

Adapting Catering for Pupils with a Diagnosis of Autism

Louise Gillam LLB DCA BSc (Hons) RD



How it began

- Noticeable increase in requests for “alternative menus” for pupils with a diagnosis of autism or suspected to be autistic
- Traditionally requests via pupils’ dietitian had always been processed. If requests came via other routes, no firm policy
- Increasing demands from parents of pupils with autism who had exhausted wide range of options and adjustments already and expecting caterers to solve ongoing restrictive eating issues

The ongoing questions

- How to ensure we are making “reasonable adjustments” as required under Equalities legislation without opening the floodgates to those who are merely “fussy eaters”
- We cannot cater for fussy eaters – cooks currently catering for more than 300 primary pupils with wide range of confirmed special diet needs. For food safety reasons we need cooks to be totally focussed on these, not distracted by long list of likes/dislikes/preferences

We needed help.....enter Cheryl (Torfaen's Children + Young Persons Autism Officer)

Fountain of knowledge, knowing all the families we were already dealing with (and others we did not know about)

Good news – Cheryl confirmed that we were already doing lots to support these pupils

BUT

We needed a formal policy to set out what parents could expect and manage unrealistic expectations that clashed with food safety rules or were impractical (food from home, branded foods)

And we needed to ensure all our 200+ Catering staff had an awareness of Autism and enough understanding to be fully on board with suggesting and trialling adaptations

Online training for 200+ staff

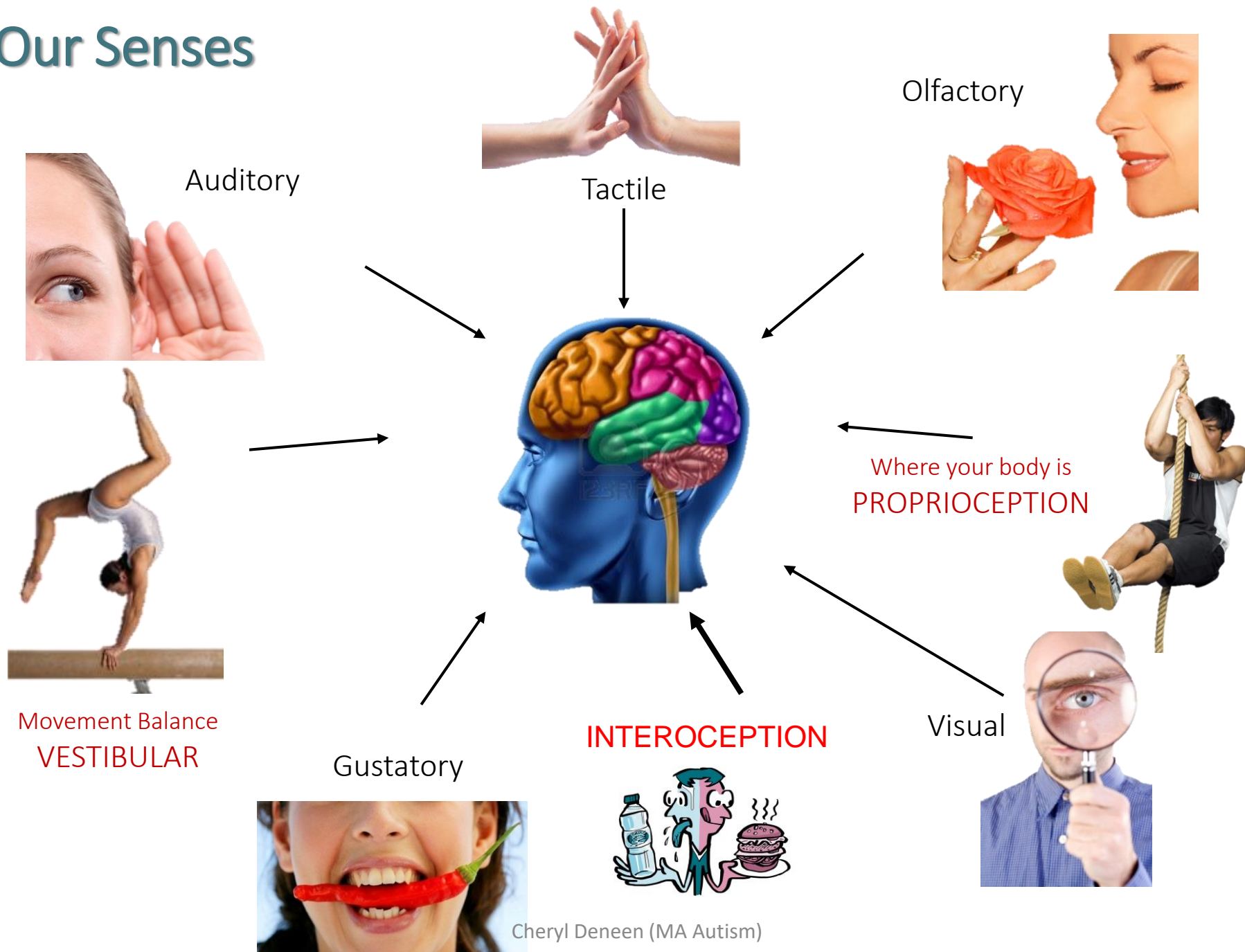
- a big task with no work laptops or email addresses



In Person more
in-depth
training for
Cooks with our
own Cheryl



Our Senses



Cheryl Deneen (MA Autism)

Consulting with Parents

- Input from parents was sought and snowballed
- A parent we had long term working relations with fed into policy then shared it with her network of parents via local Autism Charity, Hope GB

Feedback and Input from parents on various drafts of the Policy

I think this is an amazing policy, you have always done your very best for Deri and I think you guys are great.

Deri is doing amazing, he loves comp, and catering are giving him little extra things to try now and again, he's enjoying exploring the range of puddings especially!

I feel honoured that you have asked for my opinion on this.

I've just looked over the draft policy and to me it covers everything. With my child it's the change of menu that causes anxiety at school lunchtime. Having a menu that is kept consistent is a fabulous idea

That's good, they never helped with our son as we didn't have a medical certificate of food intolerances. It would be great if they were able to accommodate our kids too. 😞

Definitely the option for plain food - plain pasta etc. Or simple plain sandwiches? (Butter/ ham/ jam etc) They aren't considered healthy, but chicken nuggets would probably be a winner! Maybe segregated plates to stop food touching?

They have been really good with my soon in school can't fault them but a update on what he's eating would be good

Not mixing foods together. My daughter loves all fruit and veg but won't eat it mixed together. Keep it simple. And maybe ensuring they have their food available to them at lunchtime - it may not be important for some if they are on last dinner break to have something different as they have run out of stuff. My daughter would just not eat anything if they did not have the specific item she was going to have. She has issues with food and getting her to eat anything is difficult so this is extremely frustrating. She likes having school dinners to sit with friends

My daughter goes to Torfaen Learning Zone. Denise, the canteen manager, is absolutely brilliant. We had a chat with her and she understands her GF diet plus the importance of routine:)

Feedback from Health Board Paeds Dietitian

Opening up additional, less healthy options to pupils not under a dietitian, are we at risk of a backward step in terms of not encouraging a wider variety of foods to be eaten?

I'm happy for the child not to have a named dietitian - I think a diagnosis alone is sufficient for an ASD menu - I would say it is parent's responsibility to inform you if they feel their child can move away from the ASD menu - providing they are encouraging change at home - also sometimes keeping school predictable (including meals) can be helpful.

And
sadly...confirmation
a Published Policy
was long overdue

My son has never been able to use his free school dinner entitlement throughout his 6 years in primary , due to his limited diet because of his Autism. I provide him with a lunch consisting of the few things he will eat.(jam sandwich, frube, cheese string, fridge raiders). If Torfaen catering could address this issue it would be such a weight lifted off us as parents to know they can be catered for 😊 especially if a hot meal was offered (chicken nuggets/potato letters/turkey dinosaurs)



Catering for Pupils with Autism

Torfaen Catering fully commit to their responsibility to provide a needs-based food service for pupils with a diagnosis of autism. We will always communicate directly with pupils, parents, carers, and relevant health professionals and make all reasonable adjustments to ensure our pupils can access appropriate food and drink provision, alongside other pupils.

This policy sets out to clarify what pupils with a diagnosis of autism, their parents and carers can expect when food provision at their school is provided by Torfaen Catering. It has been written after consultation with partner service providers, current and former service users, and having regard to the Welsh Government's Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism Services, Welsh Gov (Sep 2021).

What You Can Expect from Torfaen Catering

- 1) Catering Staff have an awareness of how autism may affect pupils' dining experiences. We will work alongside Torfaen's Children and Young Person's Autism Support Officer, and continually strive towards having 100% of our catering staff trained in Autism Awareness.
- 2) Where a diagnosis of autism is made prior to a pupil starting school, we will work in partnership with the school and other agencies with appropriate measures to contribute to efforts to ease transition to eating/drinking away from home.
- 3) Pupils will always be offered the standard menu where pupils/parents/carers feel this is appropriate.
- 4) Where pupils/parents/carers have concerns regarding appropriateness/intake of food and drink offered using the standard menu, the Catering Team's dietitian will speak with pupils/parents/carers directly to discuss reasonable and practical adjustments that may improve intake, focussing on 3 core areas
 - **Meal Presentation** - We can make reasonable adjustments to how food is presented, including how food looks, for example how well cooked it is, or the shape it is presented in. We can also offer a choice of whether food is served on plates and bowls, or a flight tray, or present food so different foods are not touching each other.
 - **Menu Cycles** - It is recognised that some autistic pupils would prefer a uniquely repetitive or restricted menu. Pupils/parents/carers can be offered a weekly or daily menu if this is deemed more appropriate to a 3-week menu cycle which is standard.
 - **Food Choices – Standard Dishes**. We can offer a list of dishes that may appear once or twice on the standard menu over the 3-week cycle, and offer these choices more frequently, if preferred. A full list of salad bar choices (available daily) will also be supplied to pupils/parents/carers to ensure that they are aware of the extensive daily salad bar options that can be chosen from, which include jacket potatoes, wraps, ham and other more simple/single ingredient foods.
Food Choices – Alternative Dishes. If the above food choices have been explored and have been exhausted, a list of alternative products and dishes that we can source from our approved suppliers will be made available. These are options that are not offered on the

standard menu. These choices are only available to pupils with a diagnosis of autism if there are not enough appropriate choices for the individual pupil from the standard menu. The team's dietitian will design a menu based upon the choices that pupils/parents/carers indicate are most likely to be eaten. Pupils/parents/carers are encouraged to feedback on what is eaten/not eaten, with consideration given for time taken to adjust to or try "new foods", and an expectation that foods eaten may be limited to begin with. Over time, the menu can be tweaked accordingly.

5) **Unexpected Changes to the Menu**. We understand that change can be very hard for children with autism. We will try our best to make sure that their food on a set day is not changed. Unfortunately, due to supplies and delayed deliveries especially in the current Covid/Brexit climate, this cannot always be helped. On such an occasion, we will substitute the published meal for one of the child's agreed foods. In addition, our cook will advise the class teacher as early as possible in the day to enable them to prepare the child for the change to their lunch time meal, and contact parents/carers (if appropriate) so alternative arrangements for food can be made if required.

What we Cannot Do

- 1) **Nutrition Analysis** - Whilst the standard menu published online is nutritionally analysed to ensure both food and nutrition compliance with Food in Schools Regs 2013, pupils/parents/carers should accept that where adjustments are offered to the menu for their child, the menu will not be nutritionally analysed, and will not necessarily comply with food and nutrition standards under the Regs.
- 2) **Brands** - We cannot source brands or products that are not offered by our approved suppliers.
- 3) **Supermarkets** - We cannot purchase foods directly from supermarkets, or suppliers other than our approved suppliers detailed in our Food Safety Policy.
- 4) **Food from home** - For food safety reasons, food from home cannot be accepted into our school kitchens.
- 5) **Environmental Challenges/ Changes in Social Interaction** - as caterers, we cannot control noise levels or other environmental factors in the dining hall impacting sensory load. We ask that parents speak directly to school staff if it is thought that their child may benefit from eating lunch in an alternative space or at an alternative time. The school can then discuss these alternatives with the catering manager/teach to ensure they are achievable/workable.
- 6) **Free School Meals** - Where pupils meet eligibility criteria for free school meals, provision of a meal cannot be opted out of in exchange for monetary equivalent. We are legally required to supply a meal.
- 7) **Food brought in from home (packed lunches)** - As school food providers, we are not involved in individual schools' policies as to what is allowed/not allowed to be brought into schools. In packed lunches, if it felt that the school policy unreasonably restricts an autistic pupil's ability to partake in lunch, this should be addressed directly with the head teacher, who can discuss this further with the local authority for guidance.

What we expect from pupils/parents/carers

- 1) We ask that pupils/parents/carers give express permission for the Catering Team's dietitian to access clinical information and speak directly with other health and social care practitioners involved in the pupil's care, to discuss the child's needs and how best to meet these.
- 2) We ask that pupils/parents/carers work in partnership with the team's dietitian in designing an appropriate menu, if required, and periodically adjusting the menu, if needed.

- 3) We ask that pupils/parents/carers are respectful to school cooks. School cooks are not permitted to make menu changes or accept food from parents into their kitchens. Any requests or changes should be communicated to the cook via the team's dietitian only.

Where there are ongoing concerns with limited intake of food at school after adjustments above have been made

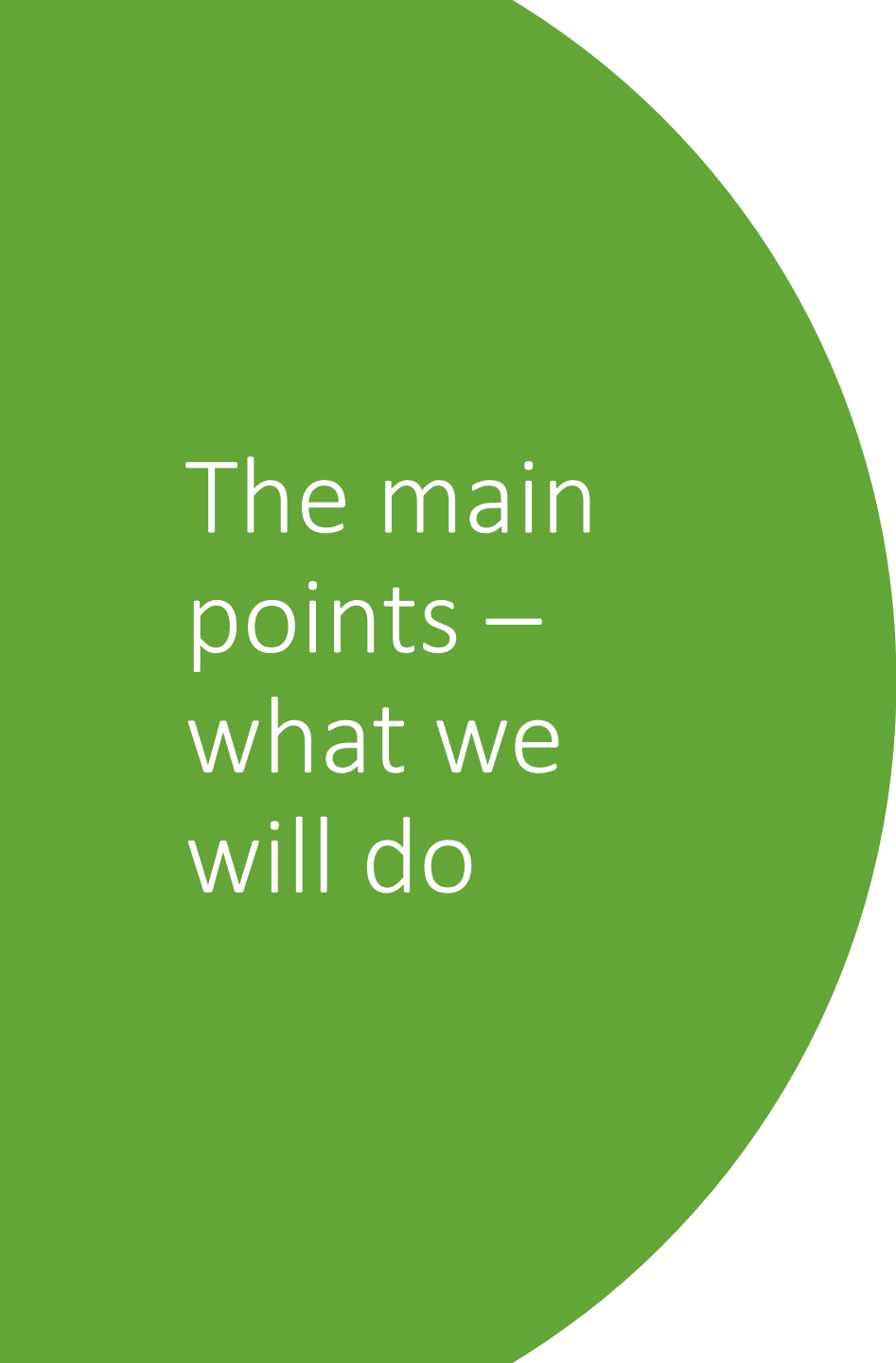
- 1) Pupils/parents/carers are expected to continue to work with the pupil's own dietitian (where applicable) to ensure that nutritional requirements are met at home from other meals, snacks and drinks when this cannot be provided by a school meal alone. If the pupil is no longer under a dietitian, the Catering Team's Dietitian can make a direct referral if deemed appropriate.
- 2) Pupils/parents/carers will be approached to further support via Torfaen's Children and Young Person's Support Officer and/or appropriate parent support groups.

Pupils Awaiting a Confirmed Diagnosis of Autism

We cannot offer anything other than the standard school menu choices until the pupil has completed the autism referral pathway and has a confirmed diagnosis of autism. If parents/carers have concerns whilst on the autism referral pathway awaiting diagnosis, we can signpost them to appropriate pre-diagnosis support. Where waiting times are confirmed as exceeding national guidelines and/or the pupil is eligible for free school meals, we will work with Torfaen's Children + Young Person's Autism Officer if he/she feels that an interim plan may be necessary.

Approved 15/2/2022

The Published Policy – copy on all sites

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The main points – what we will do

100% staff completed online training

If diagnosed before starting school – orientation planned

Practical adjustments to meals – presentation, menu cycles, access to repeated choices and alternative foods not on the menu

Tweaking of menu as tried out

Advance warning to parents/pupil if unexpected changes to menu

The main
points –
what we
can't do

NUTRITIONAL ANALYSIS*

BRANDS

SUPERMARKETS

FOOD FROM HOME


CASH IN LIEU OF FSM

CHANGES IN ENVIRONMENT (SCHOOLS TO ACTION)

CHANGES IN SCHOOL FOOD POLICY (SCHOOL
DECISION)

*Nutritional Analysis of Named Pupil Menus - **IMPORTANT**

- Any named pupil menu provided is a SUPPLEMENTARY MENU not a replacement menu. It is not intended to undermine efforts to ensure all pupils receive a nutritionally balanced healthy lunch.
- The full standard nutritionally balanced menu is still the preferred first option for all pupils and is always available to them daily.
- The supplementary menu is a “reasonable adjustment” offering to ensure that pupils with autism who are likely to refuse the standard menu are not at a disadvantage to their peers by going hungry. We want all pupils to be able to learn and reach their full potential.
- The supplementary menu is not intended to replace efforts school staff should be making to encourage trialling of standard menu items (touch, smell, taste etc).
- But as caterers we have to ensure that there is an alternative where a pupil is likely to go hungry or we are open to claims of disability discrimination under Equalities legislation.

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The main points – what we expect from parents

Permission for our Catering Dietitian to speak with other Health Professionals involved in the pupil's care

Work with Dietitian on menu writing and tweaking

Respectful to school cooks

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Other points

If all options exhausted, back to pupil's own dietitian to assess intake and advise on making up shortfalls at home

If all options exhausted, signposting – Cheryl and other forms of support

Must have confirmed diagnosis – if undue delays and concerns, we will work with Cheryl if felt an interim plan is appropriate

The Published Policy – on the website and via the Council's social media routes

Catering for pupils with a diagnosis of Autism

Torfaen School Catering are committed to making all reasonable adjustments to adapt and support pupils with a diagnosis of Autism in accessing school meal services. All our Catering Staff have received training in Autism Awareness. Please contact us for a copy of our policy "Catering in schools for pupils with a diagnosis of autism" and to discuss individualised support with the team's dietitian via the email address specialdietrequest@torfaen.gov.uk.



Sharing Good Practice via LACA and PSC

PSC AWARDS 2022

Innovation Award

Sponsored by



Winner: Torfaen School Catering



Runners-Up
 ESS
 Quality Assurance Catering Team - East Ayrshire Council
 Steve Jones - NEWydd Catering and Cleaning
 The University of Sheffield

"Integral to the success of these arrangements was ensuring all catering staff were trained in Autism Awareness and were able to reduce anxieties around school mealtimes."

Torfaen School Catering prides itself on 'going that extra mile' for pupils requiring diets other than the standard menu, so when the team found out that school meals were a source of great worry for some parents of pupils with a diagnosis of autism, they wanted to be sure that they were doing all they could to support these pupils.

Autism is known to affect pupils' eating and drinking in many different ways. However, the most common concern in Torfaen has consistently been that of selective or restrictive eating.

An initial meeting was arranged with the local authority Children and Young Persons' Autism Officer, which threw out lots of suggestions as to what the team could be doing.

Although some adjustments had already been made, they were not formally documented anywhere, and were reliant upon a referral to the team from the pupil's dietitian. There was a real risk that parents were not aware that they could access these adjustments, or exactly how they could access them. And not all pupils with autism are under a dietitian.

On the advice of the local autism officer the catering team considered all aspects of accessing meals, what adjustments could be offered, and a formal policy was drafted, setting out for pupils (and their parents) what they can expect when participating in school meals. It is now highlighted on the school website.

Among the changes made to the 'eating environment' were meal presentation (eg. foods not touching), repetitive menus offered where required, widened food choices beyond the standard menu, and avoiding unexpected changes to the menu.

Integral to the success of these arrangements was ensuring that all catering staff were trained in Autism Awareness and had an understanding of how to be able to reduce anxieties around school mealtimes.

A programme of training was organised by Welsh Government's National Autism Team that was rolled out to over 150 catering staff. As a result the Torfaen School Catering team recently gained the status of 'Autism Aware Organisation'.

Susan Manning, the parent of a pupil who accesses the policy, says: "I think this is an amazing policy. You have always done your very best for Dai and I think you guys are great."

"Dai is doing amazing. He loves camp, and the catering are giving him little extra things to try now and again. He's enjoying exploring the range of puddings especially."

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www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk

Torfaen School Catering

LACA

An autism-friendly service

Pupils with autism can be put off school meals if the eating environment is wrong. The good news is that staff awareness training and some simple changes can make all the difference, as the team of Torfaen School Catering discovered.

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Torfaen School Catering

LACA




What they said ...

Catering staff responded very positively to the awareness training they received.

Mandy Beal, school cook of Blaenavon Primary, said: "As a cook in a school, the autism course gave me a better understanding of children living with autism on a daily basis. Particularly in the dining hall where they can on occasion have a complete meltdown."

"Knowing that they are not that naughty child - they are simply someone dealing with lots of issues, and I feel I can be more supportive now."

Paulo Thomas, who works as a school cook at Bryn Onnen Primary School, said: "We all found the training really useful. It was an eye-opener, especially how asking these pupils to do something different or out of their regular routine, could make a massive difference. It would make me think before asking them to do something that they didn't want to do."

And Mary Rose, school cook of George B Primary added: "I found the Autism Awareness very helpful for me as we have a little autistic boy in our school who sometime has dinner."

"He really doesn't like any sort of change even doesn't like sitting in a different table. He has to be in the same place every day. The course helped me to understand how he sees things. The only food he will eat is meat and gravy so when he is down for dinner I make sure this is what he has."

"After doing the online course I now understand more in depth as to how he struggles to cope with things."

The Published Policy – in the news



Success is better
measured by the
reach of this
published
work.....and
continued feedback
from parents

- Word has spread fast, since publishing the Policy (Feb 2022), we have had a steady stream of pupils with a diagnosis of Autism being catered for with individual menus/adaptations (currently 60+)
- **We expect this to increase based on projections shared by Cheryl's team**

Want to know more?

- Check if your LA has an Autism Officer/Autism Team
- [Neurodivergence Wales What is autism? - Niwrowahaniaeth Cymru | Neurodivergence Wales | National Neurodivergence Team](#)
- National Autistic Society “Autism and Eating Challenges” about £150 for a full day live online
- Consult with your local Autism Charity/Support for Parents – if unsure who these are, ask the parents of those with children with a diagnosis



Long waiting list for diagnosis but needs help now?

- Approx 700 pupils with autism diagnosis in our area
- Another 700 on the waiting list for assessment and diagnosis
- Disability rights apply after diagnosis, but some missing out on eating at school whilst waiting
- How to ensure we do not open the floodgates to “fussy eaters” but do support those with real issues?

Agreement with Paeds Dietitians in Health Board

In the absence of a confirmed diagnosis of autism or ARFID, we can only consider parents' requests where a health professional emails a referral (no specific form needed) confirming that the pupil meets the 3 criteria below

- 1) they have carried out an assessment of the pupil and there are complex sensory hypersensitivity issues*
- 2) the pupil would benefit from reasonable menu adjustments*
- 3) offering a menu other than the standard menu (which is the only one nutritionally balanced) would not, in their opinion cause harm/be detrimental to work being progressed with HP's/parents/pupils at home*

A dietitian may be the best placed to confirm the above, but we will consider requests from any health professional.



Thanks for
listening

louise.gillam@torfaen.gov.uk

