

Free School Meals opt-out auto-award

From January 2026, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) are introducing a new approach (opt-out auto-award) to help make sure that more children in Gloucestershire receive the free school meals (FSM) they are entitled to.

What is 'opt-out auto-award'?

Children can receive FSM if their family meets [certain UK government criteria](#). Opt-out auto-award means drawing on existing Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data and county council records to identify and register entitled children for FSM, without their family needing to apply.

Families can still choose *not* to take part (this is called opting out). But if they do nothing, their child will be registered for the next school census.

More details about how this process works are at the bottom of this page.

FSM Language Explained

The Council is aligned with the DWP in the language we use around FSM.

- Entitled: the children who should receive FSM, but are not registered to do so
- Eligible: the children who should receive FSM, and are registered to do so

GCC is interested in identifying and registering entitled children.

Why this is important

Free school meals (FSM) help support families with lower incomes. Yet many children who are entitled are not registered, and children are missing out on nutritious meals. Schools also miss out on vital pupil premium funding, intended to further support pupils.

Opt-out auto-award has already been successfully introduced in several areas across the UK. There are many benefits, including:

- Children get better access to nutritious meals, which supports concentration, attendance, and overall academic performance
- Families could save up to £450 per year (per child), helping alleviate financial pressures and improving food security

Schools receive more funding to support pupils and benefit from less administrative workload.

Opt-out auto-award helps to reduce under-registration, ensuring all entitled pupils have the opportunity to receive a free school meal.

GCC's new opt-out auto-award process will be even more important from September 2026, when FSM eligibility is extended to all households receiving Universal Credit.

GCC wants to make sure that *all* entitled children benefit from receiving these meals.

Opt-out auto-award in more detail

There are five main steps in our new opt-out auto-award approach:

Step	Detail
Collecting the data	GCC will bring together information from government and county council held records to find pupils who are entitled to free school meals but not yet registered.
Checking the data	GCC will review the combined data and identify families: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• with school-aged children,• who receive <u>certain government-specified</u> benefits,• who are not already receiving FSM
Giving families the chance to opt out	GCC will send the families of entitled pupils a letter explaining: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• what free school meals are• the benefits of these• GCC's plan to register their child for the support The letter also lets families know that if they prefer that the Council team didn't do this, they can opt out by sending an email to the Free School Meal team (edsupport@gloucestershire.gov.uk).
Registering pupils	Once the opt-out period ends, GCC will remove the records of those families who opted out. GCC will send schools a list of pupils to register for the support through the usual Department for Education (DfE) process, in time for the next school census. GCC will only share information with your child's school. For more details on how we use your information, see our Privacy Notice on our website - Free School Meals Gloucestershire County Council (Apply for free school meals Gloucestershire County Council)

To note: If you have any specific requirements (e.g. dietary and cultural needs), please let your child's school know. As per the [School Food in England Guidance](#), meals can usually be adapted to meet these requirements.

Timescales

GCC is working closely with schools, our data and IT teams, and national partners to implement this system securely and effectively.

GCC aims to start contacting families before the Christmas break.

GCC will keep this webpage updated with the latest information as the project progresses.