

Online Free School Meals

Case Study: Hampshire Online Free School Meals (OFSM) Project

How Software for Data Analysis (SDA) helped set up an LA wide online cloud system covering parental application to meal take-up.

Hampshire County Council is a large local authority with over 500 schools and about 17,000 children potentially eligible for free school meals. **SDA** provide cloud-based services for local authorities and central government departments, including the Department for Education (DfE).



**Hampshire
County Council**
South-East
Government
Region

School Census: January 2012	Total Pupils	Free School Meal Pupils Number	Percentage
Primary Schools	96,013	10,453	10.9%
Secondary Schools	69,441	5,823	8.4%
Special Schools	2,511	680	27.1%
Pupil-Referral Units	119	24	20.2%
TOTAL	168,084	16,980	10.1%

Hampshire was already a regular user of the DfE Eligibility Checking System (ECS) for the batch processing of school meal applications from parents. Written forms from parents were delivered to the schools and passed on to the local authority (LA) or delivered directly to the LA. Once the results of the application were known, the LA would pass on the data to the schools, usually on a spreadsheet.



Hampshire wanted to enable parents to apply online, thus reducing the use of paper and keyboard entry at the LA. They wanted to get an immediate result and to notify both the school and the LA at the same time. In addition, they wanted to encourage the use of electronic communications between the parent, the LA and schools and to conduct automatic audits and renewal applications. Setting up such a service in-house would



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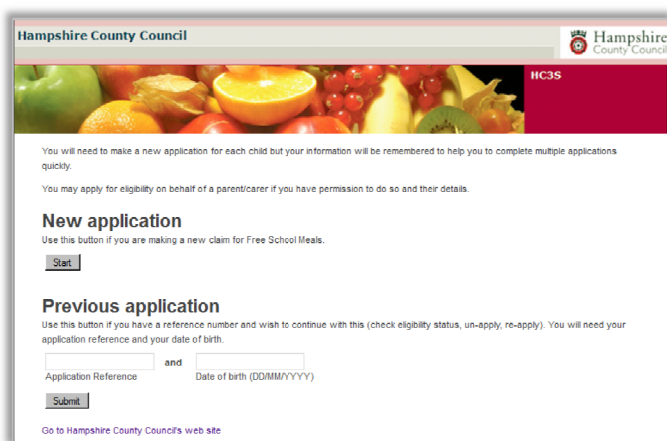


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have made demands on scarce internal resources, involving both staff and hardware, and any new development would have to compete for priority with other critical applications.

Fortunately, **SDA** were able to offer an efficient and cost effective cloud-based solution to Hampshire. There were no start-up costs and a low annual rental charge, partly based on the number of free school meal children. Hampshire was also given a reduced cost for being a regional lead authority.

The package consists of a web based application form with web service links to the ECS and a similarly cloud-based integrated back-office database system which both schools and the LA can access through any web browser. The setting up of these services is included in the annual fee, as is the DfE accreditation for web services between the LA and the ECS (although the LA is still the nominal client responsible for this service).

The screenshot shows the Hampshire County Council website for the 'HCS' (Hampshire County School) online Free School Meals application. The header features the council's logo and a banner image of various fruits. The main content area is titled 'New application' and includes instructions: 'You will need to make a new application for each child but your information will be remembered to help you to complete multiple applications quickly.' and 'You may apply for eligibility on behalf of a parent/carer if you have permission to do so and their details.' Below this is a 'Start' button. A section titled 'Previous application' provides instructions for returning users: 'Use this button if you have a reference number and wish to continue with this (check eligibility status, un-apply, re-apply). You will need your application reference and your date of birth.' It includes input fields for 'Application Reference' and 'Date of birth (DD/MM/YYYY)' followed by a 'Submit' button. At the bottom, there is a link to 'Go to Hampshire County Council's web site'.

Hampshire initially conducted a pilot with four schools to ascertain how the system would work in practice. **SDA** customised the online application form with the logos and look-and-feel of the Hampshire web site and assisted the LA with their own Data Protection Act (DPA) and privacy notices which appear on the initial pre-application screens.

In addition, Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) data were uploaded to enable postcode validation, mapping and address lookup facilities, with none of the ongoing costs usually associated with using Postcode Address File (PAF) data. The list of participating Hampshire schools is presented to applicants in school selection dropdown menus. The application form has all the expected validation and user friendly options, including multiple pupil selection, and concludes with a satisfaction survey for evaluation purposes. The back-office system provides intuitive tabulated and individual views of the data allowing schools and the LA to see new and current applications and eligibilities and, importantly, allows for data correction.

The pilot commenced in March 2012, with encouraging results:



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We think the Hub service you offer is wonderful, it saves us so much time and worry, we get an answer immediately on whether or not the applicant is able to claim free school meals. Thank you, it's a must have service!!!

School Administrator

Through the back-office system the schools and LA can set up new users, change passwords, set user access rights, add email accounts, transfer pupils across the LA's schools and edit eligibility status. Because all schools and the LA are essentially using the same database, changes are immediate and visible to all those with rights to view them. Any amendments to how the system functions are done on the cloud by **SDA** so the LA is relieved of all the system maintenance responsibilities associated with client-based systems.

As a result of this service, the parent/carer receives an immediate response to their application, including an email (if they have supplied a valid email address) and a reference number for any follow up interaction. The school that the child attends also receives a daily email for all new eligible pupils and the database is updated appropriately. Audits are carried out every two weeks to check continuing eligibility and emails are sent to notify of any changes.

In June 2012, Hampshire decided to roll out the system to all schools in the LA. Hampshire supplied legacy OFSM data and contact details for each of its schools and **SDA** were able to populate the new system with these data. **SDA** also set up initial user IDs and passwords for each school user. Schools were

given the URL link to access the application form and the back-office system.

Changes day by day							
All changes of eligibility status for the last 5 days are displayed. Be aware that one day an application may be 'Found' and the day after 'Inactive', check the current status.							
Today (21/08/2012)							
View changes from 21/08/2012							
Eligible (1)							
Lastname	Firstname	DOB	Gender	Reference	Current Status	Since	Last checked
					Eligible (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00
Yesterday (20/08/2012)							
View changes from 20/08/2012							
Eligible (1)							
Lastname	Firstname	DOB	Gender	Reference	Current Status	Since	Last checked
					Eligible (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00
Pending (2)							
Lastname	Firstname	DOB	Gender	Reference	Current Status	Since	Last checked
					Pending (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00
					Pending (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00
19/08/2012							
View changes from 19/08/2012							
Eligible (1)							
Lastname	Firstname	DOB	Gender	Reference	Current Status	Since	Last checked
					Eligible (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00
Pending (1)							
Lastname	Firstname	DOB	Gender	Reference	Current Status	Since	Last checked
					Pending (2012)	20/08/2012 10:00	20/08/2012 10:00

In all, the system requires minimal LA and school input and runs the OFSM process automatically as far as this is possible. In addition, it gives schools more control over their business and minimises the demands on scarce LA resources.



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A few of many similar views from the people who actually use the system:

I would just like to say that the service is excellent. It makes the whole procedure so much easier and straight forward. It has reduced our workload and we feel confident that everything is more secure and accurate.

School Meals Administrator

It is an extremely helpful service

Primary School Administrator

All updated and very easy to use

School Office Secretary

It's also great that I don't have to go in and manually check the eligibility of the pupils, it's all done for me!

School Administrator

Just transferred all my Year 2's to their junior placements - brilliant!!

School Office Administrator

The new free meal eligibility checking system has improved efficiency and communication between the LA and schools. School admin officers are very happy with the access to real-time information, and it has simplified our LA process, reducing time spent on checks whilst ensuring their accuracy. We now hope that the online route will encourage more parents of children eligible for free meals, to make sure their children have them.

Catering Services Manager

The Hampshire OFSM System is live at

<https://www.cloudforedu.org.uk/ofsm/hants/>

To view a demonstration system visit the Cloud for Education OFSM site at

<https://www.cloudforedu.org.uk/ofsm/>



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