

Hampshire County Council Catering Services explains their approach to special diets.
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Q&A with Food Development Officer Evelyn Cook

Hampshire County Council School Catering Service – aka HC3S - provides 45,000 meals every day across 500 schools. Of those, around 1,000 are for children with food allergies, including multiple food allergies.

Come September, with the introduction of the Universal Free School Meals, Food Development Officer Evelyn Cook estimates they will be providing 60,000 meals. At the same time, the numbers of pupils requiring allergy friendly meals is rising. She tells us how they cope.

How long have you been catering for food allergies?

The most significant change came in 2005 when we joined The Hyperactive Children's Support Group (<http://www.hacsg.org.uk>). We are the only school authority that's ever done that. Basically it says children don't need all these thousands of additives. We took those out in 2005 and by doing that we became almost 'free from'. Many of our products – fish fingers, fish cakes, sausages – became dairy free, wheat free, egg free, nut free because we were sourcing the purest products we could. We've then tried to improve our offering year-on-year.

You operate a strict 'no nuts', 'no ingredients with nut traces' policy. Isn't this difficult?

It isn't hard. It takes legwork but we have a central buying policy and I have a copy of all the specifications for every single item we buy. We went nut free a few years ago and I asked everyone for their spec – I asked 'are there nuts in the factory?' and so on. If they said 'yes' I said 'we have to find something different', or if their statements were ambiguous I asked for clarification. So, I'm going to the manufacturer and I'm asking, 'where are these lentils put into a bag?'

What are the most common allergies that you cater for?

All of our meals are entirely nut free. And the most common allergies aside from that are dairy, egg, wheat and, for Coeliacs, gluten.

But can you cater for some of the other allergies out there – sesame, for instance, or legumes, or soya?

We don't have any sesame at all in our meals. And we never turn anybody away. Every child should have the opportunity to have a school dinner. We have soya allergies, we have a combination of all of the above, we have tomato allergy, legumes... yeast free diets. We have children with PKU, which requires a special low protein diet, and children with diabetes.

It sounds like a formidable task

It is possible but it requires organisation and strict controls. We have one menu, and our schools have a 3663 buying list, and when they phone 3663 and say 'I'd

like to buy something different' 3663 ring me to check. I'm the final arbiter. They can't buy things they can't have.

Plus we won't provide any special meal without medical evidence. If your child is dairy free then it's 100 per cent dairy free, not half dairy free – unless there is medical evidence that they can tolerate baked dairy but not 'wet' dairy, for instance. But we won't cater for your child just because he or she doesn't like tomatoes, or peas.

Do you have a special menu for your allergic pupils?

The most important point to make is that it is NOT an a la carte service. We offer everybody the same menu, and two choices: meat and non-meat. But our gravy mix, stock granules, the majority of coated products and our sausages are all dairy, egg, wheat and gluten free and every one of the 45,000 children has those. That way you're taking some of the risk away because you've only got one sausage, or one gravy, to deal with. So if you are, say, egg, wheat and dairy free you can have four out of five of the week's meals the same as everyone else. Then for the fifth if, say, the children are having pizza then we might swap in pork sausages, or meatballs and rice.

What do you require from parents in order to provide a special meal?

We have a specific form, the HC300, which parents must complete, that has to be accompanied by medical evidence. That can be a letter from the GP or the paediatric dietitian.

What if parents want one-to-one advice or the school isn't sure about something?

I say to all of our cook supervisors, 'If you are not confident or the parent needs more information, get them to phone me'. I'm happy to speak to parents. That's what I'm here to do.

Talk us through how you create menus to suit the various dietary requirements.

I work with the principal food buyer and put the menu together. Every school has the same menu and starts on the same day. We have two choices every day – meat and non-meat - and the menu changes twice a year.

We work with a paediatric dietitian from Winchester Hospital and a copy of our generic menu goes to her and she puts together the egg free, dairy free, wheat free, gluten free, soya free options and combinations thereof and sends them back to us.

On the whole, though, with the most common allergies the child has a meal that's already on the menu. The key thing is if you're cooking 50 dinners and have to make a tiny pot of something else that's when the problems happen. You spill it, or it gets mixed up, or whatever. We try to think globally around what we are doing and try to be consistent.

As I said, all of our gravy, stock and sausages and the majority of our coated products are free from eggs, wheat, gluten, dairy and nuts. Then if there is, for example, a child who has an allergy to peas, we might replace that with sweetcorn.

Let us in on a few of your recipe secrets.

We have a standard recipe book with standard recipes. We're quite traditional - macaroni cheese, roast dinner, fish, pizza. Generally speaking the roasts and fish meals are good for most allergies. We use vegan margarine for baking so biscuits are always dairy free. And if we have a dairy free child then we make our oil sponge with apple or orange juice instead of milk. In fact we have St Clement's Sponge on the menu that is exactly that.

But there must be a few things you just can't offer?

Yes, unfortunately our sponge isn't egg or gluten free and our biscuits aren't gluten free. Wheat and gluten free puddings are really expensive to buy in and we just can't do it. We also don't do gluten free pasta as it's quite difficult to manage in large quantities. And unfortunately our bread mix at the moment is not dairy or egg free because the manufacturer only does a brush down and not a through clean. We're looking at gluten free baking mixes but we haven't yet found one that creates a consistent product. So there will be some occasions when a child with allergies will have a different meal.

Puddings can be an issue but in those instances we have fruit, or a fruity pot, or if they aren't dairy free then a yoghurt. Jelly is also vegetarian, free from additives and all the other major allergens. Sometimes we will have an ice cream from New Forest Ice Cream (which is egg free and nut free).

How do you ensure no cross contamination in the prep of allergy meals?

All of our school cooks go through an induction process that includes allergies. In their file they have information on cross contamination, traces and so on. And if you know about cross contamination then it's common sense. I do go on and on at people about it and say that we are responsible, and we need to be on the ball. So never ever share a baking sheet, use different utensils and pans and store foods separately.

And how can you guard against cross contamination when serving those meals?

The cook supervisor and, in fact, all staff should know each child with allergies and there will be a sheet up, usually with that child's photo. Some schools have a wristband system where the meat meal is red and the non-meat is green, and then children with a special meal might have a yellow band. And often the children with special meals will be served first and their meal will have their name on it.

What other systems do you have in place?

I tell every cook supervisor to check every single product and every new menu they receive, and if they are not 100 per cent about anything to phone me or my colleague. And I cross check with my colleague every menu I create.

Won't the rise in demand with the introduction of the universal free school meals impact upon your ability to cater for allergies?

It won't make any difference to us at all. We will carry on as we are. It's about organising in advance and having strict controls. It isn't that difficult really after that.

Where do you source your ingredients and products?

We use our local butcher who has the sausages manufactured by a local manufacturer. They make the sausages first thing on a Monday morning after a complete cleandown so that they can be declared gluten and wheat free. We buy other products from Red House and Young's Seafood – nut, egg, dairy, gluten and wheat free. We make our pizza base and bread with Premier bread mix, which is nut trace free. Pan Artisan provides our pizza bases for secondary schools. And we buy our ingredients from 3663.

What is your meal price?

It's £2 per meal. We have to be self-funding, we aren't subsidised by the county. We have to slightly more than break even.

How would you advise a school cook who might not have the power of 40,000 meals behind him or her to source safe ingredients?

You have to be quite strong with people. You have to stick by your guns. Look around and source products yourself. Just ask your suppliers – 3663 have been very good because there are more people asking for 'free from' products. If you want to buy something, if it's on their database and has a code then you should be able to get it.

So you've taken it upon yourself to source products personally as well?

Yes, when we went additive and MSG free we couldn't find a suitable gravy mix and I came across something called Marigold in the supermarket, and rang them up, and they were made by a Swiss manufacturer called Hugli. They started making catering sized packs for us and their gravy mixes and stock granules are all free from wheat, gluten, additives, MSG, dairy, egg...

What advice would you give to a smaller school that doesn't yet cater for allergies on how to begin?

It takes time. Don't panic. You have to be pragmatic. You have to say 'I *can* do that, but at the moment I *can't* do that'. Start small and evolve over time. When we started we could only do roast dinners, there was nothing coated that was 'free from', but over time we've brought in sausages and then the fish cakes and so on. Start with one or two meals a week, start with egg free, dairy free, nut free, slowly, and work up. Give yourself a target. It's small steps. And I'm happy to help them if they want to talk about it.

<http://www3.hants.gov.uk/caterers>

<http://documents.hants.gov.uk/HC3S/SpecialDiets.pdf>

