

Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education

16th September 2026

Dear Secretary of State,

(Cc Minister for Children and Families)

We are writing on behalf of leading charities supporting children in care, foster carers and fostering services across England, including The Fostering Network, TACT Fostering, National Association of Fostering Providers and CoramBAAF, regarding the recent changes to free school meals (FSM) eligibility for children in foster care.

We welcome the Government's commitment to tackling child poverty and extending access to free school meals. Expanding eligibility will make a significant difference to many children and families, helping to ensure that more children have access to nutritious food during the school day.

However, our organisations are deeply concerned that the ending of transitional protections and the current approach to eligibility has created unintended consequences for children in foster care and the foster carers who look after them.

Evidence gathered through a recent survey of 713 foster carers in England highlights the scale of these concerns. Over half (51%) of respondents reported that children in their care are expected to lose entitlement to free school meals from September, while almost a quarter were unsure whether they would retain eligibility, suggesting the true impact may be even greater.

The life experiences of children in care are different to the majority of their peers. Foster carers are supporting this cohort of children to overcome trauma, neglect and poverty and consistently told us that access to school meals provides far more than nutritional support. It offers routine, stability, social inclusion and reassurance for children who may already be coping with significant change and uncertainty. Apart from the nutritional benefit, many carers described how school meals help children develop healthy eating habits, social skills and positive relationships with food. These are benefits that are particularly important for children who have experienced food insecurity or disrupted early experiences.

A central concern raised through the survey is that eligibility is determined by the circumstances of foster carers rather than the needs of the child. Many foster carers do not qualify for Universal Credit despite having relatively modest household incomes. This includes carers whose savings exceed eligibility thresholds, often because they are saving for retirement as there is no pension scheme for foster carers. A third of current foster carers are of pensionable age. As a result, children in care can lose access to free school meals despite living in households facing genuine financial pressures.

The financial impact on foster families is also significant. Foster carers reported that losing free school meals could increase costs by well over £100 per child each month, which would particularly affect those caring for several children losing eligibility. Many noted that fostering

allowances are already stretched and have not kept pace with rising costs. Carers described having to reduce spending on clothing, activities and other opportunities for children in order to cover school meal costs. Some indicated that the changes may affect their ability to continue fostering particular age groups, while others suggested they were considering leaving fostering altogether due to growing financial pressures.

We are also concerned about the wider implications for children's access to the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. Because eligibility is linked to benefits-related free school meals, children who lose FSM entitlement may also lose access to holiday provision that provides food, routine, enrichment opportunities, socialisation and friendships. Foster carers told us that these programmes are particularly valuable for children in care and that losing access would have a disproportionate impact.

The survey also revealed considerable confusion about the policy changes. More than half of respondents were unaware of the changes before being surveyed and many reported receiving little or no information from schools, local authorities or fostering services. Improved communication and guidance will therefore be essential to ensure children do not lose support simply because carers are unaware of changing eligibility requirements.

There was a clear and consistent message from foster carers: children in care should receive free school meals as an automatic entitlement. Many respondents highlighted that local authorities act as the corporate parent for children in care and argued that access to free school meals should not depend on the income, benefit status, age or savings of the foster carer with whom a child happens to be living. Universal entitlement would provide consistency for children, support educational participation, reduce administrative burdens and ensure that children in care are not disadvantaged compared with their peers.

We therefore urge the Government to:

1. **Introduce automatic entitlement to free school meals for all children in care in England, regardless of their foster carer's income or benefit status.**
2. **Ensure that children in care retain access to associated programmes, including the Holiday Activities and Food programme.**
3. **Provide clear guidance to local authorities, schools and fostering services on eligibility arrangements and transitional support.**
4. **Consider the wider financial impact of these changes on foster carers and the potential implications for foster carer recruitment and retention.**

We believe all children should have access to free healthy school meals as a universal policy but whilst limited criteria is still applied, we would like to see the current criteria widened to include children being raised in care as a basic corporate parent duty to these children.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you and your officials and to share the experiences of foster carers and children affected by the changes.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working constructively with the Government to ensure that children in care receive the support they need to thrive.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Thomas, CEO, The Fostering Network

Andy Elvin, CEO, TACT

Mark Owers, CEO, NAFP

James Bury, Managing Director, CoramBAAF

Ruth Willets, Head of Foster Talk, Foster Talk

Emily Frith, CEO, Adoption UK

Sam Baron, CEO, British Association of Social Workers

Tania Bright, Co-CEO, Home for Good