

College Support Scheme 2026–27

A Guide for Students and Parents/Carers: Bursaries and Free College Meals

What financial support is available, who it's for, and what to expect from the application process.

A note on expectations

- Financial support through the College Support Scheme is **not automatic** and is **not guaranteed**, even if you meet the eligibility criteria.
- **Funding is limited** each year. Awards are based on **evidenced need**, and applications are prioritised where demand is greater than the funds available.
- This guide is here to help you understand what's available and how decisions are made, so you can plan with realistic expectations.

1. What is the College Support Scheme?

The College Support Scheme is Buckinghamshire College Group's financial support offer for students whose circumstances make it harder to participate fully in their course. It includes bursaries, discretionary learner support, childcare funding, and Free College Meals.

The scheme is funded by the Department for Education and other public funding streams. It is designed to help with costs such as travel, equipment, course materials, meals and childcare — not to cover all costs of studying, and not as a guaranteed income.

2. What Support Is Available

Support	Broadly for	What it can help with
16-19 Vulnerable Bursary	Students in care, care leavers, or receiving Universal Credit in their own right	Up to £1,200/year — course costs, lunch, travel
16-19 / 19+ Discretionary Bursary	Households with income of £50,000 or below	Up to £1,200/year — course costs, lunch, travel
19+ Discretionary Learner Support	19+ students, household income £50,000 or below	Up to £1,200/year — course costs, travel
20+ Childcare	Students 20+ with children, household income £50,000 or below	Childcare costs at an Ofsted-registered provider
Advanced Learner Loan Bursary	19+ students on a Level 3+ course with an approved Student Loan	Course costs, travel, childcare, learning support
Free College Meals	16-18s, or 19-25s with an EHC Plan, on qualifying benefits	A free meal on every day you're timetabled in college

3. How Decisions Are Made — Managing Expectations

Because funding is limited, the College uses a fair, structured approach to decide who is supported when demand is greater than the money available. This means two important things to be aware of:

- Meeting the eligibility criteria does not automatically mean you will receive an award — every application is individually assessed against need and available funds.
- Applications are not processed strictly in the order they're received. Where funds are limited, students are prioritised in the following order:

Priority	Who this covers
1	Students in vulnerable groups — care leavers, looked-after children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and those with an EHCP or high needs
2	Students from low-income households, evidenced against income thresholds
3	Students facing other genuine financial hardship, considered on a case-by-case basis

Applying early is still strongly encouraged — it means your evidence is in the system sooner and avoids unnecessary delay — but it does not move you ahead of a higher-priority application.

What this means for the amount you might receive

- £1,200 is a maximum, not a standard amount — most awards are based on your specific, evidenced costs and circumstances.
- Where funding is tight, the College may make a partial or staged award rather than the full amount, so support can be spread fairly across more students.
- You'll always be told the reason behind your award amount, or the reason for a decline.

4. How to Apply, and What to Expect

- Apply as soon as possible after you enrol — this starts the process and avoids delays in the busiest weeks of term.
- You'll need to provide evidence of income or qualifying benefits — original documents, not copies or screenshots, wherever possible.
- Applications can take up to 5 weeks to process from the point your application and evidence are complete.
- Because of this, you should be prepared to cover costs yourself in the meantime, where you're able to — the College cannot guarantee an interim payment while your application is being assessed.
- If evidence is missing, we'll contact you to ask for it — this will add to the processing time, so it's worth double-checking what's needed before you submit.

Good to know

- Payments are usually made directly into your bank account (BACS). In some cases, we may pay a provider directly instead — for example, a bus company or childcare provider.
- If you're not considered responsible for managing your own finances, payment may go to a parent, guardian or carer instead.

5. Attendance and Your Bursary

Bursary payments are linked to attendance. You're expected to maintain at least 90% attendance at your timetabled lessons to keep receiving your award.

- If your attendance drops below 90%, your payments may be reduced or paused.
- If this happens for a genuine reason — illness, caring responsibilities, or a disability — tell Student Services and provide evidence. Flexibility can be applied, but it needs to be evidenced; it isn't automatic.
- For childcare funding specifically, ongoing non-attendance can lead to your childcare funding being withdrawn, and you would become responsible for any outstanding fees to your provider — so it's important to let us know early if attendance is going to be a problem.

6. Free College Meals

Free College Meals are assessed against government eligibility rules. You (or your family) will usually qualify if you're aged 16-18 (or 19-25 with an EHC Plan) and receive one of the following:

- Universal Credit
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guarantee element of State Pension Credit

If you received free school meals at your previous school or college, you may be protected and continue to receive them at BCG up until the end of the 2026-27 academic year which is when all transition protections end. You will still need to apply following the college procedure and share the evidence from your previous setting or local authority to confirm this.

You'll need to provide evidence of your eligibility. Once this is confirmed, you'll receive a free meal on every day you're timetabled to be in college.

7. Things That Can Affect Your Support

- Bursary and support fund payments may affect your entitlement to other benefits (e.g. Universal Credit, JSA, ESA) — it's your responsibility to declare any funds you receive if this applies to you.
- If your circumstances change — income, household, or benefit status — you must tell us, as this may affect your ongoing eligibility.
- If you withdraw from your course, the College may ask for any money paid, or equipment purchased on your behalf, to be returned.
- For childcare support, you must give your provider one month's written notice before leaving or finishing your course — your childcare agreement is between you and the provider, and College payments stop when your course ends.

8. If Your Application Isn't Successful

If you're not awarded support, or your circumstances change, you can first speak informally to a member of staff in Student Services. If you're still unhappy with the outcome, you can submit a written appeal using the appeal form available from Student Services.

- Appeals must be for a valid reason and supported by evidence.
- Appeals are considered by a panel, and the panel's decision is final.

9. Quick Summary — What to Expect

Key things to remember

- Support is based on evidenced need, not guaranteed by meeting the criteria alone.
- Awards are prioritised by vulnerability and financial hardship, not by date of application.
- £1,200 is a maximum — most awards are lower and based on your specific costs.
- Applications can take up to 5 weeks — apply early and be ready to self-fund in the meantime.
- 90% attendance is expected to keep your bursary — tell us early if something is affecting this.
- Free College Meals follow government eligibility rules and need evidence to be confirmed.

10. Who to Contact

If you have any questions about your application, eligibility, or an existing award, contact Student Services at your campus (Aylesbury, Amersham or Wycombe) or email bursaries@buckscollegigroup.ac.uk. We're here to help you understand your options and support you through the process.