Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service

Your guide to free school meals and our eligibility checking service

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Slough
Borough Council

Your guide to free school meals and our eligibility checking service

1. What is Slough Borough Council's Eligibility Checking Service?

Staff working within this service process and provide the outcome of free school meal applications.

2. How do parents / carers apply for free school meals?

Parents can apply in one of two ways.

- Directly to their child's school using the application form provided as part of this documentation release **OR**
- Via the Slough Borough Council website – http://www.slough.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/free-school-meals.aspx. *Please note: parents can only apply via the council website if their child's school is a member of the council's free school meals service level agreement.*

3. How does Slough Borough Council determine whether an applicant is eligible for free school meals?

Slough Borough Council uses the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking System to determine whether an applicant's child is entitled to free school meals.

If the Eligibility Checking Service cannot provide a result, additional information may be sought from either the school or the parent.

4. What is the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking System?

It is an electronic system, available to local authorities, containing data from:

- the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- the Home Office (HO)
- Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)

The above system uses an applicant's surname, date of birth and National Insurance number (or National Asylum Support Service number) to determine whether they claim one of the benefits which qualifies their child to receive free school meals.

In the majority of cases the result is clear i.e. an applicant is shown to be eligible or ineligible for free school meals. However, in a small number of cases a result cannot be determined. This is usually because the information provided on the application is incorrect i.e. one of the data items provided is incorrect, or because further information is required from the applicant.

5. Can schools access the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking System?

No. The system is only available to local authorities.

6. If a parent applies directly to the school, what do I need to check when they return the form?

You must check that the parent has completed the form accurately. As a guide, the information must be in the format overleaf.

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Detail Required	Description
National Insurance Number (NI)	National Insurance Numbers should be entered in full, and consist of a combination of letters and numbers. A guide is shown below; Two Letters Six Numbers A final letter (Range A – D) AA 1234556 A
National Asylum Support Service Reference Number (NASS).	The NASS number will be shown on the Asylum Seeker letter of support from the Home Office. The number is shown on the right hand side of the letter below the address and is referred to as the NASS reference. It may look something like 12/12/12345/001. The NASS number you provide should be the first 9 digits and should ignore any separators e.g. /. In the example above, the NASS number would be 121212345.
Date of Birth (DOB)	Must be the date of birth of the applicant (NOT the child's) in the format YYYYMMDD
Surname of applicant	BLOGGS

7. If a parent applies directly to the school, how do I submit it to Slough Borough Council for assessment?

Schools should supply the required assessment information to the LA using the S2S messaging service available via DfE Sign In. Full instructions can be found in the "*Free School Meal Applications – how do I process an application*?" section starting on page 8.

To determine someone's eligibility, you must send us:

- Parent's legal surname
- Parent's date of birth
- Parent's National Insurance number or National Asylum Support Service number

8. How will I get the result of an application I have sent to Slough Borough Council?

Via the S2S messaging service – please see page 8 for more information.

9. If we signpost a parent to apply on the council website, how will we find out the result?

If a parent applies online via the Slough Borough Council website, they will receive the outcome of their application via e-mail. A copy of the application form and result will be transferred to the relevant school(s) via S2S using the generic files upload functionality. The school(s) will be supplied with a copy of the application form and the result no matter what it is i.e. irrespective of whether they are eligible or not eligible.

10. What do I do once I have the result of a parent's application?

The list of possible results and what you should do next can be found on page 12 of this guide.

11. What benefits would a parent need to be in receipt of in order to qualify for free school meals?

Children of parents who are in receipt of one of the following benefits are eligible for free school meals:

- Universal Credit (provided the applicant has an annual net earned income of no more than £7400, as assessed by earnings from up to three of their 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 they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income (as assessed by HM Revenue & Customs) that does not exceed £16,190 for financial year.
- Working Tax Credit 'run-on' – the payment someone may receive for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit

Please note: Anyone who was eligible for benefit related free school meals, either on or after 1st April 2018, will remain eligible until further notice, even if the parent no longer claims a qualifying benefit. This is known as "transitional protection". Please see below.

Free School Meals – Transitional Protection

On 1st April 2018, the government changed the eligibility criteria for free school meals to reflect the introduction of Universal Credit. They also implemented eligibility protection (known as "transitional protections") for those pupils who might otherwise have lost free school meals following the update to the eligibility criteria. The transitional protections are awarded as follows:

1. Any pupil who is in receipt of free school meals immediately prior to 1st April 2018 will continue to receive free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out. This applies even if they no longer meet the eligibility criteria during that time.

2. Any pupil who gains eligibility for free school meals after 1st April 2018 will continue to receive free school meals during the Universal Credit rollout period. This applies even if they no longer meet the eligibility criteria at a subsequent point during the rollout period.

The government's rollout of Universal Credit has a target end date of March 2022, although it is widely expected to take longer. Once rollout is complee, any existing pupil who no longer meets the eligibility criteria will continue to receive free school meals until the end of their current phase of education, i.e., the end of year 6 (primary) or the end of year 11 (secondary).

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12. What does the introduction of "transitional protection" mean for schools?

During the rollout of Universal Credit, protection arrangements mean that no further eligibility checks will be required for children who are already eligible. Schools should continue to record pupils claiming free school meals – including those being transitionally protected – as eligible for free school meals within their Management Information System and on the termly school census.

DfE will issue further guidance on FSM eligibility when the rollout of Universal Credit is nearly complete. At this point it is likely that schools will need to complete an eligibility re-check for all children the school has recorded as eligible for free school meals. At that point, anyone who does not qualify under the benefit related criteria will continue to receive free school meals through to the end of phase of education they are in.

13. **A child has just joined our school and the parent's application for free school meals has come back as "false / ineligible". How can I check if they should get free school meals under transitional protection?**

If the child has been at school elsewhere, FSM eligibility information will be contained within their CTF and / or any paper files transferring with them. If their records indicate they were eligible on or after 1st April 2018, then they are eligible under transitional protection and free school meals can be provided. If you are satisfied they are eligible, no further checks need to be made until the government's Universal Credit rollout is complete.

If in doubt, check with the previous school.

14. **If schools aren't required to re-check the status of currently eligible children, what FSM checks do we actually need to process?**

Schools must:

- Process applications from brand new applicants i.e. those who to your knowledge are applying for free school meals for the first time.
- Process applications from parents who used to be eligible before 1st April 2018 but have lost their eligibility i.e. those where transitional protection arrangements don't apply.
- At the end of each term, submit the FSM batch check spreadsheet to Slough Borough Council containing eligibility assessment information for:
  - all previous applicants who are currently ineligible for free school meals
  - any new applicants / new joiners starting the following term for who checks have not yet been completed

15. **Why should we do a termly re-check of those applicants who are currently ineligible?**

As FSM eligibility is the main trigger of Pupil Premium funding, schools would benefit from additional funding if a previously ineligible child becomes eligible. Children and families who are rightfully entitled would also benefit from the provision of free meals.

16. **I don't yet have the required eligibility assessment information for new starters joining next term. Can I submit another spreadsheet at the start of next term once I have collected this information?**

Every effort must be made to obtain the required information and include it in your end of term spreadsheet. As our availability to process these spreadsheets is limited to school holidays, we will be unable to process any which are sent at the start of the following term.

If you are unable to provide the required information for new starters at the end of the previous term we recommend you do one of the following as and when you gather application data from parents:

- send individual application check requests using S2S messaging (remembering you can only include a maximum of 5 children per message)
- signpost parents to complete the Slough Borough Council online FSM application

17. **If I know a child is only receiving free school meals because of the transitional protection rules, should I enter the date in the future when their entitlement would end?**

No. An end date should only be recorded where pupils have:

- moved into England from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (and were eligible in the country they moved from).
- electively withdrawn their claim for free school meals.

18. Where should I record details of FSM applicants?

Schools should consider recording applicant details in two places.

1. On a master spreadsheet*. Schools should keep a record of all applicants, along with their eligibility status i.e. eligible or ineligible. This is especially important as:

    a. schools will need to re-check the status of all eligible children once the government completes it's rollout of Universal Credit. This will give schools an eligibility end date for those pupils receiving FSM under transitional protection.
    b. schools should complete termly re-checks of all applicants who are currently ineligible for free school meals.

* A template spreadsheet is provided as part of this documentation release. Schools must utilise this template as you must record data in the specified format in order for bulk checks to be completed.

2. Within their MIS (e.g. SIMS.net). Details of the applicant i.e. parent/carer, will likely be recorded within your MIS. Schools should consider filling any gaps within the person's system record with data obtained on the FSM application form. For example, the parent's NI or NASS number.   This will help with any future reporting the school may be required to undertake with regards to FSM eligibility.

When recording information, please ensure:
- you pay attention to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)
- any information collected is outlined within the school's Privacy Notice
- any information is managed as per the school's Data Retention Schedule

19. How long does Slough Borough Council recommend we keep free school meals information for?

Schools should keep all records regarding a child's free school meals eligibility for as long as they are on roll with the school. Beyond this, schools must determine an appropriate length of time to retain such information. We would expect this to be in line with the school's retention period for general student records.

20. What do I do if I know a parent who currently claims free school meals, no longer claims one of the qualifying benefits?

Nothing. As per transitional protection arrangements, eligibility will be protected through to the end of the government's rollout of Universal Credit and then through to the end of the phase of education they are in at that point.

21. How many school staff should be involved in managing the FSM process?

We recommend two members of school staff know how to process applications to cover illness and annual leave.

22. What are Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM)?

All government-funded schools must offer free school meals to every pupil in Reception, year 1 and year 2. This is distinctly separate to benefit related free school meals. Schools must **not** record a child in one of these year groups as eligible for free school meals unless they meet the benefit related criteria.

23. If a child receives a Universal Infant Free School Meal anyway, is there any point in a parent applying for free school meals?

Yes! If the parent claims one of the free school meals qualifying benefits, the school would benefit from Pupil Premium funding. Children may also continue to benefit from free school meals beyond the end of year 2 (when UIFSM no longer applies).

To help make this easier for schools, we have made an "eat for free" UIFSM registration form available as part of this documentation release. Parents can use this form to tell you they want a UIFSM for their child. They are also asked to provide their NI number and other relevant information which will enable you to complete a full free school meal eligibility check.

24. Who can I contact if I have any further questions regarding free school meals?

If you have any questions regarding free school meals, then in the first instance please e-mail siteam@slough.gov.uk.

For any point of escalation or any further query, please contact:

1. Anjum Javaid, Systems & Information Officer on anjum.javaid@slough.gov.uk or telephone 01753 476576 or

2. Paul Brotherton, Systems & School Support Manager on paul.brotherton@slough.gov.uk or telephone 01753 875744

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Free School Meal Applications – how do I process an application?

There are two types of check schools should complete:

1. **New applications received in school**. Details of this application should be sent to the LA via S2S messaging for processing. S2S is accessed via DfE Sign In.

2. **Termly re-checks**. Schools should ensure they submit a spreadsheet of assessment information (in the correct format) for:

   o all previous applicants who are currently ineligible for free school meals
   o any new applicants / new joiners starting the following term

1. New applications

1-5 Applicants

If you receive between 1 and 5 applications for free school meals in a day, you can send the required assessment information in a message to the LA via the S2S messaging system.

Log in to S2S (accessed via DfE Sign In: https://services.signin.education.gov.uk/). If you don't have access to DfE Sign In, or the S2S system within it, contact your school's DfE Sign In administrator.

Click Messages, Send Message. Click Blank Message and then Next.

On the window that appears, you will need to create the message by starting from a blank template. You will then need to select the local authority (871 Slough), and then the user (LEA User). Click on Add selected LEA to recipient list.
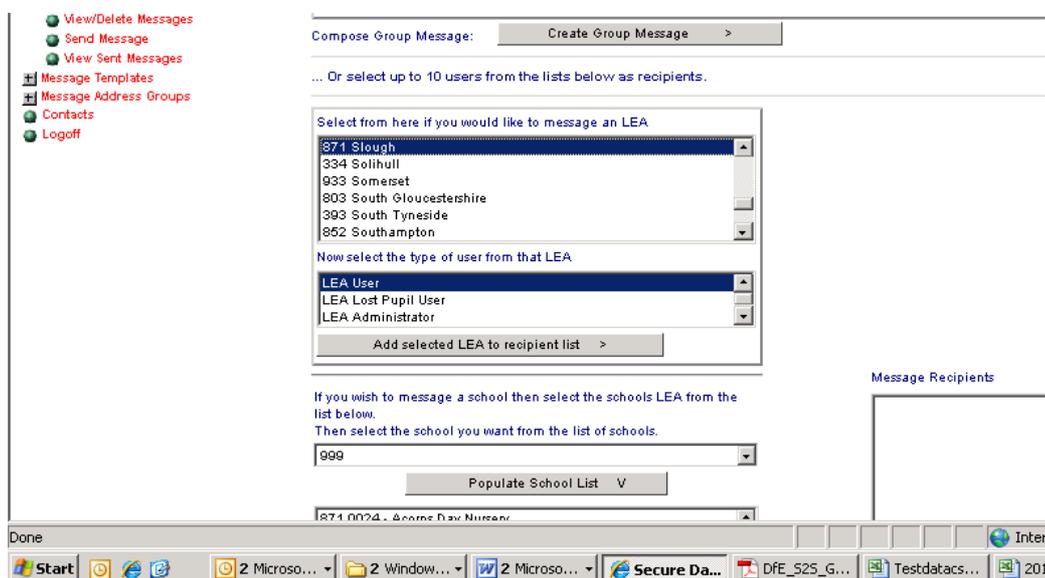
On the right hand of the screen, click Create Message.

In the message description, please write "FSM" and then include the name of your school. In the text part, include the applicants you want to be processed. You must include the parent's surname, date of birth and NI/NASS number. Press send. The message will be processed through the ECS and sent back to you via the messaging system. **You can do this for up to 5 applications**.

More than 5 applicants

If you have **more than 5 applicants**, you can send an additional message with a maximum of an additional 5 applicants. If, in the unlikely event you have a large number of applicants in a single day, you can use the spreadsheet template for termly rechecks. Please send this spreadsheet following the instructions outlined in the termly checks section. NOTE: Please also contact the LA to advise it has been sent (e-mail: siteam@slough.gov.uk).

How and when do I get my results?

We aim to process assessment requests sent via S2S messaging within a maximum of 3 working days. The results will be communicated to you by way of response to the message sent by the school.

2. Termly re-checks

An email will be sent to FSM administrators prior to the end of each term. This e-mail will request schools send in their termly recheck master spreadsheets of all currently ineligible applicants and new applicants / starters in the following term (assuming you've been able to collect the required assessment information before the child starts in school). Master spreadsheets must be sent by the prescribed deadline (always before the end of term) via S2S.

You must complete the spreadsheet in the required format otherwise it will not be processed. Pay particular attention to the parent's surname, NI/NASS number and their date of birth. Remember, you must record the date of birth in the format YYYYMMDD (an example of a correctly entered date would be 20011023).

To send your file for processing, login to S2S, click "upload", click "upload generic file", click "browse", locate the saved spreadsheet on your PC, select it, and then click "upload file". Please name the file:

871defNumber_871LLLL_FSMSchoolNameTerm19 (where term is either AUT, SPR, SUM).

To obtain your results, you need to go to the "download" section. Click Download, click Download Generic File etc.

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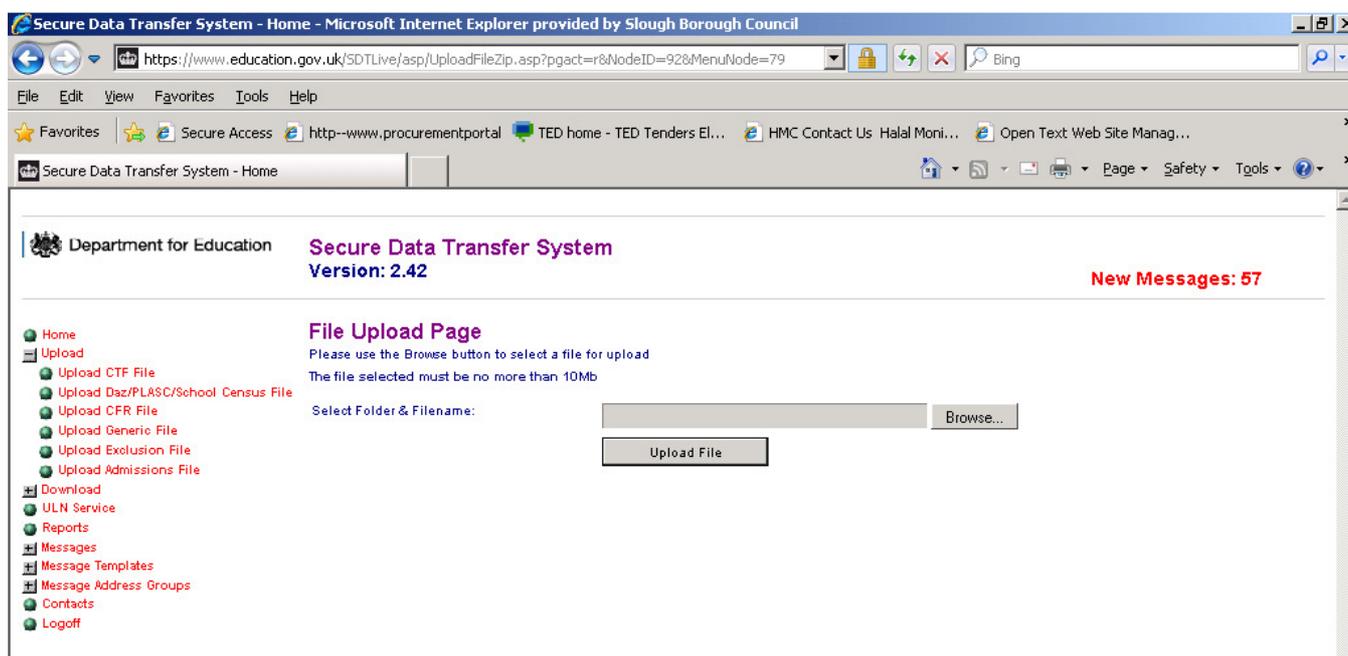
To ensure the information is as up-to-date as possible, the applications will not be processed until the week prior to the new term.

When do I get my results?

Providing the ECS is fully functional, results will be returned at the start of the new term and will be available for you to download within the generic files area of S2S.

What happens when Year 6 move to secondary school?

If in hardcopy, make a photocopy of the claimant's FSM form(s) and include in the child's file that will go to their secondary schools. Keep the original forms for your records in line with your school's retention policy. All other eligibility information will transfer via the child's CTF.

When should I delete claimants' details from the Master spreadsheet?

Claimants' details should only be removed from the master spreadsheet when their child(ren) leave the school.

Security

All data is secure when sent via S2S. There is no need to add passwords to the files.

What do the results look like?

Online Applications

If a parent applies online via the Slough Borough Council website, SBC will send a PDF copy of the application to schools for their records (via S2S generic files). At the bottom of the PDF, is a section called 'Office Use'. This section will tell you if the claimant is eligible for free meals or not. If they are not eligible for free school meals, there may be additional qualifying text provided explaining why they are not eligible. SBC will contact the parent directly to inform them whether or not they are entitled to free meals.

Applications made via a message on S2S

The school will receive a reply to their message on S2S. It will state next to the applicant's name whether or not they are 'Found' or 'Not Found' (or 'Eligible' or 'Not Eligible'. The school must inform parents of the outcome. If they are 'Not Found' / 'Not Eligible' there may be additional qualifying text provided explaining why they are not eligible.

Free School Meal Batch Results

If you have sent in a master spreadsheet, your file will be returned to you with additional columns next to each claimant. Example below:

Child's Forename	Child's Surname	Year (0 = Reception)	Class	Parents Forename	Parents Surname	National Insurance Number	National Asylum Seekers Number	Date of Birth (YYYYMMDD)	Transitional Protection	Outcome	ECS Notes	Meaning	Date
data	data	4	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE	No Trace – Check Data	No Match Found	31/08/2018
data	data	3	data	data	data		121212345	19831021	No further checks required until advised	TRUE		Benefit Related FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	3	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE		Not Eligible for FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	5	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	No further checks required until advised	TRUE		Benefit Related FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	1	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	No further checks required until advised	TRUE		Benefit Related FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	13	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE		Not Eligible for FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	1	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE	Pending	Not yet possible to determine a result	31/08/2018
data	data	9	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE		Not Eligible for FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	1	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	No further checks required until advised	TRUE		Benefit Related FSM	31/08/2018
data	data	2	data	data	data	SJ123456D		19831021	If previously eligible on or after 01/04/2018 then child is eligible	FALSE	More Info Required	It is not possible to establish eligibility electronically	31/08/2018

What do the results mean?

Outcome	Meaning	What does it mean?	What do I do next?
'True' or 'Found'	The parent qualifies for benefit related free school meals.	The applicant is confirmed as being in receipt of a relevant benefit or credit for FSM purposes.	• Inform the parent that the child is eligible for free meals. • Make arrangements for the child to be provided with free school meals. • Complete the date and outcome part of the FSM application form. • Record the FSM eligibility start date in SIMS (or equivalent). • If the child is in Reception to year 11, tick the Pupil Premium box in your SIMS (or equivalent) system. • Update the master spreadsheet of applicants with the eligibility status. • No further re-checks are required until the government completes the rollout of Universal Credit (schools will be advised when an additional check is required).
'False' or 'Not Found'	The parent does not qualify for benefit related free school meals*.	The applicant has been confirmed as **not** meeting the criteria for benefit-related free school meals.* *Please note students who were previously eligible on or after 1st April 2018 will retain their eligibility under "**Transitional Protection**". If the child is in Reception, Year 1 or Year 2, remember they are entitled to a Universal Infant Free School Meal.	• Where you know a child has previously been eligible (either on or after 1st April 2018), follow the advice for "true" / "found" above. • Inform the parent that the child is not eligible for free meals. If they insist they should be eligible, ask them to provide proof they are receiving a qualifying benefit. See our "proving your eligibility" document for more information. Refer to the LA for a final decision. • Complete the date and outcome part if the FSM application form. • Ensure the applicants status remains as FALSE on the master spreadsheet and submit again on next term's bulk spreadsheet for an additional check.
'False' or 'Not Found' / **'No Trace – Check Data'**	The details you have provided do not match any person recorded on a government system.	Either the information provided by the applicant is incorrect or the information on your spreadsheet has been entered incorrectly. Please note students who were previously eligible on or after 1st April 2018 will retain their eligibility under "**Transitional Protection**". If the child is in Reception, Year 1 or Year 2, remember they are entitled to a Universal Infant Free School Meal.	• Where you know a child has previously been eligible (either on or after 1st April 2018), follow the advice for "true" / "found" above. • Cross check the information you have entered against information supplied by the applicant. Make corrections as necessary ensuring information is entered in the required format. • If necessary, approach the applicant and ask them to reconfirm their personal details e.g. full legal name, NI or NASS number and date of birth. Request documentary evidence if necessary. • If any mistakes are identified, resubmit a new check request using S2S messaging or via the SBC online FSM application.
'False' or 'Not Found' / **'Pending'**	It has not yet been possible to determine a final eligibility result.	It is possible that the applicant has a benefit claim in process OR there is a delay in government systems synchronising eligibility data. Either of these issues should be resolved within 6 weeks. Please note students who were previously eligible on or after 1st April 2018 will retain their eligibility under "**Transitional Protection**". If the child is in Reception, Year 1 or Year 2, remember they are entitled to a Universal Infant Free School Meal.	• Where you know a child has previously been eligible (either on or after 1st April 2018), follow the advice for "true" / "found" above. • The applicant should be advised they are currently ineligible for Free School Meals but this may change within the next 6 weeks. The parent can either: • reapply in 6 weeks time, either directly to the school or via the Slough Borough Council website OR • defer their application for reassessment at the start of the following term (i.e. include them again on your next batch spreadsheet)
'False' or 'Not Found' / **'More Info Required'**	It has not been possible to establish eligibility via electronic means.	There is insufficient electronically available information on which to base an eligibility assessment. A manual process must be completed. Please note students who were previously eligible on or after 1st April 2018 will retain their eligibility under "**Transitional Protection**". If the child is in Reception, Year 1 or Year 2, remember they are entitled to a Universal Infant Free School Meal.	• Where you know a child has previously been eligible (either on or after 1st April 2018), follow the advice for "true" / "found" above. • The applicant should be advised to provide evidence of their entitlement to qualifying benefits so that a manual assessment can be completed. Where the claimant is receiving Universal Credit, they should provide the last three months of statements.

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