checks for a number of LAs a formal request from each LA would be required. The LA should countersign the declaration form, which confirms that the necessary checks have been made on the staff that will access the data. The LA retains responsibility for data use so if there are data misuse issues with a partner the LA will be culpable. The LA should inform the Service Desk if they cease to use the partner's services.

1.15 How do I request an account on the system?

From the homepage there is a link at the top right of the screen which links to a Request Login screen. See Section [Error! Reference source not found.](#) for full details of what is required to pre-register and gain a LA User account.

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1.16 Do I have to complete a user declaration form before I can request a login?

No. However, your declaration form should be returned within two weeks of your account being opened or your account will be blocked until the form has been received.

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1.17 How do I request a password reset?

In the login screen click on 'Forgotten your password?'. Enter your username and click on 'Request Password Reset'. You will be returned to the home page and your request emailed to the FSM administrator. An email providing a new password will be sent to your mailbox when the FSM administrator has actioned the request.

1.18 What do I do if I am locked out of my account?

If you are locked out of your account you need to request a password reset.

1.19 How many users can an authority have on the system?

There is no limit to the number of users an authority can have set up on the system.

1.20 Can LA Users be registered with the same email address?

No. Each individual LA User must have a unique email address. You cannot use a group email account.

1.21 Am I able to produce an audit report of checks I have carried out?

Yes. The Hub provides the facility to view and print a report of the details of claimants checked and the results obtained. This can be accessed by clicking on 'Reports' on the menu on the left hand side of the eligibility query screen.

1.22 Can I use the Hub to check eligibility for free transport or free nursery places?

No. The data that is used by the Hub can only be used to check eligibility for free school meals. It cannot be used to check for other benefits in the absence of a claim for free school meals. This is a legal requirement and is set out in the Education Act 2005. However, once you have received a claim for free school meals and you know that a child is entitled to that Free School Meal you can use this information to determine eligibility for other benefits provided the applicant has given their consent.

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1.23 Can I use the Hub to check claimants for Free School Milk as well as Free School Meals?

The eligibility criteria for free milk entitlement is exactly the same as for free school meals. The FSM Hub can be used to assess applicant's eligibility for both.

1.24 If an claimant resides in a borough different to where the school their child attends is situated, where should they go to apply for Free School Meals?

Applications for free school meals have to be made to the LA where the school is situated **not** the LA where the claimant lives.

1.25 Can I use the Hub to check claimants receiving the 4 week run on?

The Hub can't be used to check claimants receiving the 4 week run on. LAs should carry out paper checks for these claims. Claimants should be able to produce a tax award notice, which HMRC will issue them with immediately upon notifying HMRC they have ceased work or their working hours have dropped below 16.

1.26 I am experiencing problems uploading a batch file. What format does the file have to be in?

The Hub requires a file in CSV format, see Section [Error! Reference source not found.](#) for details.

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If you can't upload the file send it to the administrator at fsm.admin@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk who will investigate why the file is not uploading.

1.27 I am getting rejected batch queries on NASS numbers which have a leading 0 as this is being removed when saved as a .csv file

eg: (012345678) – number being returned as (12345678)

This is a known issue and is currently under investigation.

Until the problem is resolved all NASS numbers that begin with a 0 will have to be excluded from Batch file uploads and entered manually using the on-line system, where the number will be accepted.

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1.28 When do you have to upload batch files by? And when are they processed?

You must upload your batch file before 18.00 for processing overnight. If the batch file is uploaded by 18.00 then under normal circumstances the processed batch file will be available for downloading by 9.30am the next working day.

1.29 Is there a limit to the number of records that can be checked in one batch file?

Yes, there is a limit to the size of the file that can be processed, and this is approximately 4MB. However a file of this size would be capable of containing hundreds of thousands of records. It is very unlikely that you will ever need to exceed this size.

1.30 Is there a limit to the number of batch files that can be uploaded?

Yes, no more than 430 CSV files can be uploaded by an LA during a seven day period. This means that all users within the LA cannot in total upload more than 430 CSV files in seven days. Batch files are automatically deleted after seven days.

1.31 Do I have to enter the full surname on a batch file or can I just enter the first three characters?

The claimant's first three characters should be entered. The full surname should be used if this is less than three characters.

1.32 Why do I get 'Not Found' due to Surname from batch file uploads?

This is due to a current database mis-match whereby the data source used by Batch File queries is different than the data source being used by on-line enquiries. The on-line data source contains details of the most recent Surnames, therefore if a persons surname has recently changed it is highly likely that it would not be found if submitted via the Batch File upload.

Until this issue is resolved, any Batch file queries returned as not found due to Surname, should be resubmitted manually using the Hubs on-line facility.

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1.33 What do I do if I can't download a returned batch file?

Batch file results should be returned the day after the file was submitted. If the results are not returned contact the administrator at fsm.admin@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

1.34 Are there any eligibility criteria that the Hub can't check?

There are some types of eligibility that are not possible to check on the Hub. These are:

- Entitlement to Pension Credits in addition to contributions-based Employment Support Allowance (ESA): If the parent/carer applying is a man aged 60-64 who receives ESA and this ESA is contributions not income based and it is then topped up with Pension Credits, it is his Pension Credits that would make his child eligible for FSM. These are not recorded in the DWP CIS database because it clashes with the ESA database. Therefore a Hub query for such a person would come back not found.
- Entitlement to working tax credit during the four-week period immediately after employment ceases, or after the parent/carer starts to work less than 16 hours per week

You will need processes to cope with the instances where the Hub cannot verify eligibility. By the end of Autumn 2009 we would expect the Hub to be about 90% accurate in assessing claimants as eligible/ineligible.

2 **Contacts**

DCSF FSM Administrator

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3 Glossary

| Acronym | Definition |
|---------|---|
| CIS | Customer Information System (a DWP facility that includes benefit information relevant to establishing FSM eligibility) |
| CTB | Council Tax Benefit |
| DCSF | Department for Children, Schools and Families |
| DWP | Department of Work and Pensions |
| ECS | Eligibility Checking Service |
| FSM | Free School Meals |
| GCSx | Government Connect Secure extranet |
| GES | Gateway to Educational Services |
| GSI | Government Secure intranet |
| HB | Housing Benefit |
| HO | Home Office |
| HMRC | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs |
| LA | Local Authority |
| NASS | National Asylum Seekers Service |
| NINO | National Insurance Number |

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