

No Free Lunch?

Background

Disadvantaged 16-18 year olds studying at school sixth forms are entitled to free meals at lunchtime, while their counterparts who study at a further education or sixth form college were not. The Association of Colleges (AoC) estimate that over 100,000 students across the country were missing out. This is particularly unfair as there are three times as many students at Colleges eligible for a free meal than at school sixth forms. Eligibility should be based on need, not where you choose to study.



Between March 2012 and September 2013, the AoC ran their *No Free Lunch?* campaign, which called on the Government to extend the provision of free meals to disadvantaged 16 to 18 year olds who study at general further education and sixth form colleges.

Objectives

1. To mobilise students, college principals and politicians to influence the Department of Education to change its policy on free meals.
2. To use an integrated communications approach to build a sustained campaign of information and influence to change the Government's policy.

Strategy

The strategy employed was based on the creation of a grassroots style campaign, led by Presidents of students unions and college Principals who would initiate local promotion of the campaign, whilst still being centrally managed by AoC officers. The campaign took place using a number strands, from the localised approach and parliamentary lobbying to using social media.

The campaign was innovative in that it was built from a grassroots level, utilising students and staff in colleges, from across England, as communication tools. Being led by AoC centrally, college principals and students were asked to build support with key stakeholders, particularly local MPs and local media to create momentum for the campaign across regions which fed into national level, and ensure that the issue was maintained on the political agenda from a constituency perspective. The simplicity of the campaign message and its fundamental disparity was a central feature in building support.

Prior to the campaign, research took place to identify the colleges most affected by the inequality in the current free meals policy. This included producing data on

college in England on the number of students who were missing out on free meals, and a regional picture of the areas hardest hit. This situation analysis allowed for more targeted campaigning with Members of Parliament (MPs) who represented these areas. Alongside this, a stakeholder analysis took place to identify the key organisations to support the campaign.

Outputs

Parliamentary lobbying

As the objective of the campaign was to change Government policy, parliamentary lobbying was the central focus of the work. This included:

- Creating an online petition on the Government website, as a call to action, which gathered 10,300 signatories, to make sure the Government was required to respond to the issue.
- Secured support from an MP from each of the three main political parties to champion the cause and be an advocate of our campaign in Parliament. Ian Swales MP (Lib Dem, Redcar and Cleveland), Robert Halfon MP (Conservative, Harlow) and Rt Hon David Blunkett MP (Labour, Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) were particularly central to the campaign.
- Targeting MPs whose college students were particularly disadvantaged by the policy via individual emails and through briefings, as well as MPs who had shown support for the issue, to raise awareness within Parliament. This led to six oral questions including Prime Minister's Questions, 18 written questions being raised in the House of Commons, three being asked in the House of Lords, and two debates within six months, one of which led to the publication of a draft bill.
- Providing individual, tailored constituency level information for colleges and students to send to local MPs and media.
- Holding a photocall in Parliament for MPs to show their support. Over 50 MPs attended and these pictures were then used in press releases and social media, in addition to MPs using them on their websites and in local press to highlight their support for the issue.
- Regular meetings with the Secretary of State for Education, and relevant Ministers to raise the problems of the inherent disadvantage to college students.

Media relations

As well as engagement at a parliamentary level, it was important to raise the profile of the campaign with the media, to make sure the campaign remained on the radar of the public. This included press releases and briefing being sent the national, regional and trade media. The coverage received included:

- National media (BBC, Guardian, BBC Radio 1, BBC Radio 4, including Robert Halfon MP appearing on ITV News to promote the campaign)
- Regional media (34 regional newspapers and radio news programmes)
- Educational trade media (Times Educational Supplement, FE Week)
- Political trade media (including David Blunkett MP writing for Dods and House Magazine)

Alongside the media work carried out by AoC national office, the campaign also benefited from MPs engaging with their local and regional media, to ensure that the issue gathered exposure and momentum at a regional and national level. This included 12 MPs writing press releases to regional media.

Social media

Twitter was used as the primary social media tool, in order to build awareness and encourage discussion about the area. In total over 200 tweets were sent out, from the dedicated @aoc_campaigns twitter feed, along with the corporate @aoc_info campaign and public affairs specific account @aoc_pa.

Stakeholder engagement

A central part of the campaign was to garner support from organisations, in order to help raise profile and secure endorsement of the issue. To enable this, regular briefings and meetings were held with stakeholders including National Union of Students, Universities and Colleges Union, UNISON, the Association of College and School Leaders and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Barnado's also endorsed the campaign. Such high profile endorsements allowed us to be collaborative and reach a much wider audience.

Outcomes

In the simplest of terms, we won! In September 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP announced that free meals would be made available to disadvantaged 16-18 years olds studying at colleges as of September 2014. The parliamentary work was particularly successful as the campaign secured widespread cross party support.

The fundamental inequality and simple message of the campaign resulted in widespread coverage which, along with changing the policy, also helped to raise the profile of colleges and the further education sector, which is a separate organisational objective.

The primary objective of this campaign was to change the Government policy, and this was achieved, despite the current economic climate and reduction in departmental spending.

Budget

The total budget for this campaign was £1000.