

# CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

10 November 2011



PLYMOUTH  
CITY COUNCIL

## Eligibility Criteria for Free School Meals (Resolution 26.3)

The eligibility criteria for free school meals is set within Section 512 of the Education Act 2002.

Free school meals are available for pupils of statutory school age including sixth form pupils attending a school (but not a college of further education) and also for nursery aged children who are attending full days.

In order to qualify for free school meals the parent (or guardian) must be in receipt of one of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- Income Based Job Seekers Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Child tax credit only, (**not** in receipt of working tax credit), and an annual income as assessed by the Inland Revenue not exceeding £16,190. (Please note - Working Tax Credit is not a qualifying benefit even if the annual income is below £16,190)
- Guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Income related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA (IR))
- Working Tax Credit 'Run-On' - Where the claimant has stopped working or their hours have dropped below 16 hours per week and their Working Tax Credit has ended. This will grant a four-week entitlement (whilst their new benefit claim is being processed).
- Pupils who receive income support in their own right are also entitled to receive free school meals.

## How to apply for free school meals

- The parent or guardian completes an application form which is available from the child's school, or on the PCC website.
- The forms are sent to the free school meals administrator and the details are checked using a secure government website (ECS checking service) to determine eligibility. The data that is required to undertake a check using the ESC service is the parent's National Insurance number, their date of birth and their surname.
- The data is uploaded on a daily basis to the ECS checking service. The data is processed overnight and is downloaded the following day. The department is therefore able to offer a 24 hour turnaround time for assessing eligibility.
- The claimant does not need to provide any paper proof of their benefits unless we receive a 'not found' return from ECS. Should this happen then the school will request that the parent provides proof of their entitlement to a qualifying benefit.

## **Future developments**

We are currently working with ICT to develop an online application form. A parent (or school) will be able to complete the form online which will feed directly to the free school meal administrator. The data will then be uploaded to the ECS system as described above. The parent and school will be notified by email of their eligibility. Should a parent not have access to a computer then a paper application form will be accepted or the school could make the application on their behalf using the online application.

Currently claims are renewed on an annual basis. We are now developing processes whereby the data we hold centrally is checked more frequently using the ECS service. Using this system a pupil will stay on free school meals unless we receive a 'not found' return from the ECS service. This means parents will not need to submit an annual renewal form and there will be less administration for schools. This system will also ensure that only those entitled to receive free schools are receiving them. Although it is the parent's responsibility to inform the school if their circumstances change, many do not, and this is only picked up at the annual renewal time. Running these checks more frequently will pick up any changes much sooner. Schools will then be notified on a regular basis which pupils are no longer entitled to free school meals.

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