



Waltham Forest Catering: a case study

Our journey to allergy-friendly school lunches

Allergy-Friendly Days, where school lunch menus are free from the top 14 allergens, are an initiative led by the school catering team at the London Borough of Waltham Forest. This has been spearheaded by Operations Manager Sue Brettle, and Development Chef Andrea Moore, with the support of Cllr Kizzy Gardiner, Waltham Forest Council's Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.

Sue shares with us why she wanted Waltham Forest Catering to introduce Allergy-Friendly Days into their school menus.

"Having a grandson with a milk allergy made me more aware of the allergens in food and I began to think about his future school meal experience. What will he eat? Where will he eat? Will he be on his own every lunchtime? I wanted a better, and safer, school experience for my grandson. I realised that's what every mum, dad, grandparent and carer would want for their children too. So I said to the team - let's make school mealtimes more inclusive of children with food allergies. Proudly they agreed."

Sue Brettle,
Operations Manager



Read more about how Sue Brettle and Andrea Moore run their Allergy-Friendly Days at walthamforestcatering.co.uk



How we made Allergy-Friendly Days happen, by Operations Manager Sue Brettle and Development Chef Andrea Moore

The early days

Initially, we made the decision for our primary school meals to go nut-free. We then went a step further and introduced dairy-free, egg-free and gluten-free menus to run alongside the standard primary school menu. However, we soon realised this still meant that children with food allergies could not have the same lunch as their friends, with “special” meals being made and kept under the counter just for them. **This meant it wasn't allergy inclusive.**



Across all 43 primary schools in Waltham Forest, we are seeing an increase in the number of children with food allergies. Anecdotally, my food catering colleagues around the country say the same.

It became clear that we needed ‘Allergy-Friendly Days’ - school menus completely free from the top 14 allergens. We wanted to be inclusive of all children and made a plan to adapt our menus to include 1 allergen free day a week. Now we deliver 2 allergen free days a week.

Here are the steps we took to deliver Allergy-Friendly Days

1. Recipe review

We reviewed all our recipes to identify dishes that did not contain any of the top 14 allergens.

2. Talked to our suppliers

We spoke to all our food suppliers to see what ingredients they could provide that were allergen-free, without risk of cross-contamination. We were delighted when our meat supplier told us they were able to provide allergen-free meatballs!

3. Developed new recipes

We discovered that allergen-free recipes weren't that easy to find at the price point we needed. So, Andrea began to redesign our existing recipes to remove the allergens.





One of the first decisions we made was to limit the number of dishes containing pea protein. Pea protein is becoming a more common allergen for many children, so we decided to replace the pea protein in products with fresh vegetables where possible.

To manage costs, cross-contamination and ensure we knew exactly what was in each recipe, we continued to make sauces, bread, and main meals from scratch in our kitchens.

This allowed us to put together a free-from the top 14 allergens menu, with delicious dishes such as chickpea tikka masala, roasted pepper risotto, peri-peri chicken, and coconut rice.

Development Chef Andrea Moore said: ***“Presentation is very important for the children; we all learn to eat with our eyes. We also want even young children to get an idea of the dining experience. It’s about helping young children to develop good eating habits. If you display food in the shape of an owl or a hedgehog, children will see it and get excited. It’s also amazing what the power of a few stickers can do.*”**

Most of all, we listen to the children - all of the children. Children with food allergies want to eat with their friends and they don’t want to eat a jacket potato every day.”

4. Passing the child taste test

For an allergen-free dish to make it on to the menu, it has to pass the child taste test! Special tasting sessions with a group of 15-20 children inform the menu choices for the next term. They taste the dishes and vote for their favourites. After the tasting sessions, we develop the recipes and test again across different schools. The children love being engaged in this process and parents/ carers are involved too.

- *“I really like this chilli. It’s yummy”*
- *“I don’t like this red stuff, but I like the rice.”*
- *“I’m going straight to the pudding”*
- *“It’s really different to what I normally eat but I like it.”*



Wednesday 12th June
Stoneydown Taster Menu
with
Natasha Allergy Research Foundation

- Chilli Con Carne with Rice (ve)
- Rice and Vegetable Bake (ve)
- Ratatouille with Rice (ve)
- Rice Pudding with Fruit Puree (ve)
- Raspberry and Coconut Pots (ve)
- Lemon Shortbread Biscuits (ve)

**All Dishes are Allergen Friendly
and free from the 14 declarable allergens**

For allergen information
please speak to one of our staff members





5. Winning over catering staff, school leaders and parents

When we started this initiative there was resistance to change. However, clear communication on the importance of allergy inclusivity won over hearts and minds, as did our partnership with The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, the UK's food allergy charity.

Tanya Ednan-Laperouse OBE, a founder of the charity, came to speak to our catering team and explained how important their role is in keeping children with food allergies safe.

Tanya said: 'Food allergies have a far-reaching impact not just on children with food allergies but their families too. **Parents are anxious, children feel excluded, and this can have consequences that nobody wants.** This new allergen-free scheme will empower, include and better protect children with food allergies, so they can be fully involved in all school activities.'

Tanya's message about the importance of 'Allergy-Friendly Days' helped embed the concept firmly in our weekly menu schedule.



We found that inclusivity was the main driver for persuading both school leaders and our team to embrace Allergy-Friendly Days. It was critical that we secured the support of the school senior leadership team, and it is wonderful that so many of them now take a specific interest in the Allergy-Friendly Days lunch menu programme. Our staff are very involved too and regularly come up with new ideas for allergen-free recipes and wear their new Allergy-Friendly Days aprons with pride.

In our experience, parents and carers of food allergic children welcome the allergy-friendly initiative. **Their primary concern is that their child is safe at school, and they don't want their child to be treated differently.** Parental confidence in our 'Allergen-Friendly Days' has grown significantly over the course of this initiative.

6. Training

We made arrangements for all catering staff across Waltham Forest schools to complete an Allergen Awareness Course.

They also have regular meetings with the school cooks to provide training and instruction on the importance of being allergen aware. In addition, all catering staff are level 1 trained in Food Safety and are expected to achieve level 2 in Food Safety.



7. Risk assessment

Before Allergen-Friendly Days could be introduced, we had to complete a risk assessment. This involved rearranging store cupboards, separating allergen-free food from all other food, and we've also introduced deep cleaning the day before each Allergy-Friendly Day. The purple aprons given to staff on Allergy-Friendly Days have a serious purpose; they minimise the chance of cross-contamination with the food they handle the rest of the week.



8. Our tips for making Allergy-Friendly Days a success

✓ Find a gluten-free bread recipe

It wasn't easy to find but after much researching and testing, we found an excellent gluten-free bread mix that tastes good and is easy to work with.

✓ Ongoing training and advice to improve knowledge and understanding

This includes talks from guest speakers, such as Tanya Ednan-Laperouse, OBE, founder of the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, who gave a clear message to staff, and allowed an open forum for staff to raise issues and ideas.

✓ Excellent relationships with suppliers are critical

We need to know immediately if ingredients change, or a product is unavailable. If a product is no longer available, an alternative is sourced and checked by our teams, and if necessary the allergen matrix is updated.

✓ Good communication

Communicating with headteachers and working with them to promote food allergy inclusivity within the school is vital. For example, Stonydown School invited school governors to eat with the children on an Allergy-Friendly Day.

✓ Find a dessert that works

Finding an allergen-friendly dessert that passed the children's taste test was a challenge. A recent tasting session gave a thumbs up to a Raspberry and Coconut Pot - so expect to see this featured on future menus.



For more information go to walthamforestcatering.co.uk

