

# FSM Eligibility Checking Service for Local Authorities

Online  
Free School Meals

connect *digitally*

Steps to Success

Local authorities (LAs) can use the Department for Education Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) to:

- check free school meal eligibility for new applications without requiring the applicant to produce paper proof of entitlement
- check for continued eligibility for free school meals (FSM) without requiring recipients to re-apply or re-submit paper proof of entitlement
- regularly audit FSM databases to ensure that FSM do not continue to be offered once eligibility has ceased.

Using the ECS provides cost savings and efficiencies for the LA, parents/carers and other government departments whilst improving the service for citizens. This document is intended to give guidance to LAs on how to get started using the ECS.

## ✓ **Determine how the ECS could be used in your LA**

- Register for, and access, the FSM ECS portal at <https://fsm.education.gov.uk/fsm.laportal>
- Register for the Connect Digitally Community of Practice to:
  - access the ECS User Guide, ECS User Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and other FSM tools from the 'Library'
  - use the 'Forum' area to ask specific questions about using the ECS

## ✓ **Make initial changes to your LA FSM process and publicise internally**

- Update paper, downloadable and online FSM application forms to include required parent/carer data; date of birth, surname, national insurance number (NINO) and national asylum seekers service (NASS) number
- Expand LA databases holding parent/carer data to include the above information
- Decide whether to obtain applicants' consent to use the ECS to check eligibility. Suggested wording is available from the ECS User FAQs\* document (please note, consent is not a legal requirement)
- Get buy-in from LA senior managers (e.g. transformation lead, IT lead and Director of Children's Services). Use the Connect Digitally FSM Business Case Development Tool and Cost Calculator\* to build your case

## ✓ **Pilot using the ECS**

- Use the ECS to check eligibility for a small sample of FSM applications e.g. where incomplete or out of date paper proof of benefit has been submitted
- Use the ECS to process a batch '.csv' file of the records held in your FSM database. Refer to the ECS User Guide\* for formatting and guidance

## ✓ Establish use of the ECS as standard process for eligibility checking

- Plan the business changes required to use the ECS as the standard method for checking FSM eligibility. Standard Business Process Models\* are available to assist you with this
- Establish a mediated telephone application service. If parents/carers phone to request an application form, offer to take their details, complete the application and use the ECS to confirm eligibility during the call
- Assess how frequently you want to audit your FSM database for continuing eligibility and implement regular batch processing
- Decide whether there is a continued need for renewals and if not establish how ongoing entitlement for FSM will be checked
- Remove the need for parents/carers to submit paper proof of benefit at the point of FSM application and renewal. Refer to the Steps to Success – Removing Paper Proof of Benefit\* to find out how to implement and embed this business process change

\*All products referred to in this Steps to Success can be found in the library of the Connect Digitally Community on [communities.idea.gov.uk](https://communities.idea.gov.uk)

For more information on Connect Digitally visit the Community of Practice on [communities.idea.gov.uk](https://communities.idea.gov.uk) or email us at [connectdigitally@hertsc.gov.uk](mailto:connectdigitally@hertsc.gov.uk)