

Help with School Costs

30-word entry

Wales was the first nation to offer free school meals for all primary school children. In 6-months, 'Help with school costs' led to 53% uplift in applications for school essentials.

1000-word entry

Brief, objectives and budget.

One in five families in Wales reported having to cut down on the amount of food they were giving to their children daily. For some, this meant reducing portion sizes; for others, it meant skipping meals all together.

To ensure no child goes hungry in school, Wales took a big step and announced the rollout of free school meals to every primary school child, a UK first. The new policy is no longer means tested but families still need to register to claim meals.

In addition to the provision of free school meals, low-income families are also eligible for The School Essentials Grant to help with uniform, school kit and stationery.

Objectives:

- Increase families with primary aged children claiming Free School Meals by 20%
- Increase eligible families accessing help through the School Essentials Grant by 30%

The idea, research and planning

The first challenge we pinpointed was a disparate approach to applying for grants among local authorities and schools. With parents making the difficult decision between feeding their families or keeping them warm, this presented an immediate barrier to applying. So, before we entered planning, we unified and simplified the process through a single form on a Welsh Government landing page to drive and monitor all applications.

Insights from focus groups with parents and schools, online listening and application/eligibility data identified that knowledge of the support available was limited:

- Less than 20% of parents had applied for the Schools Essentials Grant.
- Nearly two-fifths of parents didn't know help with classroom essentials was available to them.
- 67% of parents had never claimed free school meals.
- They found the stages of the roll out confusing.

Parents first source of information for education are their local authority (LA) pages and social channels, or direct from schools. They also receive updates from other parents at school gates and in messaging apps.

Outreach with parents and teachers also discovered many families were cancelling home Wi-Fi and reducing phone contracts to cut household costs, limiting their digital inclusion.

Strategy, creativity and innovation

There were two distinct audiences for this campaign:

1. All parents of school aged children able to claim free school meals
2. Low-income families to claim the essentials grant as well as free school meals.

Our approach was two pronged:

1. National awareness – Overarching communications regarding the changes to free school meals, using online listening, plus ongoing engagement with schools, local authorities, and parents to address the common uncertainties around eligibility in our content. Preparing schools and local authorities with up-to-date guidance on the application process and signposting to the new application form.
2. Hyper targeting – We used the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation to map out the most deprived areas in Wales, down to specific streets and postcodes to promote messages on the doorsteps of parents eligible for the essentials grant. Testing the approach in six local authorities where applications were lowest, but the need was greatest.

Children are missing meals. Parents and carers are under financial strain. It was imperative to get them to access the support available and fast.

Our campaign and its messages needed to be clear, instant to action, and direct to the audience in need, without being judgemental or exclusive.

‘Get help with school costs. Don’t miss out. Check today.’

National awareness:

- National PR – statistical and human stories in national news outlets including BBC Wales and Wales Online, explaining the help available to parents and linking to the page to check eligibility.
- Owned social media – Welsh Government Education Facebook where there is a greater family audience.
- Earned social media – schools, teachers and parents sharing content (+45% increase in the volume of posts around the topic in the first month).
- Wales Online homepage takeover – targeted to parents with primary children (61,235 impressions, 367 clicks, 0.60% CTR from audience demographic).

- Digital ads on local news sites – we selected regional and hyperlocal news websites within our target local authorities (120k impressions, 335 clicks, 0.28% CTR).
- LA toolkit including template social media messages, newsletters, and links to the campaign asset hub distributed to all 22 local authorities, regional education consortia and education departments across local government.
- Application landing page (53k web visits).

Hyper targeting:

After mapping target locations to street level, we identified the most effective channels available and where there was nothing, found ways to reach:

- Digivans – driving around deprived areas in target local authorities, stopping by budget supermarkets, job centres, schools, community hubs (37k daily reach).
- Outdoor print adverts – 50 phone kiosks and 26 convenience store print ads in areas of low take-up and high need (670k people reached).
- Outdoor digital adverts – D6, D48 and D96 screens on roadsides in deprived areas, around supermarkets and bus stops on school routes (1.1m reach).
- Radio ads – an ad using a parent voice played out on school drive time, focussing on local authorities with low take-up (500k reach, 4.2 opportunities to hear).
- Owned and paid social media activity – cross-referenced geo-targeting with demographic data to deliver messages to parents of school children in the areas of low uptake and great need (10.4m impressions, 813k engagements).
- Schools’ toolkit including social content, WhatsApp notifications, flyers and railing banners. 200 banners displayed in schools in target areas. 157 schools dropped 38,775 flyers into school bags (5.3% response rate, less than £1 cost-per-response).
- Posters for food banks, supermarkets, job centres and community hubs in target LAs (810 in total).

Delivery/implementation of tactics

- June 2022 – January 2023: research, testing and production of campaign materials
- 20th Feb – 7th April 2023: hyper-targeted campaign live across 6 target local authorities
- 3rd July – 10th September 2023: reboot of hyper-targeted campaign to align with back-to-school shopping times when parents are in higher need of the School Essentials Grant.

Measurement, evaluation and impact

In six months, we achieved:

- 99% of parents in Wales now aware of Free School Meals (annual survey result)
- 24% more parents applied for Free School Meals (KPI 20%, exceeded by 4%)

- 53% more parents applied for the School Essentials Grant (KPI 30%, exceeded by 23%)