



Online Free School Meals



The Online Free School Meals Project (OFSM) is leading local authorities (LAs) in overcoming barriers to deliver this valuable service quickly and efficiently.



OFSM is a project within a wider business change management programme, Connect Digitally. Funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and led by Hertfordshire County Council, the Programme builds on the successful delivery of the eAdmissions National Project and is leading LAs in streamlining delivery and improving outcomes for families.

The DfE has developed a Free School Meals Eligibility Checking Service for LAs (ECS) which supports the delivery of an efficient service to families and streamlines eligibility checking when processing applications.

The Free School Meals Service

Over one million children in England are registered as eligible to receive a free meal each school day. 152 LAs are responsible for the delivery of a free school meals (FSM) service and the application process is usually managed by the authority (although in some cases it is devolved to schools).

Currently many applications for FSM have to be supported by a paper application and proof of a qualifying benefit. This adds considerable time to the process, delaying delivery of meals to children and bringing extra work to LAs and schools. Too often parents/carers abandon the claim altogether and their child misses out on their entitlement.

Transforming Service Delivery

OFSM provides clear benefits for both central and local government while at the same time improving outcomes for families. At the heart of this project is a genuine desire to improve services for citizens by making FSM applications simpler, quicker and less stigmatising with clear benefits for children by facilitating easier access to nutritious meals.

The vision for OFSM is of a seamless 'end-to-end' service enabling parents/carers to apply online for FSM in one quick, simple and easy process. Incorporating real-time eligibility checking, parents/carers and LAs will be rapidly informed of eligibility and, by automated notification to schools, children will be offered a free school meal by the start of the next working week.

The development of the ECS has made this vision a reality and is the result of collaboration between the DfE and the other government departments who administer the core benefits determining entitlement to FSM (Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Home Office).



The ECS provides an online service for LA employees to check parents'/carers' eligibility against central government data and thus facilitates a paperless back-office solution.

With significant constraints on public spending already in place, this kind of streamlining is going to be essential to giving the public 'more with less'. Connect Digitally's OFSM Project is a prime example of this, with significant savings being achieved by LAs using the service, while improving the service for parents/carers.

The ECS checks eligibility for FSM based on three pieces of information about the parent/carer who is in receipt of the qualifying benefit: date of birth; National Insurance Number/National Asylum Seeker Service (NASS) reference; and surname.

It provides a simple yes/no response as to eligibility. There is a web browser interface to check FSM applications or renewals either one-by-one or in batches. The batch facility enables LAs to regularly audit their whole database of FSM recipients. A 'web service' facility is also available. This means that a direct link to the ECS can be made for example from an online application form. Once an applicant has completed an online application they can get an instant response if their child/ren is/are eligible for FSM.

The OFSM Project is working with LAs to support them in improving their FSM application processes to make the best use of the functionality offered by the ECS.

Over 150 of the 174 English and Welsh LAs have already used the ECS. Of these, more than twenty LAs are already delivering an online service and six have made a web service connection to the ECS. These include Warwickshire, Bristol, Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire where over 90% of people using the online service find the process easy, and most take ten minutes or less to apply.

As well as removing the burden of proof from parents/carers and considerably reducing the costs to LAs and schools, OFSM will ensure equity of service across England and Wales.

“ We have seen a dramatic improvement to the customer journey and we believe this will be a factor in increasing FSM take-up. The ECS has enabled us to streamline and speed up the overall FSM application process and deliver a more efficient service to our customers. ”

The Benefits of the Online Service

	Child	Parent /Carer	School	Local Authority	Central Government
Speeds up access to a school meal (within 48 hours in most cases)	✓	✓			
Removes the stigma associated with free school meal application	✓	✓			
Offers a faster, simpler and more convenient application process		✓			
Removes administrative burdens and saves time that is currently spent chasing parents for information			✓		
Reduces costs associated with administration and incorrect meal provision			✓		
Lowers costs through reduced requirement for paper forms, data entry, checking, error corrections, letters, postage etc.				✓	
Reduces avoidable contact				✓	
Encourages parents/carers to use other online services offered by the LA				✓	
Demonstrates joined-up government					✓
Transforms service delivery, with the citizen in mind					✓

LAs have seen huge reductions in the administration required to process FSM applications. LAs have reported; decreased average processing time from 3 weeks to 24 hours; 17% reduction in phone calls being received; and one authority reported a reduction in the number of staff required from 9 to 5, all of which equate to substantial cost savings.

A significant amount of administration and cost is associated with the process of FSM renewals. OFSM takes an ‘assess me once’ approach so that parents/carers need only make one application for a child to receive the service on an ongoing basis. Meals will be provided as long as parents/carers are in receipt of a qualifying benefit.

“ Only 2% of applications needed follow-up; that’s a quick-win saving for us of around £6,500 plus the saving for the schools as well. Once we have completed the dataset this will be even larger by probably another £4,000 and it’s an ongoing saving. Not a bad morning’s work! ”



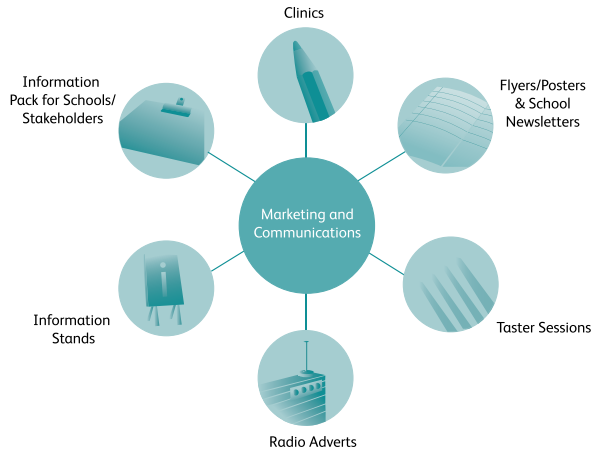
The Challenges

The experiences and 'lessons learned' of the Early Adopter LAs have been brought together into a range of materials, to help other LAs overcome barriers and successfully implement OFSM.

These materials are available from the Connect Digitally Community of Practice on communities.idea.gov.uk. Follow the link from the Connect Digitally homepage to access OFSM resources. The materials have been grouped to enable LAs to link straight to those that are relevant to where they are on the journey to achieving the OFSM vision.

These materials also demonstrate the increase in take-up of the FSM service, and the online channel that can be expected as a result of streamlining the application process for parents/carers.

One authority in particular has demonstrated the value of carrying out a comprehensive marketing campaign to encourage take-up, using a wide range of promotional channels.



“As a result of implementation, around 95% of applications are now being established as eligible on the day the application is received.”

Meeting the Needs of Citizens



The OFSM Project, as part of the wider Connect Digitally Programme, is working with LAs to:

- provide legal advice
- analyse technical options and recommend solutions
- agree the minimum features and functionality of the online system
- research the barriers in areas of social deprivation
- advise on promoting take-up of the service by parents/carers
- provide materials to support the LA business case for improving their FSM processes

For more information on the OFSM Project or the work of Connect Digitally visit the Community of Practice on communities.idea.gov.uk or email the team at connectdigitally@hertsc.gov.uk