



Maximising Free School Meal numbers

This briefing highlights the initiatives taken by several local authorities to identify all those entitled to claim free school meals and the methodology employed to ensure confidentiality is maintained. To all APSE Catering and main contacts in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Key issues

- Evidence suggests that over 10% of those entitled to free school meals do not claim the benefit
- Simplifying the application procedure and matching benefit data against school admissions information is proven to increase the number claiming meals
- Schools benefit through the pupil premium, currently £600, based on numbers claiming free schools meals and the meal provider gains turnover

Overview:

The number of Free School Meals (FSM) claimed has a direct impact on the turnover and profitability of the school meals service but also forms the basis for the 'pupil premium' paid to each school in addition to core funding. The premium was £488 in 2011-12, was raised to £600 for 2012-13 and is intended to rise to £900 in the future.

The Government states that the Pupil Premium, 'is the best way to address the current underlying inequalities between children eligible for free school meals (FSM) and their wealthier peers by ensuring that funding to tackle disadvantage reaches the pupils who need it most'.

In England, children are eligible to receive FSMs if their parents are in receipt of any of the following benefits:

- Income Support
- Income-based Job Seekers' Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the Guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not also in receipt of Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income as assessed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs that is below £16,191.

In January 2011 about 1.2 million pupils were known to be eligible for FSM. The Government states that it 'recognises the benefits of healthy school meals and is committed to continuing to provide free school meals to families who need them. Healthy school meals can help to improve children's readiness to learn and their behaviour at school, and can also help to establish healthy eating habits for life.'

The Problem

National evidence from take up campaigns suggests that the main reason for failure to claim is a lack of general awareness of entitlement which can sometimes be compounded by having to deal with what seems like a complex process of claiming free school meals.

Simplified Forms

The eligibility for FSM is often considered as part of a wider benefit application process. These forms can be over 50 pages long and require significant amounts of personal data and existing benefit information. The more data required and input, the greater the opportunity to make mistakes and the longer the checking exercise. The whole process can take weeks

Using powers under sections 110 and 111 of the Education Act 2005, since 2008 there has been an automatic Central Government Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) to check eligibility for free school meals in England and Wales. Guidance is available from <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/data-sharing-guide.pdf>. Examples of its use may be found at www.hertsdirect.org/freeschoolmeals and www.trafford.gov.uk/freeschoolmeals. The forms are accessed on-line and in some cases even available through games consoles and ask a simple set of questions. FSM entitlement can be established within minutes and in many cases a pupil receiving FSMs within 24 hours. To date, not all authorities have taken advantage of this system

Data Matching

The majority of families that are entitled to free school meals will be receiving Housing (HB) and / or Council Tax Benefit (CTB) from their local Council. They will have provided all the income information needed to process a claim for FSMs as part of this process. If this data can be used then all families entitled to (but not receiving) FSM can be identified and the benefit awarded to the benefit of families, children and schools.

In Liverpool, Bolton and recently Lancashire a proactive approach to matching up data has been used which has overcome this historic problem of failure to claim. The new approach looks to maximise take up and award free school meals by securing the customer's consent to share income and household details from Housing and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) claims with the council. This allows the children of families entitled to free school meals to be awarded and schools to receive additional funding without parents having to make any further claim.

This approach overcomes reservations that some councils have previously expressed about data sharing. District and Borough Councils HB/CTB claim forms often allow for the claimant to consent that the data held about them can be used to positively identify their entitlement to other benefits. Some councils have suggested that information supplied for HB/CTB claims could not be used for

this purpose because free school meals do not fall within the legal definition of a 'benefit'. Others have expressed concerns that some information was supplied by DWP solely for HB/CTB processing.

The simple remedy to overcome these concerns is to write to all customers to advise them of this change and ask their permission to share the data using an 'informed consent' process.

By way of example, within Lancashire, awards of HB/CTB are made to around 110,000 households. Information on income and family make up is used to calculate entitlement to these benefits. By comparing this with the existing records for free school meals claims and school admissions data held by the County Council it is possible to identify households that are entitled to but not claiming free school meals.

By writing to households receiving HB/CTB with school age children and seeking 'informed consent' to share data with the County Council, all those entitled to free school meals can be awarded without the need to complete a claim form.

The first stage involves each Borough Council running reports from its HB/CTB system to identify households who meet the criteria for free school meals. At this stage it will not be possible to ascertain which households are already receiving free school meals.

The next stage involve a mail shot to all potentially qualifying households to advise that unless they object, the Council will share their details with the County Council to allow them to confirm and award free school meals entitlement.

A special telephone and email 'hotline' is operated for a 4 week period in line with data protection requirements to any customers that do not want to take part and to opt out. During the final stage for those customers who decide not to opt out, their details are securely shared with the County Council's Children and Young People Service to confirm and award any missing entitlements.

Outcome

The results from data matching have been significant. Of the families contacted, less than 1% did not give consent for the matching process. The increase in entitlement take-up was above 10% with some schools seeing as much as a 25% increase in those claiming.

Future

The Welfare Reform Act 2012, brings in Universal Credit (UC), to be phased in between 2013 and 2017, to replace many current in-work and out-of-work benefits with a single payment. This will result in the removal of current income thresholds.

Universal Credit is intended to be a simpler and fairer way of determining entitlement to benefit. It will mean that the current criteria for identifying children's entitlement for free school meals will no longer exist. The Department for Education 'aims to ensure that, as Universal Credit is introduced in 2013, the FSM Eligibility Criteria are fair, simple and easily integrated into the existing FSM administrative and delivery systems, and that the changes, as far as realistically possible, are cost neutral'.

The Department of Work and Pensions has and is consulting on proposals for new eligibility criteria and passported benefits which includes FSM. To date no conclusions have been reached on the ultimate solution although deprivation indices are likely to replace FSM as the basis for awarding the Pupil Premium

APSE Comment

APSE regards school meals as a valuable part of a healthy school, ensuring that all children have the opportunity of at least one nutritionally balanced meal per day. We encourage healthy eating to be included within the general school curriculum.

Any initiative that increases the number of those entitled to free school meals is to be applauded and APSE encourages all Councils to join the initiatives to ensure all those eligible are identified and registered. This benefits both the school and the school meals provider.

The competitive position of a school meals service is highly dependent on the numbers taking school meals, compounded in smaller schools with relatively few pupils. Greater take-up allows fixed costs to be absorbed over a greater number of meals and provides the opportunity to improve productivity.

Rob Bailey
Principal Advisor, APSE