

Operational updates

Following the launch of our new menus in October, we've had some great feedback about what's gone well, along with some questions about why certain changes were made. Below we've summarised the most common questions and comments we've received over the past few weeks. Our aim is to be transparent about the reasons behind decisions and to remove some of the myths we've all heard along the way.

We understand that sometimes people do not like change, but we have held multiple training sessions with our teams as well as additional follow up and feedback sessions. As with any new way of working, it takes some time to settle in, and we are seeing just over one month our teams settle nicely into the new ways of working.

Before diving into the details, we want to share our approach to menu development and the new partnership between Hutchisons & IFG. As with any new collaboration, our goal is to understand both businesses and bring together the very best of each. This makes us stronger overall and, most importantly, helps us deliver on our promises to our schools but also our obligations to safely feed students, nutritious food that complies with the School Food Standards

Prior to our partnership with IFG, Hutchisons were already reviewing their supply chain, menus and allergen management processes, and we were looking to expand choice, including items they were already offering, such as mid-morning break snacks in primary schools. Together, our focus is to streamline operations, support site teams so they can concentrate on delivering their roles confidently and continue improving the quality of food served every day.

Why do we have a new supplier?

Hutchisons previously worked with two distribution partners - Turner Price and Trevor's. This caused significant challenges when managing allergens, as the same product often contained different allergens depending on the supplier.

Andrew and Claire identified the need to simplify the supply chain to a single provider who could support the whole business. It therefore made sense to transition to Brakes Food Service, a long-term partner of IFG for over 10 years, who provide reliable and consistent delivery across England.

In preparation for moving over 250 sites during October half term, we worked closely with Brakes' forecasting, operational logistics, and account teams. A single switch ensured we could control allergens and avoid staggered changes which could have put students at risk - something we would never compromise.

We've also consolidated some other suppliers, although most sites will continue to access Ribble Farm and NCB for produce and butchery.

Alongside this, Brakes support our Impact strategy on sourcing and environmental responsibility. Reducing multiple daily deliveries and consolidating goods into fewer vehicles helps lower carbon impact and minimise disruption at site level. We are passionate about supporting local suppliers and we work with local companies through the Brakes network. Using local suppliers through Brakes ensures we have full traceability and the correct accreditation for all of our products.

Why is there a new allergen menu?

Hutchisons have been reviewing their allergy processes for some time, and the answer was the new Allergy Aware menu. Having this menu in place ensured we had a consistent and safe way to feed students with the top allergens without the need for lots of complicated menus for our teams. The Allergy Aware Menu removes four key allergens - soya, wheat, dairy and eggs, but ensures that there is ample choice whilst keeping our students safe. Any child with an allergy to one of these is placed on this menu, which simplifies the choice available and reduces risk for the kitchen team.

This sits alongside our pre-plating policy, labelled plates with each child's name, and enhanced allergen training for all staff. Together these measures allow site teams to work safely and confidently while continuing to serve nutritious meals to all students.

What about students with other allergens?

Our Primary Nutritionist, Laura Whiting, continues to allocate individual special menus where needed. The Allergy Aware menu has already helped reduce the number of special menus required across Hutchisons schools from 160 to 80 - significantly easing operational complexity and further reducing the risk of errors.

We must be aware that adding more complication to our teams already busy day creates stress and risk for our staff and students. The more we can support with reducing the number of bespoke menus and providing consistent recipes with robust processes ensures we serve our students safely.

What about the choice of menu?

Working closely with Andrew and Claire, it became clear that we needed to offer menus with plenty of variety. Our food team - 10 development chefs - created new menus based on Hutchisons' sales data and nutritional guidance from Mike and Laura, ensuring we kept the needs of Hutchisons schools front and centre.

We've produced five menus, plus a tailored version for small sites. These were reviewed with the operations team, who understand each school's needs best, and they selected the right menu for their sites.

We moved communication through the operations team to ensure a consistent and compliant rollout, covering both the standard and Allergy Aware menus, school food standards, menu specifications, and allergen matrices. This also helps our site teams feel supported, reducing admin so they can focus more on service and food quality.

What if some dishes aren't popular?

In primary schools, core favourites remain:

- **Monday:** Pizza or Sausage & Mash (this appears on Tuesday's in some menus)
- **Wednesday:** Roast Day
- **Friday:** Fish & Chips

These are consistently popular across all regions. When we hear that certain dishes are less well received, these sometimes fall on Tuesdays or Thursdays. To make informed decisions, we use regional sales and plate waste data. This helps us ensure dishes are genuinely being enjoyed, which is why menu choice is so important.

Please remember that we must comply with the School Food Standards which states certain items which must appear once every three weeks, for example oily fish. While we would love students to try new things, we understand that some items may not be as popular, however, we will always place this with another item that we know is popular. The School Food Standards are currently under consultation to be updated to have more stringent nutritional targets which we welcome. There will also be a new monitoring and reporting system which will be shared in due course. We want to ensure that all of our schools are ahead of the changes.

We will continue to refine the menu over time. Please keep sharing feedback with your operations team, who will collate insights and work with our development chefs. Continuous improvement is key to offering great food year after year.

Are we trying to turn every child vegan?

Absolutely not. Our aim is to work with key partners to grow and improve plant-based options, so they are as appealing as their meat counterparts. If students or parents choose them, that's great - and it can support environmental goals - but the balance of meat/fish versus plant-based items has not changed. Increased plant based items will also be a goal of the new nutritional target-based School Food Standards.

What is the pea-protein?

On the vegan note, there has been a couple of questions around the use of the eat curious mince product. This is a dehydrated version of meat alternative product, it offers us an allergen free option, that is packed with functional nutrition vs regular mince as it includes fibre at its core. As its dehydrated, it allows us as the chefs to pack it with flavour, something our recipes always aim to do.

Why do you use bakery mixes?

We have a couple of recipes on our sweet treats line that uses bakery mixes, we do this because we have developed our own recipe mixes with our partner to reduce the sugar making them healthier than standard recipes whilst maintaining a consistent product that turns out perfectly every time! So far, we have removed over 3.5million sugar cubes across all our sites last year alone. Having these mixes allows us to manage allergens tightly as well nutritional benefit. We know that some of the teams are great bakers, however the consistency, nutrition and safety our mixes deliver makes them invaluable to a majority of our team, not to mention the role sugar plays in the structure of baking, so it's not the easiest thing to replace and continue to get the consistency we all require. This also allows our teams to focus on producing the main meals, we have increased the number of sauces made in house so this all helps to balance the workload and ensure that our teams are consistently serving safe meals.

Other updates across Hutchisons

Andrew and Claire are continuing to strengthen the foundations of the Hutchisons business, including:

- improved till reporting,
- enhanced online ordering, and
- faster delivery of invoicing and financial information.

We will keep you updated as these developments progress. Our priority remains supporting sites with simpler, safer processes so teams can focus on what truly matters: delivering great service and serving great food.

Kind regards,

Andrew, Claire, and the IFG Team