



## Managing Allergen Requests – School Meals

**To:** All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### Key Points

An APSE network query was circulated to our membership asking for information on how colleagues were managing their allergen requests, specifically:

- What is your process regarding an allergen request?
- Do you have timescales in terms of responding?
- Has a policy been developed / produced on the level of menu adaption which can be provided?

This briefing provides a summary of the responses to this query from responding local authorities.

### 1.0 Introduction

According to AllergyUK, almost 1 in 12 young children suffer from a food allergy and they seem to be getting more common. There is also currently no cure for food allergies, and if the allergy is severe enough the NHS recommend informing schools and putting in place an emergency action plan in case of accidental exposure.

The main 14 ingredients that can cause an allergy are:

- celery
- cereals that contain gluten – including wheat, rye, barley and oats
- crustaceans – including prawns,
- eggs

crabs and lobsters

- fish
- milk
- mustard
- Peanuts
- soybeans
- lupin – seeds from some varieties sometimes used to make flour
- molluscs – including mussels and oysters
- tree nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- sesame seeds
- sulphur dioxide and sulphites (preservatives used in some foods and drinks) at levels above 10mg per kg or per litre

With the importance of delivering free school meals and school meals in general, it is important to have procedures in place for dealing with food allergies.

## **2.0 What is your process regarding an allergen request?**

There are several different approaches that include:

- Requiring a meeting with a parent (with one of or a mixture of catering supervisors, catering managers, school representatives such as a headteacher or a food safety advisor)
- Requiring a letter from a GP or medical practitioner
- Some have a specific form that they require to be completed for the request of a medical diet
- For more informal requests from parents, students or members of staff – kitchens and serving points have this information available and can answer any questions about the presence of allergens (some also noted the specific training their catering departments have undergone to deal with these kinds of requests)

Other best practice noted:

- One local authority had developed their standard primary school menus to be nut free, so that children with a nut allergy can eat their primary meals without having to register for a special diet
- Another local authority offer a temporary alternative menu for children awaiting the diagnosis of complex allergies
- One local authority noted having a downloadable form from the school's catering page with a Part A which is completed by the parent, and a Part B to be signed by a GP or health professional in the absence of a recent medical letter confirming an allergy
- A local authority's information management system is linked to their till points which provide allergen alerts when a child reaches the till. They also have clear signage to advise that allergen information is available by asking a member of staff
- Another local authority have comprehensive allergen information files in all of their school kitchens, with an A-Z section of all products used and a section to match each day's menus on the menu cycle

### **3.0 Do you have timescales in terms of responding?**

Most responses to the original query attempt to respond within a day or two of receiving the request, with others specifying a set time for implementation. One respondent spoke of having a built in 10 day implementation period to include time to meet with parents, agree menu choices and obtain any specific necessary ingredients. Another council noted that the implementation of the diet will depend on how quickly the parent/s respond to any communication sent by the council. Several did however note that they didn't have a set timescale.

Many local authorities noted that their implementation times for simple allergens (e.g. dairy, soya) can be implemented much faster than more complex ones.

A few local authorities noted that the first few weeks of term in September has increasingly become dominated by special diet requirement meetings for their service officers.

#### **4.0 Has a policy been developed/produced on the level of menu adaption which can be provided?**

Generally local authorities are able to offer some form of menu, whether that is a change in an existing menu, or an entirely off menu item. Many noted that parental expectations can sometimes outweigh what the council is able to deliver, but that they do always try to accommodate medical menus.

Specific responses to this question included:

- If a diet cannot be accommodated from the existing menu range an off menu item which suits the needs of the child
- In very rare cases, a packed lunch will be advised as the only option
- The choice available will depend on the complexity of the allergy
- If the menu offer becomes so limited that it is at risk of becoming an insufficient meal offer then the parent may elect to provide a home produced meal

Others noted the existence of a full Special/Medical Diet Policy, while many noted that they work on a case-by-case basis with every child and parent to come up with the best solution.

#### **5.0 APSE Comment**

APSE welcomes our members to utilise our Network Query system as a means of acquiring the information they need to inform their services of the best practice available from other local authorities. APSE supports the delivery of free school meals and believes that local authorities have made great strides in recent years in improving the quality of their services in difficult conditions. Managing allergen requests is an important part of the delivery of school meals, and the processes, procedures and best practice contained within this briefing should be considered when developing your local authority methods of dealing with this issue. APSE runs a national Catering advisory group and a Scottish Soft FM (Catering and Cleaning) advisory group for members to attend. Details on future meetings can be found by [clicking here](#).

APSE has also established Covid-19 WhatsApp groups for Catering, Cleaning and Environmental Health that allow our members to gain answers rapidly to their service queries and to share their own best practice. To join one/all of these groups, please [click here](#) or visit the APSE website.

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