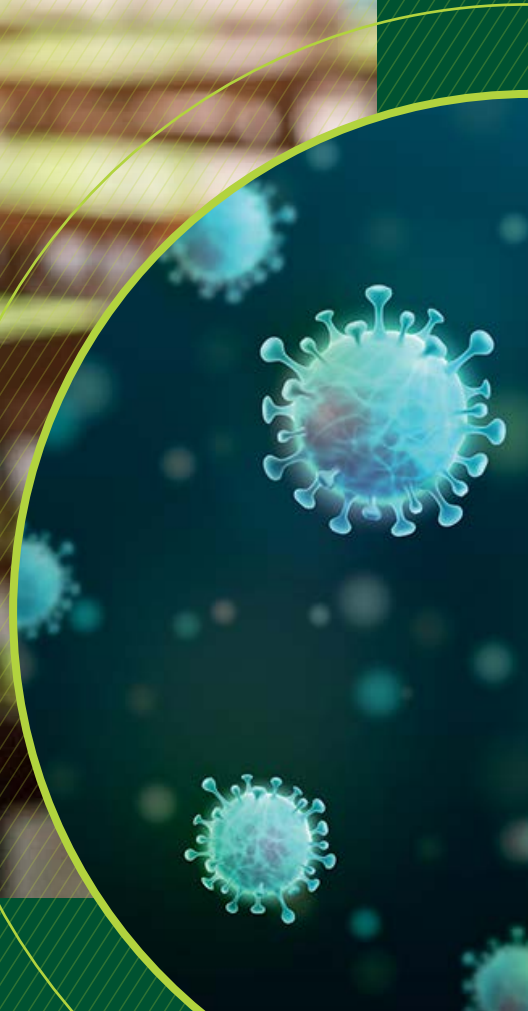


SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN THE NEW NORMAL:

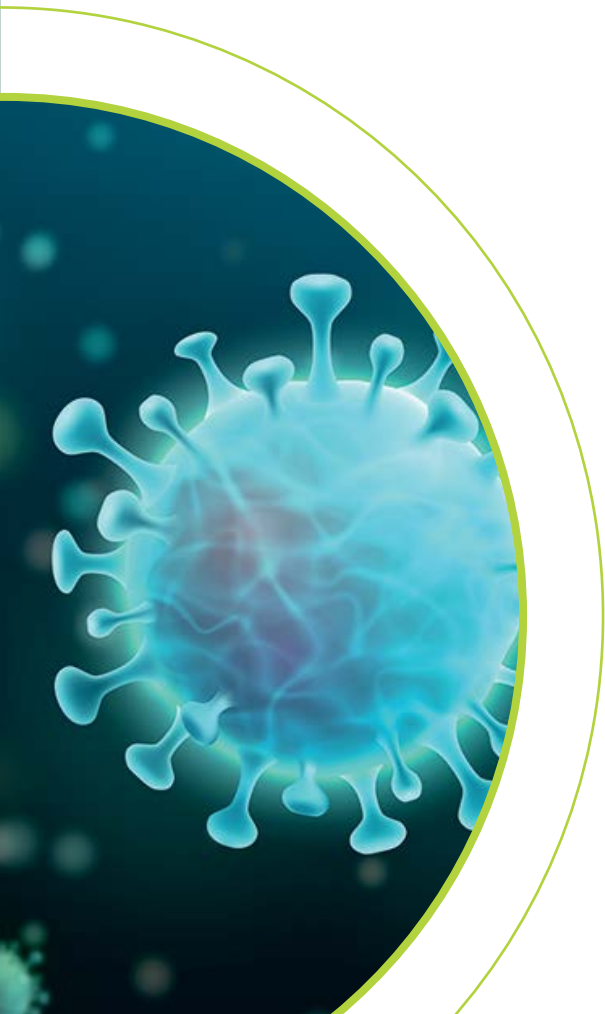
conquering challenges in education catering
in a COVID-19 world





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Foreword



The health and wellbeing of children and young people has never been more important than it is now, in the eye of a coronavirus pandemic. With many children and young people missing months of education due to lockdown, the return to schools in September presented many challenges but also presented significant opportunities to learn, grow and develop new offerings and new service styles.

There have been three key features of this for many caterers: how staff have risen to the challenge of getting back to providing hot, nutritious and sustainable food for our children and young people when operating in very different ways; how the pace of change has driven new ways of working for our teams and our schools; and how school catering has refocussed on their values and what is important to making sure that those in need of good quality, sustainable and nutritious food receive it.

The pandemic has exposed the sheer scale of food inequality that exists for many children and young people. School catering teams have always worked to balance that inequality, but now that this is more widely known, there is an opportunity to address it once and for all. But despite the increasing scale of the need for healthy food, school meals uptake since August 2020 has declined. This has to be scrutinised and addressed, giving caterers tangible and practical ways of ensuring that they reach as many pupils as possible.

The impact of the pandemic on school food goes beyond just our children, young people and our own staff: we have all seen how the food and drink supply chain has been impacted too. Those suppliers remain our critical partners, and public sector food has been important in enabling them to continue to operate when the rest of hospitality has been closed. We have lessons to explore on their behalf, too.

ASSIST FM were keen to support this work from its inception: new ways of working were clearly emerging in schools across Scotland and across the UK. We can all learn from ongoing best practice while sharing our own experiences and observations as we emerged from the initial pandemic lockdown. On our own, none of us has all of the answers, but by working together, across our industry, we are a force to be reckoned with.

But this research will do so much more than just inform front line practice. It provides us with a unique opportunity to review various perspectives from across the school food arena, to learn how we can best shape future services, and make that change happen. By putting quality, sustainability and resilience at the heart of future planning, there is a way of ensuring that catering services are seen in a different and positive light and to really value what we have to offer our schools.

Food is central to improving learning and attainment. It's nurturing, it is critical to good health and is by far the best preventative medicine available. By putting food at the heart of the school day we can move away from the old ways of working and embrace the opportunity to put food front and centre as a means of delivering wider benefits for our children, our communities and for our planet.

Jayne Jones
National Chair of ASSIST FM

Partners



For us at Brakes Scotland, conquering the challenges in education catering during the Covid-19 crisis has been a number one priority. We have faced unprecedented challenges and are extremely proud how we as a sector have faced the headwinds. Therefore to support this project did not require a great deal of consideration. We're delighted to have been a partner in this endeavour. We know that it will be an extremely valuable tool for a long time to come, for the entire sector, as we pivot the pandemic.



Our mission at CRB Cunningham is to help schools throughout the UK become cashless and benefit from the numerous effects this brings, such as increased efficiencies and a reduction in food wastage. As market leaders specialising in cashless, pre-ordering and online payment solutions, we support this vital research that encourages the sharing of best practices and highlights solutions for the safe and efficient delivery of nutritious, hot school meals.

The pandemic has seen the education catering sector come together like never before, highlighting the power of working collaboratively. Together with frontline catering teams, key leaders and suppliers in education catering, our industry can benefit from real data and valuable research that provides vital, actionable insights into the provision of school meals.

At CRB Cunningham, we view this research as a roadmap that will drive future innovations to provide long-term benefits to UK schools.



Supporting partnerships that keep us learning is fundamental to our approach at Sodexo.

The current pandemic has brought about an unprecedented level of disruption and change to those tasked with providing foodservice within an educational setting. For many, the learning curve has been a steep and continuous – with many organisations fighting for survival against the backdrop of an ever-changing sector and client and consumer needs. As challenging as the pandemic continues to be, it also represents a material learning opportunity for us working in a sector that has historically been fragmented and often struggles to coalesce around longer-term issues facing our schools and universities.

This research identifies our shared and most pressing challenges in education, many of which have now been accelerated by the pandemic. Importantly, in these challenging times, it is action orientated, easy to navigate and will be equally useful to teams operating services or those responsible for bringing about long-term change.

The new normal

COVID-19 has created a raft of new challenges for those involved in catering for the education sector, from disruption in the supply chain and the availability of products to multiple sittings, an increased propensity towards pack lunches and wildly fluctuating student numbers. The sector has been amazing, responding with innovation and imagination to provide nutritious food to young people.

But with resources stretched, it is more important than ever to pool knowledge and share successes on effective ways to provide nutritious food whilst finding efficiencies, managing costs and keeping sustainability at the heart of the education offering.

This highly actionable and timely guide is based on detailed and in-depth research with caterers, suppliers, local authorities, NGOs, campaigners and other key players. It identifies some of the industry's most pressing challenges, highlighting potential solutions and case studies to share ideas and solutions to provide a much-needed guide to navigating the new normal.

It highlights some stark realities:

- 75% of foodservice professionals report sustainability has been side-lined as a result of the pandemic. Despite this, some COVID-19-related changes have led to sustainability gains. Sustainability must be harnessed to help build back stronger, more efficient and more resilient businesses.
- 85% have said the pandemic has restricted menus, but this has led to several benefits. 60% reported restricted menus have simplified production, whilst 43% reported that fewer choices and less stock has helped to reduce food waste.
- 27% said food waste measurement plans had been put on hold – but new systems such as pre-ordering and closer collaboration with the supply chain have led to significant food savings.
- 64% reported an increase in cold and packed options, but caterers have still found plenty of solutions for hot options, like healthy handhelds.
- 94% said staff wellbeing had been negatively impacted but support, regular communication and informal check-ins have been found to make a substantial difference.
- 66% reported it has been harder to ensure students eat healthily, but increased hot food provision and solutions such as breakfast carts can help ensure young people get the nutrition they need.
- 47% felt COVID-19 had a negative impact on the levelling up agenda but that the momentum was there to change a broken system.
- 96% reported that COVID-19 had increased the use of disposables but there was hope: other options have been made to work, from using existing crockery to reusable options such as bento boxes.
- 68% said cleaning had impacted on staff workload and costs, but that changing roles and rotas could help tackle this.

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN THE NEW NORMAL: conquering challenges in education catering in a COVID-19 world



It has also highlighted some once-in-an-era opportunities such as:

- The important role catering in education plays: in society, in the community, and in supporting the economy and how this new-found recognition can enable the sector to change from a cost-to-quality focus.
- The huge benefits that eating in bubbles and longer lunch breaks can have, with between a fifth and a third of respondents reporting that multiple sittings are less hectic, more social and more enjoyable.
- The crucial role of the supply chain, and the value of increased communication, with 74% reporting increased communication and a greater understanding of what's needed for suppliers and school caterers to survive.
- Technology can solve many challenges: 46% said technological innovations had been fast tracked, bringing multiple benefits including reduced food waste, more customisation and direct communication to customers.
- Dining rooms were recognised as doing so much more than feeding students: 98% of respondents believe hot meal dining room provision is important for wellbeing and providing a balanced nutritional offering.

Sustainable success in the new normal: a checklist for action

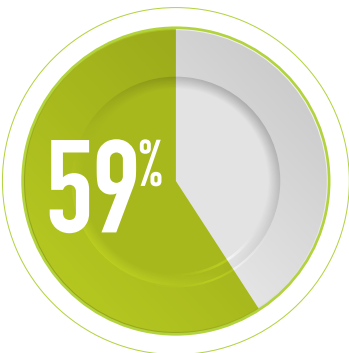
1



Push for new policy

- Celebrate the key role of catering in the education sector
- Use Brexit to lobby for change to the underlying policy framework
- Lobby for financial school caterer support
- Create a race to the top by focussing on social value and partnerships

2



- say COVID-19 led to increased collaboration

Adopt a collaborative mindset

- Tackle issues together
- Keep communication channels open

3



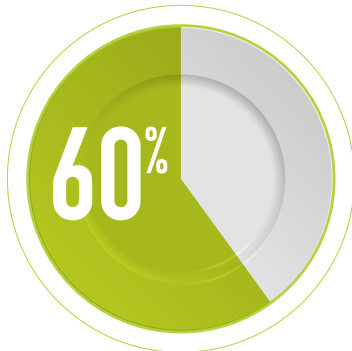
Adopt agile management approaches

- Be open minded, flexible and innovative
- Rethink staffing teams and workspaces
- Embrace technology
- Understand the importance of school dining rooms



Sustainable success in the new normal: a checklist for action

4

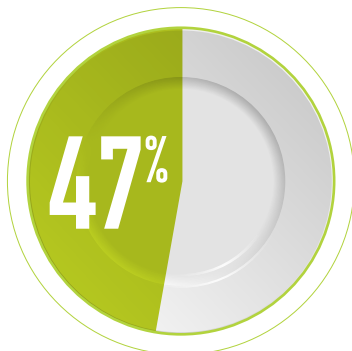


• said restricting choice had simplified production

Embrace menu and delivery innovations

- Focus on the benefits of restricted menus
- Get feedback on what travels well
- Sell multiple sittings
- Design to keep children on site
- Embrace in class dining
- Think healthy with hot handhelds
- Increase the breaktime and breakfast offer

5

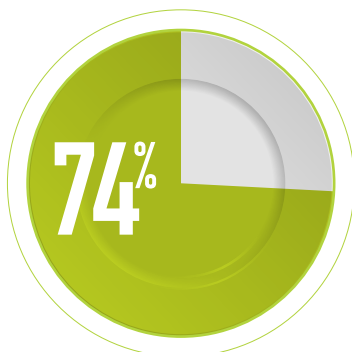


• think COVID-19 had a negative impact on the levelling up agenda

Support school food standards and the levelling up agenda

- Lobby for better funding
- Understand your community, build ecosystems and assign ownership
- Partner with local programmes
- Keep an eye on portion sizes
- Catch the kids who fall through the cracks
- Tackle segregation
- Support holiday provision

6



• said communication had increased with supply chain and other partners

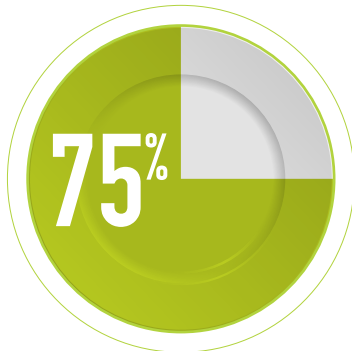
Increase supply chain collaboration

- Collaborate with menu development, procurement and suppliers on recipes and menus
- Work across portfolios and with competitors
- Reduce the number of SKUs (stock-keeping units)
- Keep a balance between SMEs and larger suppliers
- Pay promptly and look for ways to show suppliers support



Sustainable success in the new normal: a checklist for action

7

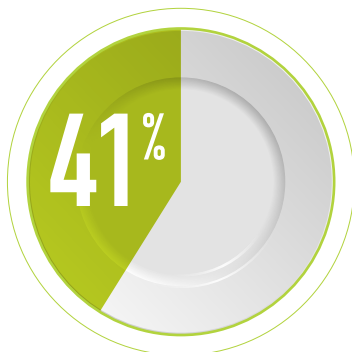


● feel sustainability has been side-lined as a result of COVID-19

Keep focussed on sustainability

- Work on wider sustainability goals
- Stay focussed on sustainable diets – partners can help
- Ask “what are we trying to do and why?”
- Harness online training and education sessions

8



● said food waste had gone up

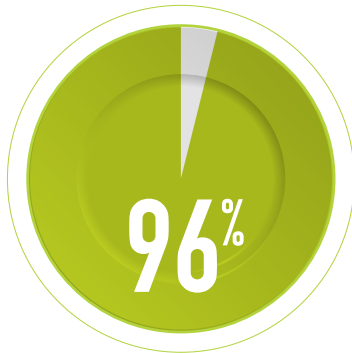
Save food from being wasted

- Collaborate up and down stream
- Prioritise measuring food waste
- Tackle plate waste via the cleaning crew
- Harness customisation technology to tackle food waste
- Be menu and product smart
- Keep staff up-to-date on labelling guidance
- Be flexible on festive foods and make fall back plans



Sustainable success in the new normal: a checklist for action

9

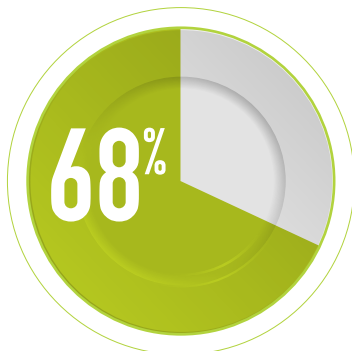


- said COVID-19 had increased the use of disposables and food packaging

Don't give up on disposables

- Reassure that crockery and cutlery can work
- Calculate the cost savings of converting to renewables
- Create engaging materials
- Work with waste contractors

10

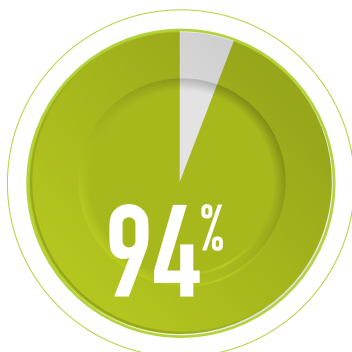


- said that cleaning has impacted staff workload and costs

Consider cleaning

- Check green cleaners' credentials
- Reorganise rotas and schedules and recognise efforts

11



- said the challenges of COVID-19 have had a negative impact on staff mental health

Support staff and their wellbeing

- Go back to basics
- Give staff the skills and support to be flexible
- Embrace online training
- Be open about what is and isn't known and communicate regularly
- Keep in touch – visually where possible
- Harness social media to boost moral
- Provide recognition
- Connect staff and students



1

Push for new policy



“School food should be holistic. You don’t charge for food in hospitals. You don’t charge for jotters or the teaching in schools, but when you turn up for a meal at school, and if that child doesn’t have cash for one reason or another, you assign debt to children. It would be easier to prioritise nutrition if food wasn’t a political football; if lunchtime was valued as a learning experience that goes beyond the lunchroom, not as time to herd people in and out of dining rooms.”

Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM

Celebrate the key role of catering in the education sector



The contribution that school meals make to the local and national economy and to the nation’s young people was thrown into sharp relief during the first lockdown. It demonstrated the value the sector pumps into food production, the supply chain and job creation, as well as its crucial role in keeping young people fed. It also shone a light on its role in giving young people skills for life as well as its key role in embedding an understanding of food and its impact on the environment and sustainability into the next generation.

So now is the moment to capitalise on this momentum and to pivot the system to recognise the importance of catering in the education sector, and to support it accordingly.

“Hospital and school catering is estimated to have made up 43% of out of home dining in September,” enthuses Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM. “We have a huge opportunity to highlight the value of our service, and that we are reliable sources of income for suppliers in uncertain times, particularly as hospitality remains very unstable. So we as an industry have a unique opportunity to make our stake in investment for future services, not just with devolved governments, but also with UK Government, and with suppliers, making them more aware of what we can offer.”

“We need to go back to the stance that food is important in education. It teaches social skills, sharing, communication and nutrition for a healthy life. The purpose of education is to enable students to become good citizens who can contribute to society – not just pass an exam – and good food and an understanding of nutrition is crucial to this.”

Niamh Sweeney, Teacher and executive member of the National Education Union

Use Brexit to lobby for change to the underlying policy framework



With school food funding opaque and confused, Brexit provides an opportunity to start afresh with public sector procurement. And, now that the sector's key role has been recognised, and with the environment, health and sustainability high on the agenda, the time is right to pull everything into one cohesive strategy. One, according to Myles Bremner, former director of the School Food Plan, that is properly funded, with clear guidelines on what we expect people to do, from the commissioning of contractors and suppliers to how things are monitored and managed.

The system also needs clearer accountancy and transparency to demonstrate that school food funds are being used to meet the needs of the child as part of a whole school approach that values the role that school meals play in education and in the development of life skills.

According to Bremner, caterers need to have a clear joint agreement with schools on what success looks like, so that the activity of providing school meals can be accountable to both school and caterer, and that there is a real partnership which is actively managed and monitored.

As part of this, schools should publish their school food policy. These should:

- outline how they are going to meet the nutritional needs of their pupils
- describe how they use food to support learning outcomes for children
- describe the arrangements in place – including breakfast provision, lunch, snacks and holiday provision – to ensure vulnerable children are supported.

“There is a growing swell of organisations bringing childrens’ food back to the centre of our minds, helped by the attention Marcus Rashford has helped to bring to the cause. The school kitchen can be a hub of the community, not just the school, and be a 360-day-a-year community kitchen. We need to push the Government to really think about policy and funding in a different way.”

Matt Garner, Managing Director, Government, Schools and AIP, Sodexo UK&I

Lobby for financial school caterer support



Drastically reduced volumes mean many contracts are now operating at a loss and emergency support payments appear unlikely to bridge the gap. Whilst in England, Department for Education (DfE) guidance recommends caterers should be supported and still be paid for FSM, there has been some “don't pay for services you didn't get” type rhetoric from some authorities. And, according to caterers, schools tend to have a lack of understanding of what it means to outsource as the risk of that catering delivery gets transferred.

“We're delivering services but operating at a significant loss.” says Mark Davies, Managing Director, ISS “I've talked to the government a lot in the last nine months about the issues affecting school caterers from the pandemic. Working with other caterers and being collegiate in our approach has been hugely welcome and made a real difference. We all want the industry to come back better than it was pre-COVID.”

So, join the industry in lobbying government from the cabinet to the DfE to ensure caterers get the support they need to survive.

Create a race to the top by focussing on social value and partnerships



Caterers often compete on low per meal costs, which they can only achieve by selling high volumes. These volumes can entitle caterers to receive retrospective discounts with the supply chain for putting large volumes through the system, enabling them to achieve these lower per meal prices. With revenues down significantly, caterers have been hit by both reduced cash in the till and higher ingredient costs as lower volumes don't qualify for discounts.

Some schools have been "brilliant" and taken a partnership approach "to agreeing what's needed to keep catering services viable, with the leaders changing the business model to share some of the risk of the fixed costs borne by the caterers," according to one industry insider. But, across the sector, particularly in England, decimated budgets cuts have created cost-focussed, commoditised school catering and left caterers with wafer thin margins and little financial resilience.

This means caterers and education procurement teams must work together to create strategies that focus more on social value, and that recognise food is a vital component of education, rather than a commercial service that should be reduced to the cheapest price per meal. They must also work together to gather evidence on the social value created.

"COVID-19 has highlighted the cracks in the system. We need to see a reset in the thinking of the value of school food, not just the cost of it. The question should be: how can caterers support social value in their community? We need to start measuring that social value and sharing it. And that will create a race to the top – rather than the last five or six years of racing to the bottom in terms of prices."

Mark Davies, Managing Director, ISS

GOOD FOOD QUADRUPLES RETURNS

Every £1 spent through the Food for Life programme generates a social return on investment value of £4.41.¹

"Look for the collaboration that can help you with your challenges. One of the great things that has come out of the pandemic has been the recognition of the power of collaboration – between local authorities, the public and private sector, volunteers, caterers, suppliers – everyone. People have discovered they can break out of their own silo."

Julie Barker, Director, Julie Barker Associates Ltd., Non-executive director, CUBO

2

Adopt a collaborative mindset



say COVID-19 led to increased collaboration

Tackle issues together

One of the great things to have come out of the pandemic has been the increased collaboration across public sector, businesses and voluntary organisations. 59% say COVID-19 has led to increased collaboration between partners, such as operators, educators, local authorities and the third sector.

So look for partnerships that can help you solve challenges. Silos can be smashed, and things can happen extremely quickly if there is the enough will. There is huge opportunity for new business models and partnerships, such as schools using their kitchens and facilities to provide holiday programmes, that can be mutually supportive.

Get the value chain from competitors to suppliers together to look at specific issues from the levelling up agenda to sustainability challenges. "There is no harm in us caterers working together," suggests Matt Garner, Managing

Director, Government, Schools and AIP, Sodexo UK&I. "It's a massive market and there is plenty for everyone so why don't we work more closely to support each other and share ideas? We can also come together to influence schools around sustainability and to pool knowledge and find solutions that we can all use."

There are also lots of tools to help drive such debates forward. For example, WRAP's Food Waste Reduction Road Map² and Guardians of Grub³ include helpful tools and assets that enable partners to identify and work through challenges together. For example, using partners for surplus food redistribution can be beneficial⁴. According to Eleanor Morris, Special Advisor, Hospitality and Food Service, WRAP, redistribution relationships have really strengthened connections and forged stronger communication and links to the community, supported by the emergency fund⁵.

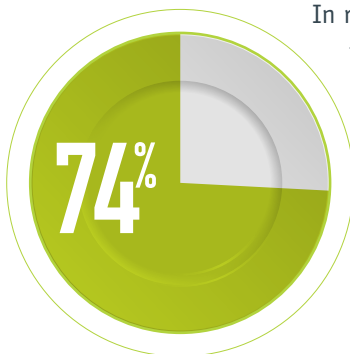
"With Brexit and COVID uncertainty," agrees Jayne Nightingale, Head of Responsible Sourcing, Sodexo UK & Ireland, "we must continue to engage closely with clients and core suppliers by looking at ways we can work together and efficiencies we can support, such as reducing delivery frequencies to maximise efficiencies."

Keep communication channels open

In rapidly changing times, keeping communication open between caterers, clients and the supply chain has become key to the long-term survival of the sector. The key to building these relationships is focussing on the business's core priorities.

"Our priorities are what they've always been," says Matt Garner, Sodexo UK&I. "Keep our people safe, keep clients and consumers safe, protect jobs and make sure we're still a business at the end of this. When we can engage with clients on all of these issues, we can build a much stronger relationship."

For many school leadership teams coping with the ongoing challenges of COVID, catering has been pushed lower down the list of priorities. However, many caterers report that by keeping the dialogue open and by taking an approach of continually asking heads and leadership teams on an individual basis how they can help, they



say COVID-19 has increased communication between the supply chain and/or other partners

have been able to find ways to keep a better range of services and dining experiences open to students.

The shift to virtual meetings has also provided opportunities to strengthen links with external partners and key organisations. "It's easier to access people," notes Margaret Gilmour, Senior Partnerships Manager, Soil Association, "because they are more able to attend virtual meetings as it's only an hour out of their day, rather than a whole day to attend."

3

Adopt agile management approaches



Be open minded, flexible and innovative

Our research found that, for many in foodservice, the solution to a rapidly and continually changing landscape with significant ongoing uncertainty is agile management. For caterers, examples include:

- Building flexibility into service provision, for example, having a central kitchen supply two or three schools, or by having kitchens on standby to deliver food if another kitchen has to close because of cases of COVID-19 amongst kitchen staff.
- Finding innovative ways to create community and build social skills.

These can be remarkably simple. "Just asking 'bubble members' (pupils) to help serve each other has great results," shares Deborah Homshaw, Managing Director, CH&Co. "The experience immediately becomes more community spirited, encouraging a sense of togetherness and belonging in a challenging situation which is great for morale."

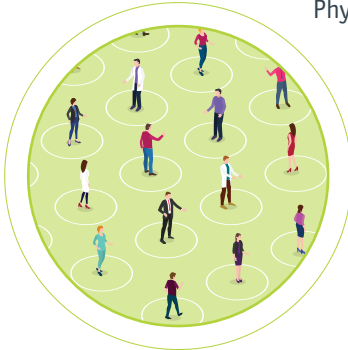
- Record contingency plans. Most businesses went through a massive learning curve when businesses were shut down at the beginning of the first national lockdown. Ensure this knowledge of processes, partners and delivery routes is recorded clearly in a shutdown plan to ensure systems can run as smoothly as possible if it happens again, when memories might have faded or staff have left the business.

AGILITY IN ACTION

During the first lockdown, foodservice wholesalers turned around services in days or even hours that would usually take weeks or months to set up. For example, Brakes, Bidfood and the Scottish Government worked together to create a care box for those shielding. "In nine days, we planned, designed and operationalised the service," says Chris Boyle, Public Sector Channel Head at Brakes Scotland. Brakes also rapidly pivoted to supply retailers and to reduce pack sizes for smaller orders and care packages.

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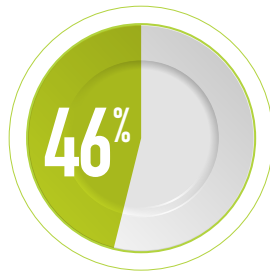
Rethink staffing teams and workspaces



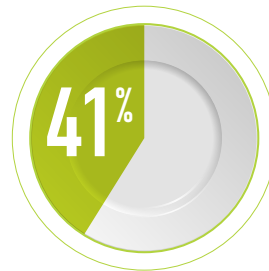
Physically measuring sites to see what's possible with staff numbers and finding creative ways to apportion tasks so that not everyone is working in the kitchen, and when people can no longer work across sites, can help provide good service within physical distancing criteria.

Sealing items like crudites and fruit in bags enables students to still access salads and fruits and can also help by enabling teams to give this role to a 'front of house' bubble who can work away from the kitchen, such as in the dining hall or home economics room, providing more space for staff who need to remain in the kitchen.

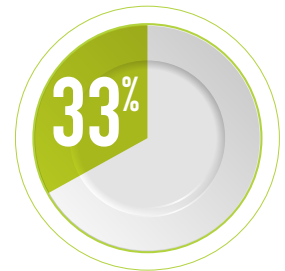
Embrace technology



said COVID-19 had enabled them to fast-track technology



said pre-ordering systems reduce waste and/or increase efficiencies



said pre-ordering reduces queues and/or wait times

"Schools across the UK are implementing a 'Grab & Go' style food service utilising our pre-order app, Fusion Online. Pre-ordering software tells catering teams exactly what meals should be prepared in advance, helping to reduce food waste and improve stock ordering."

Stuart Brown, Head of Sales, CRB Cunninghams

Pre-ordering apps have been massively successful in allowing kitchens to plan and match production to sales more readily, reducing queues, waste and cost. And the pandemic means they have been rolled out at impressive speed, without the time-consuming test and pilot phases usually favoured by risk-adverse schools. 46% of respondents in our survey said COVID-19 had enabled them to fast track or upscale technology such as pre-ordering systems, cashless payments, or click and collect.

"In Scotland," observes Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM, "local authorities have rolled them out virtually overnight, rather than over 12 to 24 months as expected... The pandemic has shown that we should be brave and jump in, and that we will live to tell the tale and that this can help us to find quick wins and solutions for customers."

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN THE NEW NORMAL: conquering challenges in education catering in a COVID-19 world

Pre-ordering technologies that have been found helpful range from professional apps which enable students to order customisable dishes from home, their mobiles, in classroom or through a pod in a canteen, to more basic 'home-made' systems which use QR codes and Google work sheets.

Increased convenience and customisation can also help school caterers compete more strongly against outside providers. This can help keep custom on site, particularly in the more competitive secondary, Further Education and Higher Education environments.

Having parents or students order directly via technology also opens the communication channels between caterer and end customer, without having to go through the usual conduit of the school. This means caterers can not only market more effectively, but also gather feedback and respond.

Adapting concierge services has also helped provide vital services to those in need. For example, Sodexo deployed its Circle concierge service in schools to support teachers who are busier and more stressed. In universities, the service helped students in isolation, or those living away from home, to order food deliveries and to complete life admin.

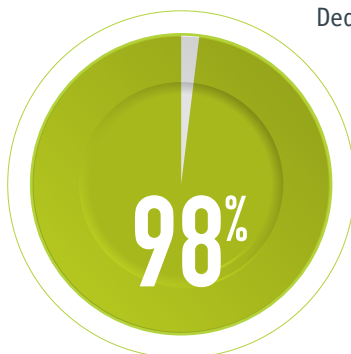
“Cashless catering solutions... [including] pre-ordering school meals, and removing cash from schools is vital in reducing food waste, minimising lunchtime queues, and increasing uptake of school meals”

Stuart Brown, Head of Sales, CRB Cunninghams

HI-TECH SOLUTIONS

Scan and go technology, such as that used by Sodexo at Coventry University, enables students to use their phone to check out so they don't have to come into contact with catering teams. Sodexo is also trialling using robots to deliver food on campus at universities in America, whilst they also rapidly repurposed an app they were using in Japan to enable British university students to order food direct from Morrisons.

Understand the importance of school dining rooms



**believe hot meal dining room
provision is important to wellbeing
and nutrition**

Dedicated dining rooms are well recognised as being instrumental in helping to create a positive space which encourages students not only to eat but also to learn other key social and life skills, whilst providing vital support. 98% of those surveyed said they believe hot meal dining room provision is important for student wellbeing and providing a balanced nutritional offering.

The dining room is a place where students from all backgrounds can come together and find connections and common ground, whatever their background. “Food is the one thing that can bring everyone together and unite a diverse community to share food, in a mostly non-combative way,” observes Matt Garner, Sodexo UK&I.

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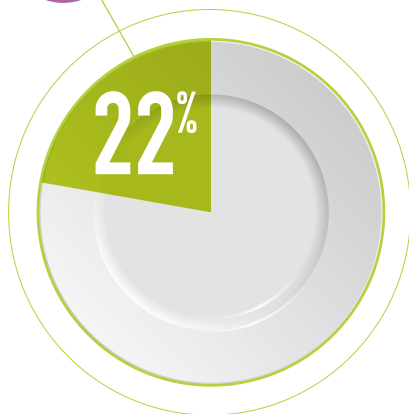
“The first school kitchen I walked into smelt of homemade scotch broth and I heard someone singing a Tom Jones song – I knew something special was happening there,” shares Lindsay Graham, Poverty and Inequality Commissioner, Scotland. “It was a place where children felt warm, safe and nurtured. The school cook there was Diana McKay. All the kids knew Diana. And she knew whose granny had died and what their dog’s name was. She knew who needed an extra portion, and whose parents had challenges. She knew what was going on in the community.”

Where dining spaces have been commandeered, it can prevent students from engaging with the catering offer, which can lead to poor habits being formed. So, work with school leadership teams to find creative solutions which might enable the dining hall space to be reclaimed.

“Be supportive and keep the conversation open without pressurising them,” advises Judith Gregory, Chair, LACA Wales. “It’s also helpful to get different leadership teams together so heads can see what’s working safely and well in other places to build their confidence to try it.”

4

Embrace menu and delivery innovations



said new systems are less hectic as there are fewer pupils



said new systems are less rushed



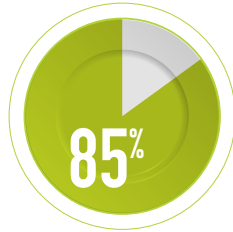
said new systems create a more enjoyable dining experience

The most positive school meal experiences occur when the lunchtime break is set in the context of a whole school approach to health promotion, is reinforced within the curriculum and where there is partnership among pupils, staff, parents and the catering services, according to the Hungry for Success⁶ school food report recommendations. The report concluded that “A happy child and teenager-friendly atmosphere, lack of queues, sociable seating arrangements and well-presented healthy food choices led to a marked rise in meals uptake and a welcome increase in healthier choices.”

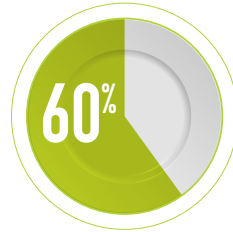
Our research found that the changes required to enable physical distancing have made many of these recommendations a reality. The industry reported that many changes have created a less hectic and more enjoyable dining experiences: these gains must be built upon.

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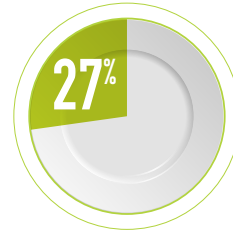
Focus on the benefits of restricted menus



believe COVID has led to restricted menu choices



said restricting choice had simplified production



said kitchen workload is more manageable



said restricted menus made it harder to provide good nutrition

Three quarters of survey respondents reported that COVID-related challenges have led to restricted menu choices. However, despite the pre-pandemic obsession on providing customer choice, those working in the sector report that restricted menus can have some benefits.

In our survey, 60% of respondents said that restricting choice had simplified production for catering teams. 33% said this also reduced the required catering staff skill set as menus are less complex, enabling more staffing flexibility. 27% said kitchen workload is spread over longer periods so is more manageable. 43% reported that fewer choices and less stock has helped to reduce food waste. 27% said it also increased collaboration between catering teams and the supply chain.

According to Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM, there are benefits for children too. Fewer choices cause less confusion and can be simpler – particularly for younger children. Pre-plating dishes also means that students are given vegetable sides that they may not have served themselves but they now have to chance to try and eat. They can also support healthier choices by making the differences between healthy and unhealthy choices more stark, providing opportunities to open up the dialogue about health and food choices.

However, restricting choices does come with dangers. 49% of survey respondents said restricted menus made it harder to provide a good range of nutritional options. “School food is vital in educating children about food and widening their palettes,” stresses Amy Roberts, Managing Director of Operations, Holroyd Howe. So that whilst there might be daily reduced choices, especially in areas such as vegetable sides, and salad bars, it’s important to keep up the variety, interest and learning across menu cycles to ensure a range of grains and nutrients.

“Where schools had to reduce their menus, plant-based options will have been pushed aside for the time being.”
Survey respondent, supplier

Get feedback on what travels well



Many caterers are looking for solutions that will ensure meals hold well in transportation as they're delivered to several new service points in schools from catering vans to classrooms. Get teams to share feedback on what has travelled well or badly and why. Canvas pupils and teachers' feedback on how dishes have looked and tasted when they arrive at their end destination.

Ask: which dishes appeal to which student demographics? How do the containers used to transport them impact their appeal? Disposables tend to reduce the appeal and dining experience of many dishes, so if disposables are unavoidable, work out which options will keep dishes at their peak most effectively.

Caterers report that some of the compostable and biodegradable options look better on presentation because cardboard box styles are often shallower and flatter, giving "Leon-esque" vibe. However, these can go soggy, which can make them unsuitable for certain dishes, whilst disposal is an issue (see [Don't give up on disposals](#)).

"Nothing looks as good as a meal when it's on a white plate."

Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM

Sell multiple sittings



According to our research, using multiple sittings create a dining experience that is more social, less hectic, more enjoyable and make it easier to ensure students eat a healthy meal. 22% report that new systems are less hectic as there are fewer pupils, 29% said the new systems were less rushed and 20% said the new systems create more enjoyable dining experience.

Having extended breaks has a positive impact because it maintains and enhances feelings of community and social eating. Students are eating in smaller cohorts – often of their class or year group peers. This can make it easier to find seating and to sit with peers. It also encourages them to get to know others in their year group better, forging new ties and improving social skills.

Voicing a common experience, Amy Roberts, Holroyd Howe, summed it up: "The biggest impact is that it's much calmer queuing and going through the food counters. It's much more manageable for teams to keep the counters topped up and well presented. We're not having to do 900 students in 20 minutes. One thing we'd love to remain out of the pandemic is structured dining room timing – both for the catering teams and pupil experience. It's nice for kids to get out of the classroom and into dining halls, building on social and other skills."

The feedback on the benefits of extended lunch breaks has been so positive that many schools are hoping to maintain them post COVID-19. "We've created new areas by using sports halls with a pre-order service for some year groups and, along with the extended lunch, we've got more space so it's a much better eating environment for our children and young people," observes Nicky Joiner, Catering Co-ordinator, East Renfrewshire Council. "This may also enable pupils to sit with their friends, so it makes the lunch time experience more sociable. The pupils have voiced this positively."

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“Increased safeguarding measures have accelerated the use of cashless technologies such as our Fusion Online pre-order app, online payment and click and collect solutions. This pre-order addition to cashless systems gives pupils the freedom to choose meals directly via mobile device or online browser. This complete, contactless solution removes multiple touch points from the traditional lunchtime service. It facilitates social distancing, enabling the control of traffic with customisable collection methods that utilise school spaces beyond the dining hall.

Submitting orders via an app or online resonates with pupils familiar with using mobile apps to pre-order food outside of school time. Offering a modern service attracts young tech-savvy customers and is vital to help school catering bounce back and compete with out-of-the gate spending for years to come.”

Stuart Brown, Head of Sales, CRB Cunninghams

Joiner recommends harnessing the students themselves to advocate for the change to become permanent. “In East Renfrewshire, pupil voice is important, so if pupil support for extended lunch break is strong enough, we might be able to keep it.”

The challenge? To make multiple sittings a permanent feature, and to get the increased labour costs for catering teams reflected in procurement contracts. Meanwhile, caterers must share their experiences and insights and harness the expertise of development chefs for solutions which help teams to prep and hold food for a longer period of time.

“The school estate has changed over time to become less conducive to social dining. In some instances, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to rethink and reorganise school dining. For example, in some instances, eating in the classroom has been allowed, while in others there are now multiple sittings over lunchtime in the dining hall. Reflecting on what works and committing to making these changes permanent will help ensure students are getting better nutrition to support their studies.”

Professor John McKendrick, Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University

Design to keep children on site



When on site secondary school provision has to compete with the high street, and with secondary school students still turning to snacking and comfort foods as a response to increased anxiety⁷, it's more important than ever to ensure that healthier school food options are appealing and easy.

“It strikes me,” observes Professor John McKendrick, Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University, “that the actual uptake of FSM has gone down consistently for five years. One of the issues is the balancing act between the desire for healthy food and the need to meet what young people want to eat. Catering leads are required to deliver healthy food but kids vote with their feet if that means it's not food that they want.”

“More secondary pupils [are] going out to shops etc. More pupils in general bringing packed lunches.”

Survey respondent, Local authority, Scotland

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“We have to find ways to create what they want,” agrees Matt Garner, Sodexo UK&I. “Our student research found secondary students want something quick, portable and easy to eat that is sustainable and uses no single use packaging, and all at a price point of about £2.30. It’s a tall order, but if we can meet this need with nutritional food, we’re more likely to keep them eating with us.”

Placing pop ups such as catering kiosks or vans by the entrance to education sites can help capture students, helping to keep their spend on campus. Some secondary school leadership teams also use lunchtime clubs and engage with parents to keep younger years on site. Prioritising enjoyable dining experiences can also make a massive difference: schools which have moved to multiple sittings in a dining hall environment have found that students have been more receptive to staying on site when eating at school is a more social and less hectic experience.

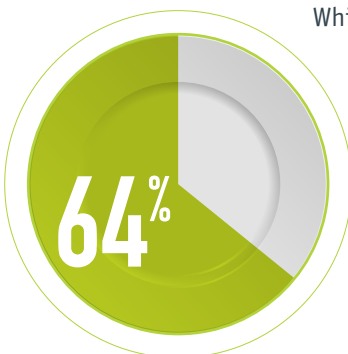
Embrace in class dining



Whilst in class dining has its challenges, the upside has been that for many pupils, especially younger ones, it’s been a positive experience that is less rushed, noisy, echoey, frantic and frightening. This is because pupils can more easily sit with friends in familiar and relaxed environments. This can be of particular benefit to more needy pupils but also provides brilliant opportunities for encouraging softer skills, such as social skills, for example, when pupils serve each other.

But in class dining does not have to mean packed lunches. Many caterers have found that they can still serve hot meals such as roast dinners and curries in boxes or on plates in the classroom, though it can require a rethink about the composition and container choices of ‘wet’ dishes. It’s also important to take the smell into consideration – with lingering odours, such as that of cabbage, forcing some foods off the menu.

Think healthy with hot handhelds



reported an increase in
packed and cold options

Whilst most education settings have now managed to reinstate hot options, the increase in packed lunches and cold provision is still a concern. This is because research has shown that only 1% of packed lunches (prepared at home) meet school food nutrition standards⁸. Caterers also admit that even they find it challenging to find nutritionally balanced cold options “day after day after day”.

Hot pots such as pastas, curries and other dishes can provide portable nutrition that pupils can eat around the school site, but a hot option alone doesn’t necessarily solve nutritional challenges. This can be especially relevant when it comes to the increase in handheld items like pizzas, hot dogs, paninis and wraps which might not have a rounded nutritional profile. This can be addressed by carefully assessing the fillings of hot sandwiches, pizza recipes and toppings, and offering sides of items like fruit and vegetables to round out the nutritional profile.

Soup can also be a winner – and some caterers have found that using reusable thermal polycarbonate cups with lids have been a great way to get healthy food into kids around campuses and in the classroom. “The cups are great,” enthuses one senior education authority insider. “We can decant the soups into the cups and put on the lid in the production kitchen. This is then safe to transport to classrooms and keeps the soup at a great temperature for the children to consume. Soup is the perfect menu item which the children really enjoy.”

“FSM provision for over 16s is dire. It’s focussed on fast food and it is not nearly as good as it was before COVID – there are a lot of beige options and no sit down provision. This is having a big impact on pupil nutrition and their ability to concentrate.”

Niamh Sweeney, Teacher and executive member of the National Education Union

Increase the breaktime and breakfast offer



Research by the University of Leeds found children who ate breakfast regularly achieved an average of 2 GCSE grades higher than children who rarely did. And, according to an Institute for Fiscal Studies evaluation, Year 2 pupils in schools with universal free school breakfast provision made two months additional academic progress⁹.

But figures suggest there are 1.8m children in the UK potentially at risk of starting the day too hungry to learn¹⁰.

COVID-19 hasn’t helped. In many cases, longer service times mean some children eat earlier than usual while others have to wait longer to eat. This has knock on effects because long gaps between meals or hunger can interfere with learning, by impacting concentration for example.

“If you’re 13 and you’ve been up since 7am, by the time it’s breaktime, you’re starving,” notes Matt Garner, Sodexo UK&I. “But if kids fill up at break time on snacks, then they don’t bother with lunch so they don’t get a nutritious meal at all.” The solution is to introduce additional healthy but satisfying food options at break times, including at least one main meal option so kids can be sustained throughout the day.

“Offering one of the hot meal options,” says Laura Brimacombe, Business Development Director, Government Schools Business, Sodexo, UK&I “– like a bolognaise and salad – and releasing FSM funds early for the hot meal, would enable all students to have access to this option late morning. This would mean everyone could eat earlier if they were hungry and that they would be filling up on something nutritious rather than a snack that could make them too full for a proper lunch later.”

Breakfast carts can also be a hugely effective way to provide food for all pupils without stigma in a social and calming environment. Used in some settings by East Renfrewshire Council, students can grab items such as toast, fruit and cereal in sealed bags to eat in the canteen or in the classroom.

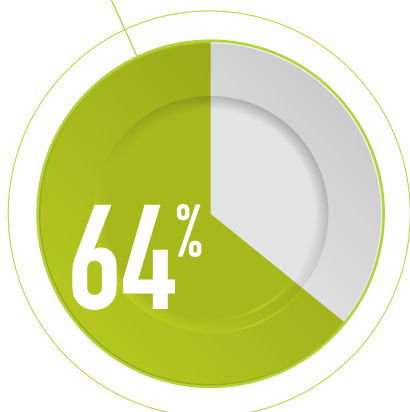
“Schools are great at targeting the pupils that they know should attend. In one primary school, there were three siblings at the same school. So the school bought the oldest an alarm clock so he could get himself and the others up and get them all to school in time for breakfast. Some head teachers will encourage parents by ringing them each evening to remind them to get their child to school in time to have a free healthy breakfast. Lots of school leaders know food aids concentration and improves attendance.”

Judith Gregory, Chair, LACA Wales

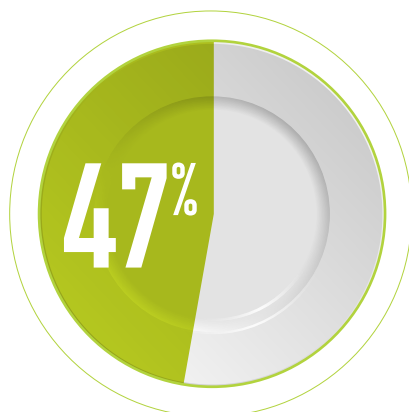
Supper clubs are also an effective way to help ensure children have a good evening meal, whilst providing support services for children and their families as well.

5

Support school food standards and the levelling up agenda



say COVID-19 made it harder to ensure that students eat a balanced diet



think COVID-19 had a negative impact on the levelling up agenda

“As Henry Dimbleby says, excellence doesn’t come through public decree. Whatever funding is in place, it takes the will and the skill of everyone in education to deliver good food culture.”

Myles Bremner, CEO, Bremner Consulting

COVID-19 has exacerbated child poverty and its already dire impact on vulnerable children and their access to nutrition. Whilst holiday hunger has dominated the headlines, children are impacted during termtime too. For many, the free meal they received at school was their only hot meal of the day. Without access to this, they are facing hunger and malnutrition.”¹¹

In addition, as low income families have been disproportionately more effected as the pandemic continues to decimate incomes and increase unemployment, more and more children and young people may be reliant on school meals, but may not be able to access them. Parents may be unable to pay for them or be waiting for benefits paperwork to be processed (Universal Credit takes five weeks if all goes smoothly). Or parents may be unwilling to use school meals because of safety concerns, yet they struggle to provide nutritional packed lunches.

Lobby for better funding



Research by Guy’s and St Thomas’ found that, before the pandemic, 60% of secondary schools were failing to comply with school food standards¹². Of the industry insiders we surveyed since the pandemic, two thirds said COVID-19 has made it harder to ensure students eat a healthy balanced diet. Caterers also reported that emergency menu planning and wastage control has also led to less fresh food ordered and supplied in menus. Restrictions have “made it a challenge for us every single day to meet school food standards,” admitted one caterer, whilst insisting that, none-the-less, standards have been maintained, though within a more restricted menu framework.

All agreed that the increase in cold options, and the children having cold packed lunches daily, has meant ensuring good nutrition is a real concern and something that could negatively impact on the ability of all students to learn. And, for those children for whom their school meal was the main, and in some cases, only, meal of the day, this is a pressing, and distressing

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concern. FSM provision is also particularly poor for over 16s, with many in the education sector concerned about the impact that both onsite and at home provision was having on students achieving their potential.

As referenced in [Push for new policy](#), the industry must get behind the working groups lobbying for permanent change. With COVID-19 exposing the fragility of policy and funding mechanisms, head teachers, caterers and campaigners are working together to work out where the tensions and opportunities lie to ensure government funding targeted at supporting vulnerable children via FSM can be used more effectively to support the school food service whilst being more sustainable. As concluded Serving up Children's Health¹³, "in the aftermath of COVID-19, this is the time to put children's health at the heart of the food system."

"Go beyond what's expected of you. We have a moral duty to be part of positive societal change – we must try and even the playing field for the people we serve... The gap is widening not narrowing – we have to put more focus and work 10 times harder to maintain the status quo because there is such a massive increase in working households entering poverty with furlough, reduced hours or being laid off. This is driving school absenteeism because it is getting harder for parents to deal with the challenges of getting kids to school."

Angela Halliday, Director, Social Impact, Sodexo UK&I

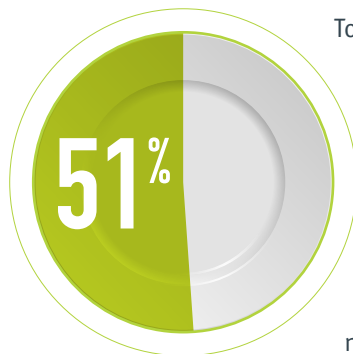
Understand your community, build ecosystems and assign ownership



In education catering, no one size fits all so understanding each community and its needs is the starting point. This then enables the building of ecosystems between suppliers, educators, caterers and the wider community. Agreeing who will do what at the outset, and having a pandemic plan and creating contingencies for several different scenarios enables rapid action and ensures everyone knows who is doing what, when and why.

"We need to create the right conditions where people are communicating and we have accountability," recommends Tom Laskey, Marketing Director, Schools and Universities, Sodexo UK&I. "We need a joint approach to planning so we are always looking at the horizon to see what is happening down the line and it is being discussed in good time so we can all be prepared."

Partner with local programmes



reported increased
collaboration to address FSM

To access children at home during lockdowns or periods of self-isolation, there has been unprecedented collaboration and communication between schools, charities, suppliers and other partners which has enabled incredibly quick turnarounds to support children in need.

Many organisations rapidly pivoted their support model to providing a range of help from funds to food at cost or volunteers to the organisations supporting children in need. The trick to helping, says Peter McGrath, Operations Director at Brakes-founded charity Meals and More, is to ask these local organisations what they need so that the catering industry can work together to provide the right help and donations.

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The furore over food parcel quality in Jan 2021 emphasised the importance of keeping tabs on hamper quality and quantity whilst also ensuring hampers demonstrate value equal to their cash equivalent. It also highlighted the need to ensure that recipients understand how many meals each hamper is designed to provide.

The Childhood Trust, a child poverty charity which has doubled the number of programmes it supports since the pandemic, has found that the most effective way to support vulnerable children is through funding the delivery of trusted, well-run programmes directly in local areas. And, where programmes aren't available, meal vouchers that can be reimbursed through local retailers can be effective.

"Engaging with families can be a challenge," observes McGrath, "but local programmes are the best. The schools, churches and other social enterprises who run them know their communities better than anyone. They can publicise services, and also know who is in need."

"Children learn more than just facts and figures in school by being in group and social settings. These experiences provide critical and essential components of citizenship which help them to grow up to be rounded and balanced individuals. The food served in school, as well as in before, after and holiday clubs, which deliver activities and other services alongside a meal, play a key part in helping children gain valuable life skills to enable them to fulfil their potential."

Laurence Guinness, CEO, The Childhood Trust

Keep an eye on portion sizes



In dining hall environments, serving staff are often able to give larger portions or seconds to those who they know need it most, often based on their knowledge and personal relationship with the child. But with pre-portioned meals, this flexibility is lost.

So survey students and ask staff who oversee lunches to keep a close eye on portion sizes to check if they are appropriate, and to share any feedback received. Then look at ways to top up those who aren't finding the standard portion big enough.

This can benefit all children, but will especially help the vulnerable. "For children who are disadvantaged," notes Laurence Guinness of the Childhood Trust, "and who may not be getting much else outside of their school meal, school meals must have some flexibility to address this. We need to be better and less squeamish at identifying those in dire need, and finding non-stigmatised ways of addressing it." This is why systems such as breakfast carts (see Increase the breaktime and breakfast offer) or food surplus 'sales' (see Stay focussed on sustainable diets) can be so powerful.

AS EASY AS 1, 2, 3

One school tackled hunger and plate waste in one by identifying three different portion sizes – 1, 2 or 3. Pupils could then choose the size they wanted. The initiative led to a 20% reduction in plate waste. Such schemes are more valuable than ever in situations where pupils are no longer able to go up for seconds.

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Catch the kids who fall through the cracks



Work with schools and charity partners to provide funds and provision for children who might fall through the gaps. The numbers of children eligible for FSM is estimated to have risen from 1.4 to 1.8m already, and that number is swelling. Meanwhile, there is believed to be a gap of 3m children who are in poverty but who aren't able to access FSM because the threshold hasn't been met. However in many instances, schools have been able to work with catering teams to identify such pupils to ensure they are also provided for.

"My immediate concern is the approximate 1.7 million children who miss out on Free School Meals, holiday provision and Healthy Start vouchers because their family income isn't quite low enough."

Marcus Rashford, football and child poverty campaigner

Tackle segregation



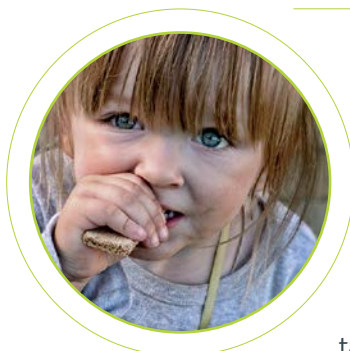
Keep packed and school-provided meals eaten together. For some schools, where a high proportion of children are opting to bring in packed lunches, this has caused segregation between FSM and other pupils because hot meals and packed meals are eaten separately, potentially splitting up friends. Caterers have reported instances where this has led FSM children to leave most of their meal so they can join their friends quickly, or to forgo their free lunch to bring in empty or poorly filled lunchboxes so they can sit with their friends. Keeping groups together prevents this.

MORE THAN JUST FOOD

"We run our own toiletry bank at college because we recognise this can be a really difficult point for teenagers. They don't have the ability or the cash to get products to be fit and healthy."

Niamh Sweeney, Teacher and member of executive of National Education Union

Support holiday provision



"The fact is that if a child is in poverty, they didn't choose that. If a child is hungry, feed them. That child needs our support."

Peter McGrath, Operations Director, Meals and More

Even before COVID hit, "destitution was rapidly growing in scale and intensity"¹⁴. As COVID-19's impacts on job losses and financial security continue to worsen, tackling holiday hunger has become a key public issue. 18% of 8-17-year olds (1.4m children) experienced food insecurity and 10% of all parents said changes in household budget affected their ability to purchase food in the summer, according to the Food Foundation¹⁵.

The government's announcement of a national Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme for England for 2021 targeted at children eligible for free school meals is a welcome step forward. Local authorities, schools and local community groups are often well placed to provide provision and should look to connect with partners to help support holiday food programmes. This funding

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could potentially enable school catering teams to support projects more directly whilst providing a valuable income stream for beleaguered caterers and provide more weeks of employment for catering staff.

It should be recognised that there are many children who live in poverty who are not registered for free school meals as they live in low income households, often with parents on low or non-contracted hours and these children also need support.

The HAF programme is due to start in Easter through to the end of 2021 and many local authorities will need guidance in setting up holiday provision hubs, setting standards and ensuring a good quality of delivery. Peter McGrath, Operations Director, Meals and More, says, “These clubs provide so much more than just a meal – but also support, engagement, literacy, maths, sport, cooking, learning around food and where it comes from. Ultimately, the main aim is to ensure children are engaged, live less in isolation, improve their diet and health and wellbeing, whilst having a little fun.”

The industry must also lobby to ensure that the commitment from government to supporting children and young people through a national Holiday, Activity and Food programme is extended to further years. This is an investment not only in local communities, but also in our children.

Cashless catering systems such as Parent Pay have also been used in reverse to drop payments to FSM parents. Cardiff Council was the first local authority to do this, but this wasn't appropriate for certain communities who don't have bank accounts so supermarket vouchers were used. And, with increased admin costs to administer such schemes, lobby government to ensure payments include an admin element.

Pay if you can models work well also. East Renfrewshire takes an approach that those that can pay, do, which subsidises those who can't to provide valuable enrichment opportunities to all. Combining sports, food, IT support, with parental support such as helping parents to fill in CVs, it takes a holistic, whole family approach to tackling poverty.

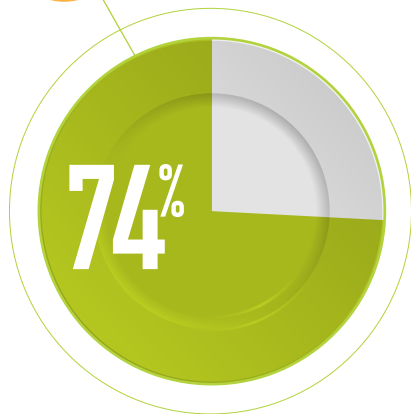
“I sat on a table after the kids had been doing sports,” shares Lindsay Graham. “There were two boys talking about skiing holidays, and two girls talking about whether or not their mothers could afford shoes, but there were giggles and jokes between all of them, no-one cared about their differences, friendships were made and they were all having fun at the holiday club. The tables were set with napkins and flowers in the middle, the food was really good and the kids were getting an experience they'd always remember.”

BUILDING ON EXISTING PARTNERSHIPS

Where possible, feeding funding through to existing programmes is usually the most effective way to help vulnerable children access the nutrition they need. And there is a strong recognition that food-based services provide so much more than food. Meals and More, a child poverty charity funded by Brakes and 27 other supply businesses, was able to harness its existing networks to upscale and virtually double its reach to provide meals and activity packs to thousands of children in 2020.

6

Increase supply chain collaboration



said communication had increased with supply chain and other partners



said their relationship had changed with supply chain



said COVID-19 had increased collaboration in relation to FSM and other issues

Collaborate with menu development, procurement and suppliers on recipes and menus

The first lockdown illustrated the vital role of the supply chain as critical partners and massively increased dialogue. 74% said communication had increased, and nearly two thirds said it had changed their relationship. This must now become standard to ensure mutual survival, whilst also being harnessed to make real impacts on entrenched industry issues such as food waste (see Adopt a collaborative mindset).

“We must learn the lessons from the pandemic,” shares Chris Boyle, Channel Head for Public Sector Scotland, Brakes. “The market is changing and we’ve got the chance to change it for the better. For suppliers, long term survival could depend on us being able to have conversations with our clients about menu design, ordering, storage, labelling, dates, pack sizes and planning. This would really help with forecasting and helps guarantee that caterers get what they need and expect. It would also make tenders and procurement much smoother, whilst reducing waste.”

The situation is continually evolving but share what is happening in different sites in terms of the food offering and food service settings. What are causing issues and why? Where can efficiencies be made such as reducing delivery frequencies to increase delivery values for suppliers.

Moving from chilled to frozen for items that are portioned provides flexibility for fluctuating numbers and reduces waste for those that have freezer capacity. Discuss shelf lives and design on-going menus, menus used on reopening or care packages for FSM students that help suppliers use short-dated products to help reduce waste and write offs.

These dialogues help suppliers to work with manufacturers to ensure they can actually supply what is needed, but also ensure suppliers and their manufacturers stay viable.

Keeping suppliers in the loop when classes or year groups have to self-isolate and ahead of school closures is also key.

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“When our schools reopened in September 2020, our menus were based on the service we could deliver whilst keeping to classroom bubbles. We were also conscious suppliers had frozen and ambient foods in storage which we had ordered, and which had good use by dates so we worked closely with our partners in the food supply chain. Once we had the menus agreed we shared them with our suppliers so they could start the ordering process at their end of the chain. We worked very closely as a team and engaged throughout with our school principals and our catering staff to ensure our service was able to start, and most importantly, that it was able to keep going.”

Senior education authority insider

Work across portfolios and with competitors



Utilise governing bodies or, for contractor caterers, managing directors of education units, to work across sites to align menus and key products to enable the supply chain to prepare and remain flexible. Typically, each school and/or caterer “does their own thing” because of their individual leadership and specific needs. However, this pre-existing issue is made more challenging by the multiple different interpretations by local authorities and educational establishments of the Government’s COVID guidance. This has led to suppliers having to meet an array of rapidly changing needs quickly.

If caterers were able to work together to come up with a thoughtful plan which identified common menu items and products, this would help the supply chain to plan, whilst building resilience and protecting its own business. Caterers could also consider working together to support one another, for example in the creation of hub schools or kitchens that could kick into action if a kitchen has a COVID-related closure.

The pandemic has also increased demand for particular product lines but bulk orders for in demand items can prevent suppliers having enough to go around. Work with the supply chain to pin down exactly what quantities are needed, when. This enables suppliers and manufacturers to work out how they can distribute popular products amongst those who want them to meet their needs, for example, by using smaller but more frequent deliveries to give manufacturers enough time to keep up with the demand.

Reduce the number of SKUs (stock-keeping units)



Reducing the number of SKUs doesn’t only help to tackle waste (see Be product and menu smart). It also helps by reducing stock (and risk) supplier side as they can concentrate on less lines to maintain supplies for kitchens whilst providing better order certainty for suppliers.

“We’ve been working with suppliers, wholesalers and distributors to rationalise low volume products to help provide greater certainty for both us and our supply chain.”

Jayne Nightingale, Head of Responsible Sourcing, Sodexo UK & Ireland

Keep a balance between SMEs and larger suppliers



Whilst some caterers have focussed on larger suppliers because of their ability to absorb longer payment terms and their larger stock holdings, SMEs have also shown many strengths.

In some scenarios, local suppliers can have more scope for flexibility than larger ones for certain products. So using local suppliers for more perishable items and larger suppliers for items with longer shelf lives, such as flour and baked beans, has enabled some caterers to provide the certainty of orders that suppliers need, whilst retaining some flexibility for the unexpected.

“SMEs can be more flexible and adaptive,” observes Nightingale. “And they can be more agile because they haven’t got the bureaucracy that some of the larger organisations may have. They are quicker to try new things. This can be countered by the fact that they might be more challenged in cash flow and working on tighter margins. They might not have the scale – and economics that come with scale, whilst smaller work forces can be more vulnerable if team members are on furlough, off sick or isolating .”

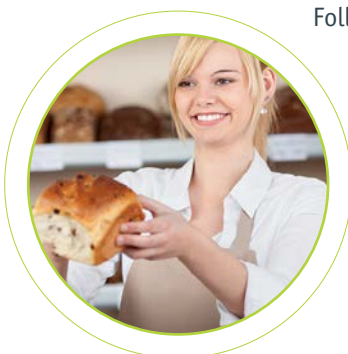
Organisations such as the Soil Association can help caterers identify local suppliers who might be interested in tendering, and can in turn help support suppliers who might not have the dedicated teams used to filling in school procurement paperwork.

For larger trusts, contract caterers or local authorities, it can also be worth procurement teams looking at ways they can break down contracts into smaller volumes for specific sites or areas that SMEs local to each area can more readily fulfil.

“We always work closely with suppliers, we have tried to get even more local suppliers involved to protect local jobs and mitigate breaks in the supply chain.”

Survey Respondent, Local Council

Pay promptly and look for ways to show suppliers support

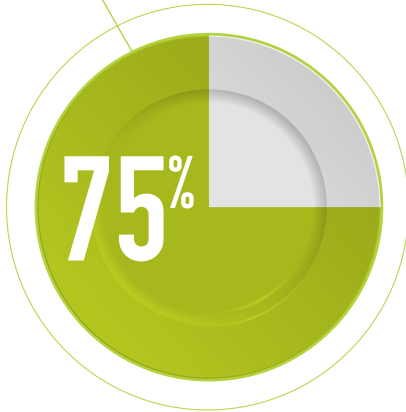


Following the Government’s Payment code of practice and paying suppliers, particularly SMEs, within 30 days can be crucial to supplier survival.

Other tools, such as apprenticeship levy gifting from larger companies to SMEs, or giving SMEs access to internal subject matter experts so they can get advice or direction on where to access help in areas such as marketing, legal and sustainability, can be hugely valuable.

7

Keep focussed on sustainability



feel sustainability has been side-lined as a result of COVID-19

“We mustn’t lose sight of what we want to do – it’s too big and important. We have our goals and priorities for 2025 from our ‘Better Tomorrow Plan’ and we’re making sure we’re still on track. Some areas might have lost the limelight for a few months - such as reducing disposables and single use plastics - but these areas have been reclaimed whilst crucial issues such as carbon emissions, modern slavery and responsible sourcing of products such as beef and soya, must continue to be a major focus.”

Jayne Nightingale, Head of Responsible Sourcing, Sodexo UK & Ireland

Work on wider sustainability goals



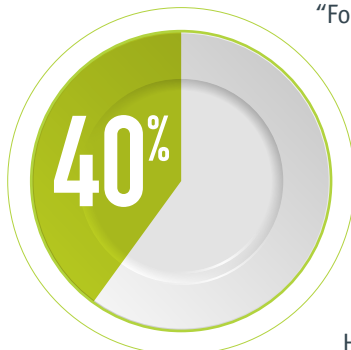
COVID-19 showed that unless we start to properly address issues of planetary and public health, then the foundations on which economies are built will continue to disintegrate. And, for many people, on a personal level, it changed their relationship with food as food shortages and the change in status to key workers of the food-related workforce made people value food, the food system, the environment and those who provide it – more highly.

Whilst three quarters reported that sustainability had been necessarily side-lined in the shock of coping with the pandemic, with the frustration around increases in disposables (see 9. Disposals) dominating sustainability conversations, many of our research subjects noted how when staff came back after school closures, they were revitalised to address other sustainability challenges from food waste to social justice. Many furloughed workers used their time to volunteer and discovered a new passion for tackling pressing issues in their communities, such as helping those in food poverty.

Support staff to continue with these volunteering activities and find ways to incorporate this volunteering into company CSR activities.

Sustainability goals may have taken a back seat on site whilst getting used to life in a COVID-19 world, but now that systems are becoming more settled, it is time for them to return to centre stage.

Stay focussed on sustainable diets – partners can help



say COVID-19 has negatively impacted on sustainable diets

“Food can be at the centre of every subject – from geography to maths,” enthuses Nicky Joiner, Catering Co-ordinator, East Renfrewshire County Council. “Better eating, better learning.” So look for opportunities to work with schools and partners to build food education into the eating and learning experience.

Whilst 40% of respondents say the pandemic has negatively impacted efforts to shift to more sustainable diets, such as increasing plant-based options or serving “less but better” meat, it has also provided opportunities.

For pupils, the rapid move to online education has meant caterers such as Holroyd Howe have been able to move pupil education resources online to give pupils and teaching staff access to a huge range of materials covering topics from food waste to water conservation via a dedicated teaching portal which hosts classroom presentations, materials and videos. Using online systems also enables engagement directly with pupils, for example, through live events such as classroom presentations and Q&A sessions. This allows the exploration of a host of issues with students from the impact of our food on the planet to nutrition and disposables.

Partners can also help with engaging young people by providing materials and frameworks to bring schools and caterers’ efforts to educate and engage young people regarding food and sustainability together.

Organisations such as Rethink Food¹⁶ teach young people about food to give them the skills to be food independent in the future. It teaches them about the Sustainable Development Goals through the medium of food, and harnesses student enthusiasm for healthier eating, as students are typically more inspired to change their food habits to save the planet rather than to improve their health.

The Rethink Food Education programme provides schools with a weekly delivery of surplus food from supermarkets and wholesalers that would otherwise have been thrown away which students can help themselves to for a donation (or not). This neatly gives young people to access free food without the stigma of a food bank because the focus is on tackling climate change by reducing food waste.

And between March and August 2020, 400 tonnes of this surplus was diverted into food packages for children and their families. In addition to the food, schools receive access to a programme of education that references all 17 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Trifocal, an EU funded project in London, also have a teacher pack available for schools¹⁷. This covers sustainable eating and practical interventions. The Royal College of Culinary Arts¹⁸ can also provide support through its adopt a school programme. There are also resources for incorporating food into the syllabus on the Education Scotland website¹⁹.

The pandemic highlighted the need for food that’s good for health, the environment and the local economy and The Soil Association’s Food for Life programme is well-placed to help. It can provide support in creating sustainable, healthy menus, which support local suppliers. And it has a good track record: pupils in Food for Life schools are twice as likely to eat five a day, eat around a third more fruit and veg than in comparison schools, whilst increasing fruit and veg intake at home, and pupils report enjoying their school food more²⁰. In Scotland, it’s also free as the programme is funded by the Scottish Government. Food for Life can help caterers to look at menus to streamline products, boost local spend, and make recipes healthier and more plant based. For example, its recommendations identified potential savings of over £11,000 for one Food For Life local authority, whilst it helped West Lothian Council source 95% of their fresh meat for primary schools from Scotland.

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And for caterers in Scotland, Food for Life Scotland offers a free menu development support service tailored to the needs of your local authority. This includes assistance with recipe development, testing and costing, idea sessions, attendance at menu planning groups. For example, the scheme helped one local authority change its steak pie recipe, saving 5p per portion whilst incorporating less but higher quality meat from farm assured sources and increasing vegetable content.

“When you have conversations with caterers around ways to make menus healthier and more sustainable by upping the veg content, adding pulses and using seasonal produce, they often express concern that our young people won’t like the new recipes.” says Margaret Gilmour, Senior Partnerships Manager, Soil Association. “But when they prepare and serve them, it actually goes unnoticed.”

Ask “what are we trying to do and why?”



In the face of so much uncertainty and a health and planetary crisis, encourage staff to always ask the “So what?” question to help them find meaning and inspiration. Encourage them to question: “What is the purpose of what we do? Why do I get up in the morning? What difference can I make personally to the people I come in to contact with? Who has benefited from the action we’ve taken? What is the legacy we leave behind to the people and community? What are the wider societal benefits we can bring?”

This inspires teams to feel empowered and driven because they understand the individual impact they can make to students, their communities and their planet in big and small ways, from bringing a smile to a student’s face to helping to fight climate change by reducing food waste.

EVERYDAY HEROES

Angela Halliday, Director, Social Impact, Sodexo UK&I, gave an example of this attitude in action when she talked to an electrician at Northumbria University. He was fixing a socket. She asked him what he did, and he replied: “I look after the mental wellbeing and health of students – I save lives.”

He explained that when he does maintenance, he looks out for signs of distress in students, such as their room being in disarray. He then flags this to the team so support can be mobilised. His mental health training also allowed him to triage kids in danger, such as those that are self-harming or at risk of taking their own life.

Harness online training and education sessions

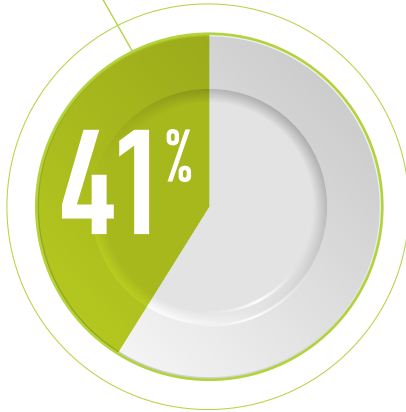


Harness online training to educate staff about sustainability. The rapid growth in online training (see Embrace online training) coupled, in some cases, with enforced time off has provided a golden opportunity to focus on increasing staff sustainability knowledge.

For example, Sodexo has launched a 15-minute course on Sodexo and the environment – which is mandated in some regions – that brings together top tips and tangible actions staff can undertake to support sustainability efforts. This aims to help ensure the management population understands the key initiatives and priorities for the company.

8

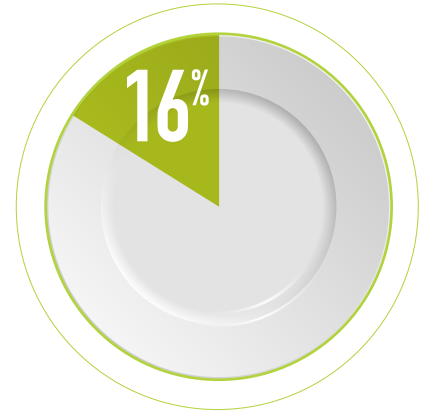
Save food from being wasted



said food waste had gone up



said food waste had stayed stable



said food waste had gone down

“There are so many things to consider now in the school environment, but the main thing is embedding sustainability in its truest sense so the sector can build back better and with longevity – economically and socially. If we tackle issues such as food waste and supply chain resilience now, we can adjust for the future in a positive way that will benefit the sector, irrespective of the pandemic.”

Eleanor Morris, Special Advisor, Hospitality and Foodservice, WRAP

Collaborate up and down stream



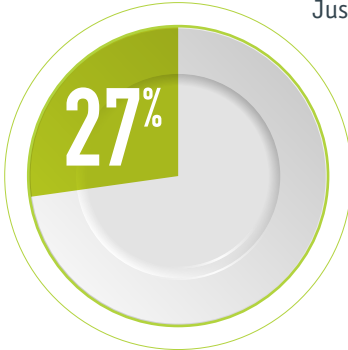
Unprecedented collaboration between caterers, local authorities, charities and suppliers has and continues to save vast amounts of food from being binned when schools lock down, often diverting it to those in need. Such partnerships will still have value even beyond the pandemic so continue to build on such relationships and capture contingency plans so that systems are ready to go as and when they are needed. When looking to sell surpluses to an alternate market or redistribute it, WRAP's food surplus network²¹ helps businesses find and contact the right organisation quickly, easily and directly.

Volatile student numbers and providing food within COVID-restrictions, such as changes to delivery methods including the increase in pre-plated meals, is also creating an ongoing host of food waste related challenges and successes. Many of these have been tackled by much closer communication and engagement between schools and their supply chain - see Increase supply chain collaboration.

“The ability to pre-order [via CRB Cunningham’s Fusion Online app] benefits our catering service as it limits production to only what is ordered and has reduced our food waste considerably.”

Jamie Fisher, Facilities and Support Services Manager, West Lothian Council

Prioritise measuring food waste



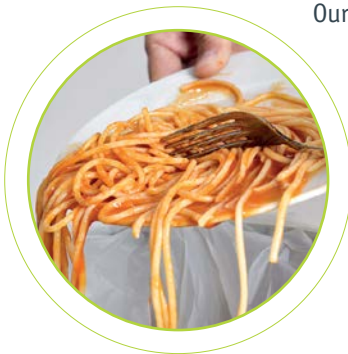
said food waste measurement plans had been put on hold

Just when the issue of measuring to manage food waste was gaining real momentum, COVID came along and kiboshed many operators' plans to introduce food waste measurement with over a quarter of caterers reporting they'd had to put food waste measurement on hold.

However, despite the challenging circumstances, some operators, such as Holroyd Howe, are still working with schools to monitor and record food waste. During this time, Holroyd Howe have seen a reduction in all food waste through a combination of pupil communication, longer services and the increased serving of meals. This has led to a 26% reduction in production waste and a 50% reduction in spoilage.

Those that have been able to continue monitoring say having concrete data to measure impacts shores up support for new practices, identifies current food waste hotspots, and is enabling efficiencies even in the pressured COVID-19 environment. So, whilst teams might have had to adjust to a whole host of new COVID-related practices, introducing food waste measurement is still hugely worthwhile, and there are free tools available, such as those provided by Guardians of Grub²², or Unilever's Wise up on Waste app²³. Plus, perverse as it may seem, now might be a perfect time to tackle food waste as people's newfound appreciation of the value of food might make staff (and students) more supportive.

Tackle plate waste via the cleaning crew



Our research interviewees indicated that plate waste, per meal served, has gone up.

They attribute this to the huge rise in pre-portioned and grab and go options which allow little scope for customising so young people can choose the portion size and accompaniments they will actually eat. The fact that young people are now eating in bubbles across estates also makes plate/in package waste very hard to track and monitor to enable kitchens to identify key waste culprits and to address them.

To get around this, survey students, work with the cleaning crew, or even send catering teams around to do a spot check on rubbish bins, to help kitchens get a sense of what is being thrown away and why so it can be addressed.

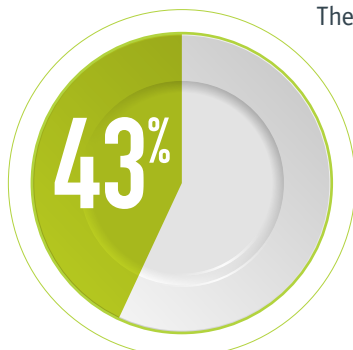
Harness customisation technology to tackle food waste

The pandemic has enabled the fast-track of technologies from pre-ordering to click and collect. This has often had a positive knock on reducing over-production related food waste as catering teams can cook/prepare to order. However, to tackle customer-based waste, increase customisation options, for example, of accompaniments to main meals so that students can choose the vegetable options they want and will eat, can help tackle plate and grab and go waste.

“Pre-order software tackles waste by enabling caterers to prepare exactly what is needed. Flexible pre-order apps allow pupils to customise meals, eliminating unwanted add-ons and reducing the preparation of items that would be wasted. Pre-ordering also provides live and historical data that helps predict future trends, assists with stock ordering, reduces food wastage, and generates savings in associated costs.”

Stuart Brown, Head of Sales, CRB Cunninghams

Be menu and product smart



reported that fewer choices and less stock has helped to reduce food waste

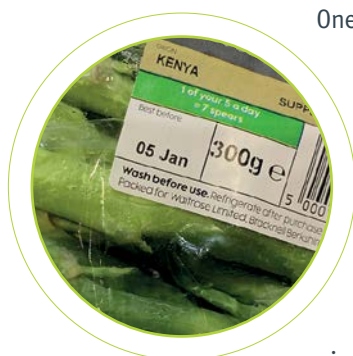
The more products a site has in its larder, the potential for more waste. If caterers' onsite menu design and procurement teams work together and with suppliers to come up with the optimum number of products and use the same products in more recipes, it can dramatically reduce waste. This is in the supply chain, and also in every day usage, but is especially effective when sites have to deal with the additional COVID-related volatility of pupil numbers fluctuating widely, and sites shutting completely at short notice.

In addition, it's worth being more flexible on freezing food. Whilst many caterers pride themselves on never freezing fresh food and temporarily relaxing this standard to allow sites flexibility can save food waste, costs and staff morale as it helps stop good food from going in the bin.

"Our supply management, food platform team, nutrition and dietetics, operations team and others are working hard simplifying our suite of recipes whilst still providing choice and interest, and addressing sustainability and responsible sourcing. We're all joining up with the same aim but coming from different angles."

Jayne Nightingale, Head of Responsible Sourcing, Sodexo UK & Ireland

Keep staff up-to-date on labelling guidance



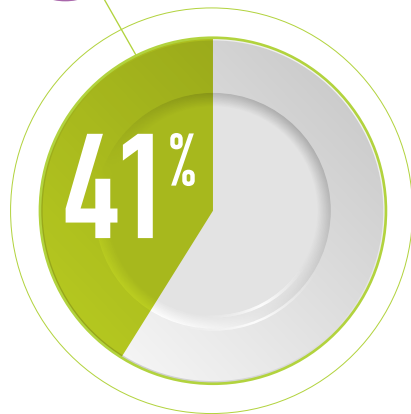
One of the legacies from the increased communication to deal with unwanted and surplus stock in the first lock down is that DEFRA has updated labelling guidance. This may mean that items can now be used for longer. Ensure staff know about these changes and know to check pack advice rather than relying on historical conventions as certain products may now be usable for longer.

Be flexible on festive foods and make fall back plans

Working with suppliers to choose festive products lines which can be used flexibly in non-festive or less specific time frames is key when there is so much uncertainty regarding how many students will be on site for the actual celebration. Choose shapes that are generic or which represent the season – such as Spring – rather than a time-specific celebration – such as Easter. And take the time to design back up menus that can use up these surpluses, such as curries and stews to use up a white meat surplus.

9

Don't give up on disposables



said COVID-19 had increased the use of disposables and food packaging

Noted as one of the biggest changes and most pressing sustainability challenges across the board, caterers reported a frustrating and emotionally crushing increase in disposables, often rowing back on previous efforts to reduce or even cut them out entirely. However, there are green shoots of hope that disposables for food products can be a short-lived, stop-gap solution.

Reassure that crockery and cutlery can work

Obviously, each site has different requirements but caterers report that despite many schools opting for disposables at the beginning to be safe, a lot have now established COVID-secure practices that enable them to go back to using crockery and cutlery. This shows that in some settings, there is no need to adopt disposables as the new standard, so keep communicating with the school to find ways to go back to crockery and cutlery.

Calculate the cost savings of converting to renewables

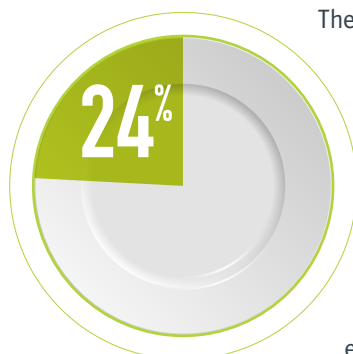
For those who can't return to using tableware, perhaps because they are too heavy or fragile to use across sites, there is now a strong business as well as environmental case to invest in reusable options now that it is clear that portable options are likely to remain necessary in some scenarios for an extended time.

The costs of disposables have generally been absorbed by caterers but many report that, long term, this is unsustainable financially. This is driving renewed interest in reusable formats.

One large caterer has introduced a reusable bento box – a multicompartment takeaway box – that can be washed and reused safely. However, such solutions require catering operators to be able to support the upfront investment, and not everyone has the capital in the balance sheets to drive change. This is leading to a vicious cycle of increased costs and the environmental impacts of continued disposables use.

In such situations, schools or colleges or local authorities should partner with caterers to invest in reusable solutions.

Create engaging materials



said disposables were going in right bin

The massive rise in disposables has the additional frustration that even when more sustainable choices are used, they often fail to be discarded correctly: in our survey, over three quarters either said disposables were not thrown in the right bin, or they didn't know what happened to them.

Caterers can help schools by creating clear guidance materials so everyone – from pupils to school and catering staff – understands how to throw away disposables correctly, from emptying out food waste first, to which bin it should go in.

Students should also be engaged in designing engagement programmes to help ensure they resonate with their target audience. "Students are our biggest champions," notes Jayne Jones, Commercial Manager, Commercial Services, Argyll and Bute Council and National Chair, ASSIST FM. "They are the first to make a noise about it if they see

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stuff going in the wrong place.” So harness the student body through student councils or eco clubs to get students focussed on finding ways to get their peers engaged in disposing of things correctly.

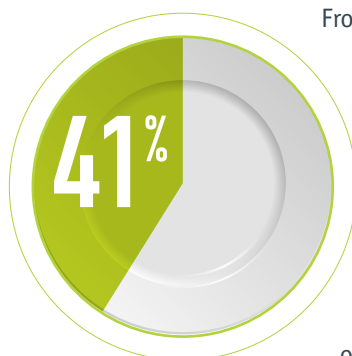
“It needs the continued support of on-site teaching teams to work with the children and young people to ensure pupils recycle correctly. Before lockdown, we were doing a lot of work with pupils regarding recycling so these conversations need picking up again.”

Nicky Joiner, Catering Co-ordinator, East Renfrewshire Council

Work with waste contractors



said disposables enter the correct waste stream



didn't know what happened to disposables

From food waste to disposables and PPE, it's vital to ensure waste goes in the right bin and ends up at the right processing facility, otherwise efforts made to use more sustainable products can be in vain. Yet in our research, only a quarter of respondents said disposables enter the correct waste stream for their product type when they are collected by the waste contractor - such as recyclable products go to be recycled, or compostable items go to AD or composting. A further 41% didn't know what happened to products.

It's still vital that those in charge of choosing disposable options are in communication with

the site's waste contractor so that they understand what treatment options are available for recyclables, compostables and bio-plastics, and how these items need to be collected in order to actually be recycled, and what counts as contamination - such as food residues - and how this could potentially be addressed.

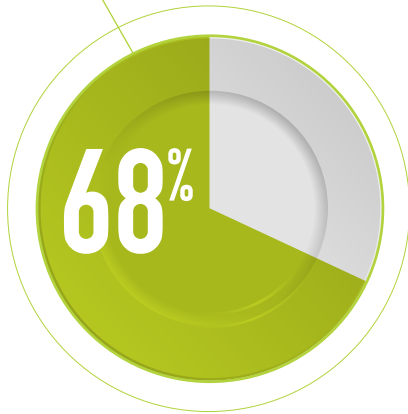
Head office teams can help site staff by educating team members about disposables and their various impacts. This enables site staff to ask their clients the right questions so the right solutions can be chosen.

“To support our teams, we have created a dedicated document that provides guidance on packaging and disposing of waste, including information on recycling and other ways waste is processed at the end of life, as this is not always straightforward. We provide this information to empower sites to understand the best option for their school as well as what happens to this afterwards; having an eco-friendly product may have a worse environmental impact if it is not disposed of correctly.”

Hannah Irvine, Sustainability and Environmental Manager, Holroyd Howe

10

Consider cleaning



said that cleaning has impacted staff workload and costs



are concerned about increased use of harsher cleaners

1 in 4
said additional hygiene practices had had a negative impact on staff wellbeing

Check green cleaners' credentials

Our research revealed that a quarter of those in catering in education are concerned that the additional hygiene requirements due to COVID-19 has led to an increased use of harsher chemical cleaning solutions, a concern which could potentially impact on water courses and health.

However, whilst there is no denying that the pandemic requires a greater frequency of the cleaning of certain areas, many eco products are still suitable. For example, there are eco cleaning systems which take water and salt to create electrochemically activated water which can kill 99.9% of bacteria without chemicals or the ongoing purchase of plastic bottles. So consult manufacturers and DfE guidance to ensure the most sustainable and appropriate product is used for each situation.

"Before COVID we had invested in a salt/water Toucan system that has fantastic certification [killing] 99.9% of bacteria so [it] has saved money on chemicals and assisted with environmental issues such as waste and use of harmful chemicals."

Survey respondent, Local authority

Reorganise rotas and schedules and recognise efforts

Food safety systems have always been robust in schools to meet standards, but COVID has increased cleaning pressures. The enhanced cleaning often means staff "don't stop - every 60 minutes, they have to clean again... and they're not given enough credit for all their hard work in helping schools to operate safely."

Reorganising cleaning schedules to shift the focus from night-time to daytime cleaning can help, whilst dedicated daytime cleaning teams provide ongoing support for catering staff. Switching to ongoing cleaning of touch points and eating spaces, whilst reducing the cleaning frequency in low use areas, can also help to reduce labour cost impacts.

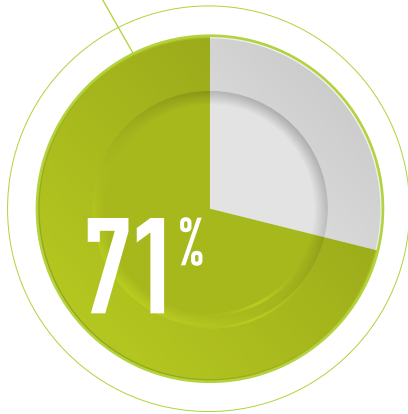
Moving some kitchen staff onto cleaning – which has been given extra budget – can also help to manage staffing costs and hours. Design rotas and shift patterns so that staff still get a break. Also ensure staff efforts are acknowledged and highlighted for their vital role in enabling school food - and the vital nutrition it provides - to continue.

"We have requested that some staff stretch working hours, allowing the number of staff to be reduced in the kitchens to support social distancing – if someone maybe did 15 hours before, it's 20 now. As a result of the reduced number of staff in kitchens, the catering service has been in a position to support touch cleaning in the schools which is essential in these heightened COVID 19 times."

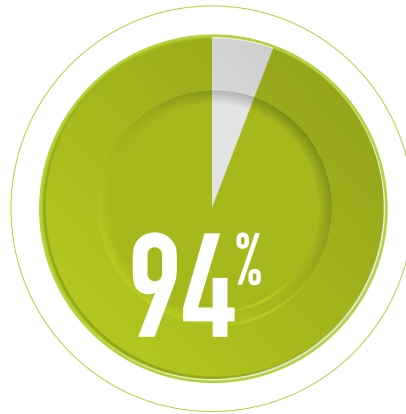
Nicky Joiner, Catering Co-ordinator, East Renfrewshire Council

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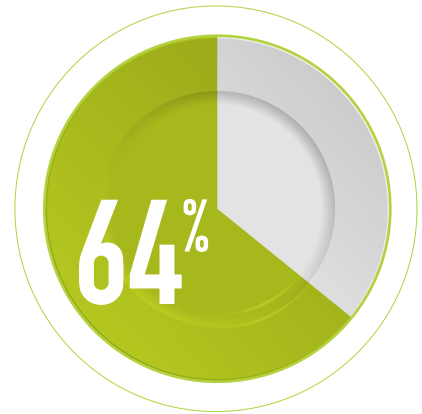
Support staff and their wellbeing



said longer food service times and multiple service settings have increased catering staff workloads and costs



said the challenges of COVID-19 have had a negative impact on staff mental health



had to change practices to support staff mental health

The ongoing uncertainty and concerns of living through a pandemic have left few unscathed, with everyone from students to suppliers coping with their own personal and professional set of impacts. In education settings, staff have to deal with increased workloads because of changes in delivery, service times and cleaning requirements, whilst clients and students are struggling to adjust to constantly changing systems and services.

Not surprisingly this has had a massive impact: 94% of those surveyed said the challenges of COVID-19 have had a negative impact on staff mental health. But there is much that can be done to support those working in catering in the education sector, as well as the students and clients they serve.

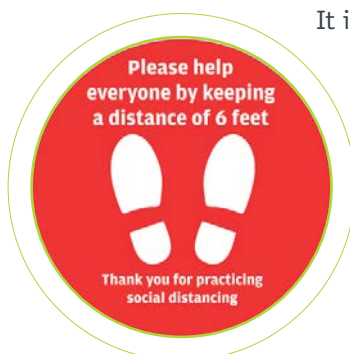
"We need to be dealers of hope. It's so important to give people hope."

Tom Laskey, Marketing Director, Schools and Universities, Sodexo UK&I

Going back to basics

It is crucial staff feel safe at work so de-codifying COVID-speak and communicating how the measures in place work to protect them can help. So, advises Matt Garner, Sodexo, go back to the basics of safety culture and ensure staff can answer these three questions:

- have I got the right equipment?
- do I know how to do my job?
- is my environment safe?



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“The different working practices make working more difficult and less relaxed.”

Survey Respondent, School

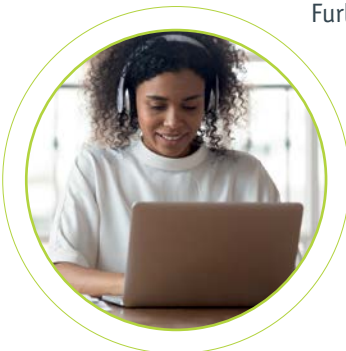
Give staff the skills and support to be flexible



Give staff the training and support they need to work flexibly across the business. This can also help keep people employed in tough economic times by taking the financial burden off clients by moving them elsewhere in the business.

Taking an ‘all hands to the pump’ approach has helped businesses survive the pandemic and keep staff on the payroll with people stepping up and performing differing roles than they would normally. Examples include people in finance taking a more active role in business development, to catering staff taking on cleaning responsibilities. It can also help to get staff pre-emptively DBS checked if they work in parts of the business that don’t require it, such as the university sector, so they can shift sites if necessary.

Harness online training



Furlough and the challenges of running face-to-face training has led to an increase in online training and video briefings which provide reliable consistency of content, quality and messaging. Some of this is company specific but there is a lot free online too. Some companies have used the furlough scheme to support labour re-education which has helped people to work more flexibly across the business, whilst also expanding staff’s long-term prospects. It is also an important tool in getting people up to speed regarding new systems and expectations for when they return to work.

Online training can also be harnessed to widen training and development opportunities to even more people. For example, the move online has enabled Sodexo to make some training, that was previously only available for management, available to all staff. Using portals that can be accessed on any device also helps staff access training, even if people don’t have work laptops.

Be open about what is and isn’t known and communicate regularly



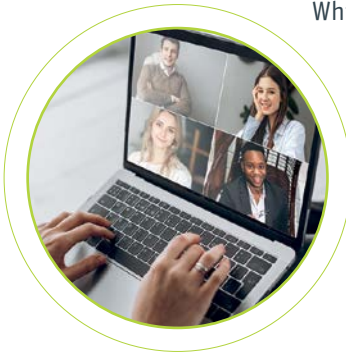
Strong, open leadership and regular communication can make a massive difference in keeping staff feeling secure, supported and committed to a company. In uncertain times, it’s crucial to communicate openly, being honest and regularly sharing what is and isn’t known. Hold true to and frame efforts around the organisation’s core mission to keep staff feeling engaged and secure, and they will in turn work hard to support the business.

The key to coping, says Katya Simmons, MD, Nestle Professional, is to share lessons and experience with the community. “From a leadership perspective, how do you manage the change - personal, professional [brought about by COVID 19]? How do you support people through this change by supporting them with how they are feeling?

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN THE NEW NORMAL: conquering challenges in education catering in a COVID-19 world

How do you understand capability – and redirect resources, and cope with change very fast – to support people in a comfortable way to let go of what they are used to, and to open up to new things to help them with what they are facing tomorrow?”

Keep in touch - visually where possible



Whilst there is significant video call fatigue, most people report that they have been a vital tool in keeping teams in touch and feeling connected. Weekly calls are reported to be vital to keeping up moral and supporting mental health. Where possible, encouraging or mandating the use of video makes it easier to spot when people aren't engaged or something is not quite right.

Informal meetings - such as weekly 'open video clinics' where staff can log in to talk practical issues that are worrying them as well as how they're feeling - can also be hugely valuable and provide a more supportive, "chat by the coffee machine" vibe.

Sodexo ran a 'press pause' series of hour long facilitated sessions where people could log on to discuss how they were feeling and to connect with colleagues they didn't interact with on a daily basis. According to Matt Garner, Sodexo UK&I, who facilitated some of them, the sessions "were really powerful and it helped people to feel 'I'm not alone in front of this stupid screen.'"

Harness social media to boost morale

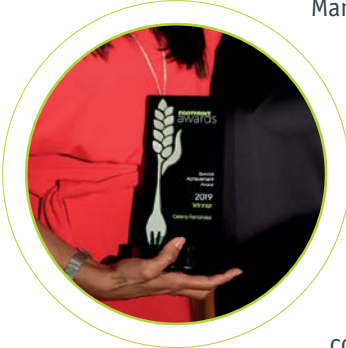


Sharing stories of successes and highlighting team efforts on social media is another helpful way to build moral for catering teams as well as the rest of the education value chain.

"Sharing what we do with parents and schools is a great way to get people involved," enthuses one senior education authority insider. "We use several means of communicating, including social media platforms. It's a good way to recognise the great work our catering is doing and the vital role they have and continue to make in the life of a school. I like to visit as many schools as possible, to get out and meet our people and see what they do, and most importantly, what do they need from me. We acknowledge school visits by posting the visit on social platforms and sharing some interesting facts to gain wider interest."

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Provide recognition



Many businesses use awards to recognise efforts, and taking these awards online when face to face celebrations aren't possible can help to keep staff engaged and ensure that people are recognised and appreciated as well. This is especially important under such unusual pressure and in scenarios when so many staff have gone above and beyond the call of duty.

Connect staff and students

Find ways to keep the relationship and the interactions between pupils and colleagues alive as, according to our research, the thing many catering staff missed most during furlough was the students.



"The impact on everyone's wellbeing shouldn't be underestimated because of physical distancing," notes Amy Roberts, Holroyd Howe. "Staff are used to engaging with the pupils. Now it's harder to have those conversations with screens and masks. It's hard for them to tell the students to stand back and keep their distance. They serve so much more than food, and for the children, whose teachers can change each year, the person they see in the dining room is a constant. Staff look forward to talking to the students and seeing them learn and grow and being involved in their educational journey along the way." And to the young people involved, the relationship can also be hugely rewarding and important.

So, when designing service and delivery systems, look to incorporate safe ways for catering teams and students to continue to have meaningful interactions. One way to do this is through education programmes. According to Deborah Homshaw, CH&Co's 'From the Kitchen' initiative extended the engagement pupils usually enjoy in the school dining room into the home, keeping the importance and value of good food and nutrition front of mind. It included nutrition guidance, cooking tips, menu planning, supermarket swaps and recipe ideas from chefs and video 'cook-alongs' to encourage children to get cooking at home, as well fun activities such as quizzes. It was very popular with schools and parents and continues to evolve.

CARE FOR THE KIDS

"I am so touched by our staff," says Nicky Joiner, Catering Co-ordinator, East Renfrewshire Council. "I don't want to put the team under pressure... but they still want to keep things normal and fun for the pupils who have had such a hard time, so they've done things like organising themselves on Whatsapp to wrap up selection boxes at Christmas and dressing up at Halloween."

About this research

Footprint Intelligence was commissioned by ASSIST FM, Brakes, Sodexo UK&I and CRB Cunninghams to conduct research which examines the impact COVID-19 has had on those working in catering in the education sector. This was in order to create a guide which pooled knowledge and shared successes to help those in the industry to find effective ways to provide nutritious food whilst finding efficiencies, managing costs and keeping sustainability at the heart of the education offering.

The research for this project comprised a mix of in depth, semi-structured interviews with over 25 foodservice experts, as well as an online survey undertaken by professionals working in catering in the education sector value chain. This primary research was supported by desk-based research, involvement in industry events and forums, as well as comment and insights gathered from other opinion leaders linked to industry. Our thanks, as ever, go to all those in the industry who are always so generous in sharing their knowledge from the coal face. It is hugely appreciated.

About Footprint Intelligence



The ever-shifting sustainability debate makes it vital for businesses to have accurate intelligence to make informed decisions. Footprint Intelligence is Footprint Media Group's research and analysis division, helping companies develop successful strategies in the context of responsible business practices.

Footprint Intelligence aims to drive, promote and share best practice by helping the industry resolve pressing sustainability issues. It asks tough questions and finds answers. It uses research and industry insight to bring businesses together to identify challenges, opportunities, trends and solutions.

Report Authors

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