

“We have to be proactive because the food has to get there in time”

Race against the clock

Primary schools that have no kitchen facilities can still serve a hot meal to their key stage 1 pupils come September. Morag Lyall visits Tevin Tobun, managing director of Gate Ventures, to talk transported meals

One of the biggest concerns among schools facing the introduction of universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) in September is their lack of kitchen facilities. Some schools are lucky and may require just a new microwave to cope with a few extra mouths to feed. But at the other end of the scale there are schools that have no kitchen at all. How are these schools expected to start serving school meals to children up to Year 2? Thankfully there are a number of options available. One of these is having meals transported in from a central production unit (CPU).

Gate Ventures specialises in school meal delivery, ensuring that schools with no kitchens can still provide a hot lunch for its pupils. Importantly, Gate Ventures is not the caterer, but at the same time it is much more than the logistics.

“We act as an extension to a contract caterer or local authority,” explains Tevin Tobun, managing director of Gate Ventures. “We are the conduit between production sites and schools with no kitchens.”

The company was first set up in 2001 and now has contracts across the country, delivering up to four million meals a year. It operates by taking meals in temperature controlled boxes from a CPU and transporting it to a school – perhaps even taking a member of the kitchen staff with them – and delivering everything back to the CPU after service. In some schools Gate Ventures provides a local runner service as well, delivering items between schools if one is out of stock, saving that school from calling up their wholesaler for another delivery.

As the majority of schools without kitchens are primary schools, Tevin knows the challenges many of these schools face ahead of September. And because the company liaises directly between the catering staff at a school and the contract caterer, the team can see from the ground up what the concerns of UIFSM are. Increased labour costs, longer lunchtimes, larger food deliveries – Tevin insists that the team will be the ‘helping hand’ for schools.

After all, this is not just about transporting food from A to B, it is a real science. Tevin is proud of his company’s efficiency and Gate Ventures works every delivery down to the minute. Each vehicle has a tracking device and the office can see whether or not a vehicle is on time with its route, as well as predict any problems with traffic and road works so they can inform the driver of a different route. This even goes so far as having a relief driver on hand, ready to take over from any of the vehicles that get stuck.

“We have to be proactive because the food has to get there in time,” Tevin explains. “There’s no explanation to 1,000 children that there’s no food coming.”

On the day we speak, one driver is doing a ‘dry



run' to a new school site, collecting information on the road and site access times, parking limitations, and breaktimes.

"What it means is when we take over the first day it's a seamless service," Tevin says.

This isn't the only information they collect. The team knows the access restrictions of inner-city roads and what time traffic builds on particular roads. For example in Cambridge, access to the city can take one hour or 10 minutes, while out in the countryside drivers need to be aware of the worst times for getting stuck behind a tractor. Other considerations must be made for the demands on the central production kitchen, which might be preparing meals for a couple of sites as well as their own.

"It sounds complicated but it has to be," Tevin remarks. "It's simplistic to think that it's just going from A to B; you don't want to be outside a gate for 30 minutes. If a driver is late it could mean that the whole school diary is in disarray."

While everything is calculated down to the minute, everything will have to be recalculated ahead of September. Tevin is wary that some schools will act at the last minute to prepare for UIFSM, so Gate Ventures is collating all the information they need themselves.

"The threats for us is someone calling us up in July saying we've got six weeks," Tevin says. "We want to be more organised than that so we're starting to collate information on how many children we have in a school, what the current uptake is, and we're going to base our numbers on 90% uptake. We'll look at our vehicles and timings. The thing we really want to focus on is improving the service and coping with increased demand."

Tevin is confident that with so much data to hand, he can go to a caterer and present a solution to them. While there are plenty of challenges ahead, Tevin believes that readiness is the answer. 📍

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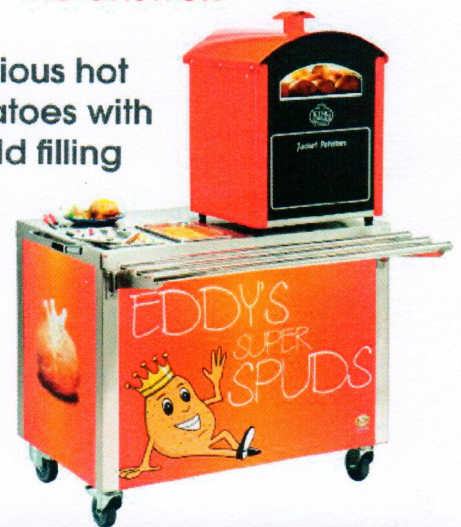


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