**Schools Briefing Note: Transition to New Free School Meals (FSM) Application and Reporting System – Year 3 +**

**To all Hertfordshire schools,**

Following approval at the September Schools Forum, Hertfordshire is preparing to move to a new Free School Meals (FSM) application and reporting system.

**Why is the FSM system changing?**

* The current system will no longer be technically supported from March 2026, so an alternative is required.
* The new system will be hosted and maintained directly by the Department for Education (DfE). Hertfordshire is the first local authority to use this system, with 35 schools across the county having trialled it since April. Feedback has been positive, with schools reporting the service is simple to use and provides all relevant information.
* The new system will be available via the DfE sign-in, which all schools are familiar with and have access to. Further communications and instructions to follow.

**What does this mean for applicants?**

* **Years 3 to 13:** Parents will continue to visit the free school meals website but will be redirected to the DfE gov.uk site for new applications. Applicants can check entitlement before applying (soft check). If not eligible, they can upload proof of entitlement (e.g., Universal Credit) for schools to review.
* **Infant, Nursery, Reception – Year 2:** Applications will continue to be hosted on the HCC website form. It is hoped that the DfE system will expand to include all year groups in the future.

**What does this mean for schools?**

* **Years 3 to 13:** All new and currently eligible FSM applications will be hosted on the new DfE system. SOLERO reporting will end for these year groups. The Customer Service Centre (CSC) will no longer process applications, as most will be automated. Applications not found to be eligible (a very small number) will be reviewed by schools. Guidance on how this is completed will be provided. Schools will see all applications, their status, and can review them in one DfE-hosted system.
* **Infant, Nursery, Reception – Year 2:** No change for now; schools continue to use SOLERO for application information.

**Timeline for Changes**

* **06 October 2025:** All schools will receive sign-up details (via School Bulletin) for the new DfE system, with a deadline of 31st October to sign up.
* **31st October 2025:** All schools with Year 3+ groups to be signed up to the new DfE system.
* **14th November 2025:** Migration of all currently eligible children from SOLERO to the DfE system.
* **9th December 2025:** All schools will have access to the new DfE system. SOLERO will be switched off for Years 3+ applications. All new applications from this date will be made via the new DfE system.
* **11th and 16th December 2025:** School drop-in sessions hosted by HCC and DfE for schools to raise queries about the new system.

**What do schools need to do to prepare?**

* Sign up by 31st October – details to follow.
* Check your current SOLERO report for Years 3+ and advise of any pupils who no longer attend your school. Contact: freeschoolmeals@hertfordshire.gov.uk with pupil name, date of birth, and reference number.
* Attend the drop-in sessions , 11th & 16th December to discuss the system and learn from others already using it.

Further information and instructions on next steps will be sent to you shortly. If you have any questions, please contact: CS.Enquiries@hertfordshire.gov.uk