

Record of Officer Decision

Implementation of the expanded Free School Meals eligibility arrangements for the 2026/27 academic year

Decision Taker and Date Decision Taken:

Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, on 12 October 2026

Summary of Matter or Issue Requiring Decision:

From September 2026, eligibility for Free School Meals is expanded to all children in households receiving Universal Credit. Torbay Council must implement the Targeted and Expanded Free School Meals categories, undertake eligibility checks and annual reviews, notify families and schools, maintain accurate records, and support opt-out auto-enrolment. The change increases the number of eligible children and creates additional operational, systems, communications and administrative requirements for the Council and schools.

Implementation will be led by Children's Services with the Free School Meals Team, Education Data and Business Intelligence, Finance, Communications, Legal and Governance, and schools. Delivery will include eligibility checking, annual reviews, maintenance of Targeted and Expanded records, family and school communications, opt-out auto-enrolment, review of linked policies and monitoring of uptake, operational pressures, school readiness and financial implications. Progress and emerging risks will be reported through the agreed Children's Services governance arrangements during 2026/27.

Decision Taken:

To approve Torbay Council's implementation of the expanded Free School Meals arrangements for the 2026/27 academic year, including the use of Targeted and Expanded eligibility categories, annual eligibility reviews, communications with families and schools, appropriate systems and data processes, and continued delivery of opt-out auto-enrolment, subject to the approved data protection and governance framework.

Summary of Reason(s) for Decision Taken:

The decision implements the Department for Education changes from September 2026 and supports eligible children to receive a free, nutritious school meal. It aligns with Torbay's child poverty and cost-of-living priorities, reduces the risk of eligible families missing out, and gives schools timely and accurate eligibility information. A coordinated approach is required to manage increased checks, annual reviews, data requirements, communications, school readiness and the distinction between Targeted and Expanded status.

Summary of Alternatives or Options considered and rejected and Background Papers:

Alternatives considered and rejected were retaining an application-only approach, because eligible children could remain unidentified; delaying implementation, because this would not align with the national commencement date; and relying solely on manual processes, because this would not be sustainable given the anticipated increase in applications and annual reviews. Background papers include the Department for Education Free School Meals guidance, the Torbay Free School Meals Expansion 2026/27 briefing, the approved data protection impact assessment, and the Torbay opt-out auto-enrolment procedure.

Details of any conflict of interest and dispensation granted to the Officer taking the decision or by any Member of the Council in delegating responsibility for any specific express delegation:

None

Implementation:

This decision will come into effect immediately.

A copy of this decision and any supporting documentation considered by the Officer taking this decision may also be available for inspection by the public at the Council's offices or posted upon payment of any copying and postage charges. Any member of the public wishing to take up either of these options is asked to please ring (01803) 207087 or email governance.support@torbay.gov.uk

Signed: _____ Date: 12 October 2026
Director of Children's Services