

Online Free School Meals: a revolution in public service delivery

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Organisation: Hertfordshire County Council

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Regional/State government

Sector: Social protection

Type: Digital, Public Service

Launched in: 2009

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Free school meals play an important role in tackling disadvantage and child poverty. School meals are the only hot meal received by one in four children – click for more information. Free school meals play an important role in allowing children to concentrate better in lessons. They also form part of a child's social education, and alleviate some of the financial difficulties experienced by parents on low incomes.

In the past, the application process for free school meals was an antiquated, difficult and slow, paper-based process. The Online Free School Meals project is a cross-government project streamlining delivery across four central government departments and 174 local authorities in England and Wales. By creating an electronic application process Online Free School Meals makes it simpler and faster for over 1 million children to receive these important meals, whilst delivering significant efficiencies for local authorities and other government departments.

Why the innovation was developed

- In England around 1.4 million children are entitled to free school meals.
 - However, over 300,000 pupils don't get the meals to which they are entitled - with one of the factors being that parents were put off by a long and slow application process.
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Objectives

Improve access, Improve service quality, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction

- In April 2009 Online Free School Meals was initiated as a key project within Connect Digitally, a national business change programme funded by the Department for Education and led by Hertfordshire County Council.
 - The objectives of the Project included: To speed up and simplify the process for parents/carers; To reduce the stigma associated with the application process; To reduce bureaucracy for schools and local authorities; To reduce the capacity for fraud and error.
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Main beneficiaries

Families, High-risk populations, Low-income groups, Students, Young people

- Children from low-income families

Results

Efficiency

- Costs have been reduced although more citizens are applying for free school meals due to the increased ease of application. For example one local authority Coordinator for Food in Schools has reported:
 - “Our take up of free school meals has increased by 2,500 to 11,000 but we’ve been able to reduce staff by more than half ... because of the eligibility checking service. This has saved the council over GBP 20,000.”
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Effectiveness

- Of the 174 LAs in England and Wales, 172 have now moved to electronic checking. The need for paper proof of benefit has been removed by 121 and 41 now offer an online channel.
 - As more local authorities move towards implementing the real-time online application, those in the vanguard are now developing additional digital channels to further widen access to those in disadvantaged circumstances. For example, through usage of SMS text messaging, digital television, smartphones and games consoles.
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Service quality

Responsiveness:

- Feedback from on the ground supports this as seen in another local authority service coordinator's report: “... the feedback we have received from schools indicates parents find the ability to apply online preferable to completing a paper form. The two main reasons given for this are that the online process is quicker and easier, and that the online system offers a greater level of anonymity than completing a paper form either at the school or at the Civic Centre. This would explain the high number of applications we receive via the online system and helps explain the increased take up in free school meals we have seen over the last two years.”
 - In some local authorities, 65% of customers are selecting self-service digital channels, and where digital assistance is also provided, this figure rises to 100% - exceptional take-up for this demographic.
 - Data accuracy has improved and this has resulted in fewer parents/carers being provided with the benefit when they are ineligible and a consequent reduction in accumulation of debt.
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User satisfaction

- Online Free School Meals delivers an ‘end-to-end’ service enabling parents/carers to apply online for free school meals quickly and easily. Incorporating real-time eligibility checking, parents/carers and local authorities are immediately informed of eligibility. With automated notification to schools, children can be provided with a free school meal as early as the same or following day.
- Parents/carers are feeling the benefits of the new system: “I wouldn’t have bothered with the old system; it is so easy this way.” “Very very good I’m not good at reading and writing and I found it so easy thank you” Local authority service managers are also enthusiastic: “The Online Free School Meals project is a revolution in public service delivery.” “Of all the systems I’ve worked on, this is the only one that really makes a difference.”

Development

Design

The Free School Meals service has such a complex delivery chain that for many years it sat in the 'too difficult to solve box'.

The systems for administering free school meals vary across local authorities but all previously involved the manual checking of often complicated documentation by local authority or school staff and sometimes both. Applications had to be accompanied by current paper proof of benefit from the Department for Work and Pension, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs or Home Office.

The process was slow, time consuming and frustrating for both parents/carers and other government departments, while placing significant demands on local authorities and schools. Processing of the application took many weeks often involving having to take the completed form to a local job centre where it was stamped to show that the required criteria were being met.

For the parent/carer it could be months before the child received a free nutritious meal on each school day. More significantly, parents/carers often gave up because of complexities and delays or were discouraged from even trying to apply. Finally, having made an application and been proved eligible, parents/carers were obliged to re-apply at termly, bi-annual or annual intervals.

Implementation

Tools used:

- The original objective to streamline the application process resulted in two additional innovations: automatic renewals and improved audit process.
- With use of 'informed consent' and the Department for Education Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service batch process, parents/carers can have their records checked automatically and effortlessly, preventing the need for regular reapplications.
- Local authorities can also audit the free school meal service using the batch eligibility checking service process which prevents parents/carers building up debts when their circumstances change and reduces the costs and unpleasantness associated with chasing up debts from financially disadvantaged families.

Resources used:

- Funding and development costs of around GBP 2 million have enabled an eightfold return on investment across local authorities, other government departments and schools. Additionally parents/carers nationally could be saving GBP 2.4 million in travel, telephony and postage costs.
 - Many local authorities have made efficiency savings and this has often translated into headcount and office space reductions. For example: "Because of the hub, the Free School Meals Department has been able to downsize from 3 area offices employing 9 staff to one central office of 5 staff all in one location."
 - Online Free School Meals was funded to support English local authorities; however the service, tools and products have enabled the solution to be transferred to Welsh local authorities at no extra cost.
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Challenges and solutions

- Data sharing discussions involved Cabinet Office and Ministry of Justice as well as the four core other government departments and whilst progress on data sharing and legality was slow and tortuous it stimulated many heated discussions.
- The process has moved partners from an intractable 'No' to a new way of thinking about data sharing. Government departments are now reviewing opportunities for reusing the eligibility checking service infrastructure to simplify delivery of other benefits, such as assisted transport, school uniform, grants and cycling proficiency.
- The change in government approach to data sharing is a great step forward and a huge achievement.

Lessons Learned

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- This has been a best practice exemplar for improving delivery of digital services. Key success factors which have universal application include:
- Putting the citizen at the centre of service transformation
- Highlighting the benefits and measuring results
- Identifying common barriers and developing solutions
- Collaborating impartially and with parity with commercial partners
- Communicating effectively with all stakeholders at all stages of the transformation
- Transferring knowledge and solutions to avoid reinvention of the wheel and enable re-use of effective solutions

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