

Universal Infant Free School Meals - Engaging With Stakeholders

The stakeholders associated with school meals include anyone involved in, or affected by, the service. They include head teachers, teaching staff, catering and dining room staff, pupils, parents, governors, suppliers and the local community.

To a greater or lesser degree each of these will support or oppose your school meals service. They will have formed opinions about its strengths and weaknesses and have views about how and where improvements can be made, and how you can best meet the challenges presented by Universal Infant Free School Meals.

Effective engagement can become a major tool in your armoury. In many cases it can help you prevent spending precious time carrying out unnecessary and unfocussed work. It can help you assess the probable impact of any changes being considered.

As a minimum, it should help you:

- *Identify the issues that are important to each stakeholder group,*
- *Prioritise and align your activities with their needs thereby achieving optimum support and approval,*
- *Bring about systematic change for a sustainable service,*
- *Assist in managing expectations about what can be achieved,*
- *Create shared values.*



Engagement needs to be issue-based, pro-active instead of reactive, measurable and based on a thorough methodology. Typical areas for dialogue include strategy, risk management, innovation, development and sustainability.

To be successful, engagement must be in a form that is convenient to the stakeholder. The messages must be provided in a way that is easily received and understood by them. Therefore frequency and mechanisms used may need to be different for each group - meetings with school-based staff, working groups of pupils, newsletters and open evenings for parents etc.

Because it is generally true that engagement needs to be more frequent at the start of a process, there is a danger that if the rate of recurrence reduces, this may be perceived as a reduction in your interest or enthusiasm. If your interest appears to lessen, so will that of other participants, with the result that the outcome may not be as positive as it could have been. Therefore it is essential that, right from the start, all stakeholders are told what the whole process will look like – how frequently communications will take place, what success will look like and how and when it will be measured.

In all cases it is important to manage expectations by clearly establishing the parameters in which you are working. For example, consultation with pupils could result in a request for a daily McDonald's Happy Meal – style option. The process would then be undermined if this then wasn't provided. This wouldn't be an issue if pupils understood from the start, the limitations of the school food standards.

Determine which stakeholders will become responsible for successfully carrying out each of the actions identified within any resulting development plan.

Universal Infant Free School Meals - Engaging With Stakeholders

Whether you are able to take action on suggestions put forward or not, it is essential that you demonstrate that you have listened and have actually given the issue some consideration.

In circumstances where, for whatever reason, the requested actions can't be taken, you should give a valid reason why.

Where you have managed to successfully address views and priorities expressed by stakeholders – particularly pupils and parents - actively promote your achievements eg if local procurement was perceived to be a key issue, make sure this features prominently in newsletters, on your website and in communal areas within school.

Responses should be timely and in line with the process agreed at the start of the consultation.

Where engagements are in the form of meetings, care should be taken to set aside sufficient time and book a venue where there will be no interruptions.

Why engage?

Pupils

Pupils are the end users of the service and their custom determines its ultimate success or failure. More than ever, parents' decisions are influenced by their children's preferences. For this reason it is important that your pupils actually want to use your service and would do so by choice.

To encourage this, in order that you can modify and develop your service accordingly, you need to know the issues that determine their choices. We know from existing research that the two areas generally important to children are food and environment. Through engagement with pupils within clearly defined parameters, you can establish how these can be developed to become more attractive to your target market.



Even though food and diet is currently covered by the curriculum, young people can be extremely reluctant to 'risk' trying new foods and tastes. Many children will need to be taught to appreciate properly cooked food. Tasting sessions, held in advance of new dishes actually appearing on the menu and with an influential adult explaining what the pupils can expect from the new tastes, can massively assist in breaking down these barriers. One approach would be to carry out this exercise when pupils are actually queuing/ waiting to be called to queue and then ask them to watch for the item appearing on the menu the following day/week. Managing expectations here is especially important as it can take children up to eight times to learn to enjoy a new taste. This is particularly true where pupils have been used to a high fat, high salt diet.

It may seem an obvious thing to say but decisions shouldn't be made on assumptions. Proper pupil engagement can, for example, prevent situations such as the Kitchen Manager removing an unpopular dish from the menu when simply presenting it in a different way/ adjusting the recipe slightly would have renewed its fortunes.

You also need to know the issues that actually discourage your pupils from taking a lunch. A general assumption is that there must be a problem with the quality of food or price. Queuing is another common issue. Pupils may equate long queues with long queuing times. If your service is efficient it may be worth doing some work to identify how long pupils actually spend queuing and then promoting any positive outcomes.

Universal Infant Free School Meals - Engaging With Stakeholders

Other issues will be particular to individual schools – allowing packed lunches to incorporate fizzy drinks or eat outside in good weather may also be influencers. Or it may simply be that one of the catering staff has an aggressive manner and would benefit from further training.

Proper engagement can identify the real issues so that action can be targeted accordingly.

Student Councils are an excellent way of engaging with pupils and getting research conducted on your behalf. Care needs to be taken to ensure the pupils attending and views submitted are truly representative of the wider student body. Once the meetings are scheduled they should take place. Regular cancellation sends out the message that the school does not consider them particularly important

Parents

Every school would wish for parents to become supporters of, rather than objectors to, their school meal service.

Resistance to any planned changes is far more likely when a proposal seems rushed or is only shared at the last minute – people think that they have not been given time to give the matter full consideration. Give reasonable notice of your plans, the reasons for them, how they fit into any ‘bigger picture’, any compromises that may be created and the overall benefits of the proposal to each stakeholder group. Give the date that the final decision will be made with an interim date and formal channel for responses and views to be submitted. Ensure that the timescale gives you reasonable time to consider any responses.

This approach can be taken with:

Pricing - While everyone accepts that prices have to increase, a poor pricing policy may very quickly undo all the success achieved by the introduction of Universal Free School Meals. A policy of regular (but not frequent), and reasonable increases is likely to achieve a lower level of customer resistance than long periods of sustained prices followed by a more substantial hike. Get the balance right.

Consider when you implement price increases – involve parents in the decision. For example, an increase in September, after the long school holiday, is likely to be considered more acceptable than January, directly after Christmas.

Changes to style of menu provision or packed lunch/dining room policies - Publish your menus well in advance. Make them readily available to parents on the school website, in newsletters and in communal areas within school. Encourage parents to discuss the menus with their child and to help them make sensible choices. Remember, parents are more likely to resist your proposals if they don't fully understand the reasons for them.

To reinforce the importance that you give your school meals service, make sure that it features prominently on your website and in newsletters.

Engagement with parents can also be used as an opportunity to ‘teach’ and clarify issues around food and good diet. Also to challenge, in a non-confrontational way, parents about their views and preconceptions. Does the parent value their child's right to choose the foods they take each day above their need to have a nutritionally balanced diet? Unhealthy foods or unhealthy diets?



Universal Infant Free School Meals - Engaging With Stakeholders

Can a child be both overweight and undernourished? In this way, the school can work towards achieving consistent messages for pupils both at school and at home. The website, school newsletter and display materials within school can all be used to reinforce these messages.

School Staff

It can often be quite difficult for school staff to engage with your school meals service. Catering staff regularly report about comments and views expressed by teaching staff that seem in direct conflict to the direction they (the catering staff) have been given by school leaders.

In the interests of providing a consistent message to pupils and to ensure that school staff do not inadvertently undermine what you are trying to achieve, it is worth keeping them abreast of your objectives for the service, the current position, the standards you are aiming for and the challenges you are facing.

Their views and support can then be sought and an appropriate system of consideration and response put into place. Teaching staff will then be in a position to support you in generating parent understanding so that they can adopt the same policies at home.



Where not already the case, in the interests of providing positive role models, it is very worthwhile engaging with teachers about what would encourage them to be seen enjoying a school meal with the pupils in the dining room.

Catering Team

Engagement with the catering team can be used to break down any barriers between the kitchen and the wider school and to inform your thinking when determining policies and procedures about your school meals service.

It is certainly worth meeting with your Kitchen Manager on a regular basis and keeping her up to date with forthcoming events on the school calendar. Not only will this help her schedule her time more effectively, it will enable her to be pro-active rather than reactive - identifying where she can provide you with additional support. It will also give her the opportunity to report back on developing issues within the service and request assistance from you when necessary.



Dining Room Assistants

Dining Room Assistants (DRAs) are the people directly responsible for the successful management of the dining room. Yet very often they are under-utilised and receive little consideration within school. They are often under-managed, have no clear objectives and are left to their own devices during lunch. Furthermore, there is often a poor relationship between kitchen and dining room staff with each frequently blaming the other for any shortfalls in the lunchtime service.

Universal Infant Free School Meals - Engaging With Stakeholders

For DRAs to be fully engaged they need to have a clear understanding of your objectives for the dining room and of the role they are expected to play. To achieve this, it is helpful for clear person specifications to be produced. For example, in addition to the obvious objectives around dining room management, it should be made clear to all dining room staff that they will be required to both encourage pupils to taste new foods and to help improve their overall dining experience.

They should understand that, for pupils to appreciate the value of lunch, it is important to allow them sufficient time to eat without being rushed. DRAs can also play an important part in monitoring food waste and advising the Kitchen Manager of any possible modifications that the menu cycle may require.

They should be accountable for their performance against objectives set. Beyond that, DRAs should require little in terms of specialist engagement. A regular meeting where their views are sought and the normal standards of consideration and response apply should suffice.

When starting the process, it might help to explain to DRAs that there could be a need for more frequent meetings in the early stages of Universal Free School Meals but, as things settle down, these are likely to reduce to say, once per term/half term. In the interest of team building and creating common objectives, it would be helpful if some meetings were combined with those of the catering team.

Suppliers

Although these may generally take place with the Kitchen Manager, where an in-house service is in operation, it can be very helpful to have regular, if not frequent, meetings with your food suppliers. Shared plans and advance notice means that they may be able to offer help and support for things such as theme days and other planned events. Furthermore, they can use the opportunity to make you aware of forthcoming promotions/seasonal produce that you may wish to take advantage of.

