

What's cookin', At School

October 2026

School Food Standards Are Changing

See how we're keeping nutritious, tasty lunches on the menu.

What's Really in Plant-Based School Meals?

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A Warm Welcome from HCL: Feeding Growing Minds Every Day



John Want
Chief Executive Officer

Welcome to the first edition of *What's Cookin' At School*, our new regular update for parents. We know that not every parent is aware of who we are so maybe I should start by introducing ourselves.

HCL (Hertfordshire Catering Limited) are the caterer in your school, we produce lunches and other meals fresh every day on site. Some smaller village schools may have their meals transported from a nearby primary but we're proud to say that every meal is produced that day by skilled and dedicated HCL employees who may have well been in your school kitchen for a number of years!

We are a unique school catering specialist. We're a private business within the ownership of Hertfordshire County Council and consequently we can reinvest profits back into the service.

Our Purpose is to Feed Growing Minds. We understand how vital good nutrition and nourishment



“We understand how vital good nutrition and nourishment is for children to help them learn and play through the whole school day.”

is for children to help them learn and play through the whole school day. We are a fully inclusive business, both from an employment perspective and in the way we deliver our meals. Children with any dietary, religious or practical need are accommodated and our Allergy

Management System (known as 'Citrus') is a leader in school catering.

The most important thing is the food, of course. We care very deeply about creating high quality menus with choice and flexibility depending on the school and child's needs. Our pupil participation is much higher than many of our competitors and honestly, not only do our children love our meals, but all the grown-ups and HCL people do too!

These updates will give you information about our service, our menus (they change twice a year!) and our people. I hope you enjoy what we have to say and that your family continues to enjoy our wonderful meal service.

Free School Meals: Eligibility Expanded



Katy Appleby
New Business & Retention Controller

Big news for families across the country!

From September 2026, every child in a household receiving Universal Credit becomes eligible for a free school meal, regardless of household income!

This is one of the biggest expansions to free school meals in

years, and government estimates suggest well over a million more children could benefit. That's a huge win for children's health and education!

However, eligibility only helps if families actually know about it.

Recent research from the Child Poverty Action Group found that more than half of newly eligible parents don't yet realise their child qualifies.

The benefits for free school meals go so far beyond the meal itself. A hot, nutritious lunch fuels concentration, supports better behaviour, boosts attendance, and takes real pressure off household budgets when families need it most. So getting the word out truly matters.

At HCL the meals we create are freshly prepared, packed with goodness, and designed to help children stay focused, energised and ready to learn throughout the afternoon. With a choice of tasty dishes, vegetables, and desserts, our school meals also give children the chance to try new foods and enjoy eating together with their friends.

If you think your child might now be eligible, you can find out at www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals

Don't miss the chance to provide your child with fully-funded, nutritious lunches. Register for free school meals today!



“Recent research from the Child Poverty Action Group found that more than half of newly eligible parents don't yet realise their child qualifies.”

Fresh Flavours for Winter 2026

We're excited to launch our new Winter 2026 menu, featuring delicious new dishes alongside student favourites for the season ahead.

As they say, a picture speaks a thousand words! To see photos of our winter menu dishes, simply click the image.



Please note that menus may vary between schools to reflect individual preferences, requirements and local choices. Most schools will move onto the Winter 2026 menu in November, so if you can't see these dishes on your current menu just yet, don't worry - your new Winter menu will be arriving very soon.

What the New School Food Standards Mean for Your Child

The Government has recently confirmed updates to the School Food Standards, which will be introduced from September next year. At HCL, we welcome the ambition behind these changes. Our purpose is Feeding Growing Minds, and providing nutritious, enjoyable meals that help children learn, grow and thrive throughout the school day.

However, we will need to help parents and children appreciate how the new standards will impact our menus. A summary of the changes include restricting the use of cheese as an ingredient; greater restrictions on the use of 'processed' proteins; requirements to increase fibre and alternative proteins; and baked puddings (including cookies and cakes) allowed only one day a week.

Many aspects of the new standards are already part of our approach. Our menus currently exceed the existing School Food Standards and are supported by both Food for Life and Sugarwise accreditations. We already use a variety of vegetables, pulses and wholegrain ingredients across our menus and are experienced in creating balanced meals that children enjoy.

Some changes to our menus will be required over the coming year, and our teams are already working to ensure these are introduced in a way that maintains quality, choice and appeal for students. We know that school lunches are an important part of the day, and it is essential that any changes support both children's nutrition and their enjoyment of food.



John Want, Chief Executive Officer, said:
"We support the aims of the new standards and the focus on improving children's nutrition. Many of the changes are already reflected in our approach, and our teams are working on exciting new menu ideas that meet the new requirements while continuing to provide meals that children enjoy choosing every day."



David Stanley, Head of Food, added:
"Children are at the heart of every menu we create. As we develop new recipes, we'll be focusing on meals that are nutritious, appealing and familiar, helping students continue to enjoy a positive lunchtime experience."

Our nutrition team, led by Elif Danish-Niyazi, will continue to ensure our menus support children's nutritional needs while helping them build healthy eating habits for life. By balancing nutrition, choice and enjoyment, we aim to make the transition to the new standards as positive as possible for students, schools and families.



Healthier Choices, Happier Planet!



Our menus incorporate products from Quorn and Eat Curious, both of which use plant proteins that are naturally occurring, nutritionally beneficial, and sustainable.

Misconceptions about plant-based alternatives often arise from mixed messages in the media, lack of research or understanding, and outdated stereotypes. So, we understand that for many parents, the plant-based options and meat substitutes we use in our menus seem like undefined, mysterious alternatives, full of unknown ingredients that offer no nutritional value. But this couldn't be further from the truth...

Plant-Based Menu

Eat Curious

Eat Curious is a dedicated plant-based food manufacturer based in the UK. Innovating like never before, they create delicious and exciting products that are: nutritionally valuable, minimally processed and extremely sustainable!

We use *Eat Curious* Dehydrated Mince. Made from just 3 ingredients: pea protein concentrates, faba protein concentrates, and salt, the *Eat Curious* mince is 100% plant-based, and free from the 14 key allergens, making it fully accessible for those with allergen sensitivities and specific dietary needs. It is also isolate, synthetic emulsifier, and stabiliser free so we know that when we add it to our dishes, we're providing delicious meals that are natural, healthy and sustainable.

The *Eat Curious* mince adds texture without compromising on taste. Using it in dishes such as burgers, bolognese and lasagne has been received well by our students.



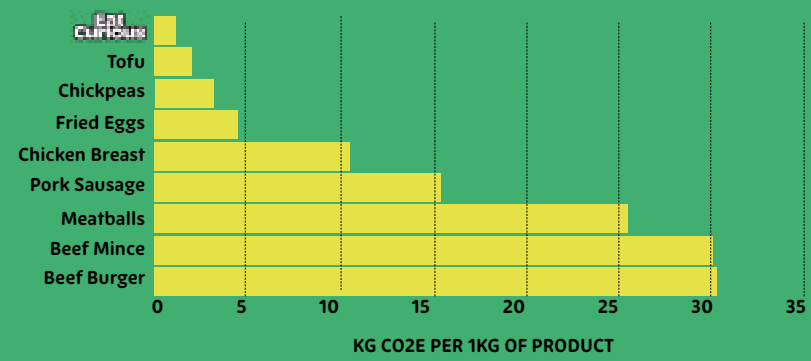
Eat Curious isn't just a versatile alternative; its ingredients offer real health benefits. Pea protein concentrate contains all 9 essential amino acids including branched-chain amino acids (BCAA's) that help build and repair muscle,

Eat Curious mince is 100% plant-based

something that's key for our students active and growing bodies. It's also low in saturated fats to support healthy blood flow, manage blood pressure and reduce cardiovascular risk.

Eat Curious is nutritionally valuable for our students too. When comparing 100g of hydrated *Eat Curious* protein to 100g of chicken, beef and lentils, *Eat Curious* is the lowest calorie option with a higher fibre and carbohydrate content than both meat choices. It's a plant-based alternative that's nutritionally challenging and outperforming typical meat sources. To us, it's a simple decision: *Eat Curious*, Eat Better – that's why we choose it for our students. To provide them with a transparent, clean food that's adding value to their lunchtimes and their diets.

CARBON FOOTPRINT OF DIFFERENT PROTEINS



Eat Curious are creating something that's better for the planet too. Blending *Eat Curious* Mince with beef across 250,000 burgers saves 280,198kg of CO2 emissions per year. That's over a 1kg of emission saved per burger patty!



Image shows the product in its dehydrated form

Nutritional Content of Eat Curious Protein Compared to Chicken, Beef and Lentils (per 100g)

Nutritional Data	Hydrated Eat Curious Protein	Fresh Chicken	Fresh Beef	Cooked Lentils
Energy	106 kcal	134 kcal	253 kcal	136 kcal
Fat	1.4g	6g	19.8g	0.4g
Carbohydrates	5g	0g	0g	20g
Dietary Fibre	5g	0g	0g	8g
Protein	17g	20g	18.8g	9g

QuornPRO

We use QuornPro to create delicious, balanced meals that support the health and wellbeing of our pupils while helping to reduce the environmental impact of the food we serve. QuornPro products are a popular choice across our menus, allowing us to offer meals that are both nutritious and appealing to students.

At the heart of *QuornPro* is mycoprotein, a sustainable, nutrient-rich, naturally occurring protein. As a complete protein containing all nine essential amino acids, it provides the building blocks children need for growth, development and muscle repair. Naturally low in fats with just 1.6g of fat and 0.3g of saturated fat per 100g, it offers a healthier alternative to many traditional meat-based proteins.

QuornPro also helps us meet the nutritional requirements of the School Food Standards. Being low in sodium, containing only 5mg of salt per 100g, it supports our commitment to serving healthier meals without compromising on taste.

Unlike animal proteins, mycoprotein is naturally high in fibre, providing 7g per 100g to

support healthy digestion and help children feel fuller for longer.

Alongside its nutritional benefits, *QuornPro* plays an important role in our sustainability goals. Producing up to 95% less CO² than beef, mycoprotein significantly reduces the carbon footprint of our meals. It also requires considerably less water to produce, with a water footprint 13.5 times lower than beef, 16 times lower than pork and 3.5 times lower than chicken.

Using *QuornPro* allows us to serve meals that are delicious, nutritious and more sustainable. It's a simple way to support healthier choices for pupils today while helping to protect the planet for future generations.



Per 1kg of product, *Eat Curious* produces just over 1kg of CO2 emissions, a stark contrast to the 30kg of CO2 emissions created from 1kg of beef burgers, the 10+kg of emissions from chicken breast and the 15+kg produced from pork sausages. Choosing *Eat Curious* means choosing cleaner air, greener spaces and a healthier planet for future generations to enjoy.



Conclusion

So, rest assured, we don't use any 'mystery meats' in our menus and we never compromise on nutritional value when we invest in plant-based alternatives.

We provide healthy choices for students without compromising on responsible, sustainable choices. Because why would we compromise when we can do both?

Benedict's Law Rolls Out Nationwide

You may have heard about Benedict's Law, new national protections introduced this September to help make schools safer for children with allergies.

These measures have been introduced in England, with ongoing campaigning to extend them across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The aim is simple: to ensure every school is properly prepared to prevent, recognise and respond to serious allergic reactions.

Benedict's Law was developed following the tragic death of five year old Benedict Blythe, who experienced a fatal allergic reaction



at school in 2021. In response, his family established the Benedict Blythe Foundation and worked alongside medical experts, charities and government to campaign for change and address gaps in current school allergy safety measures.

In 2026, the Government confirmed that these protections would be introduced through new statutory guidance for schools and will also form part of national legislation.

Together, these measures are designed to ensure schools can respond quickly and effectively in an emergency, helping to keep all children safe.

HCL supports schools in meeting its allergy management responsibilities by providing a robust online special diet and allergen management process designed to help ensure the safe provision of meals to pupils with medical dietary requirements.

This September, all schools have begun the rollout of Benedicts Law legislation, providing safer, more inclusive educational environments for all children.

What does this mean for schools?

Benedict's Law introduces a consistent approach to managing allergies, including:

- Clear, whole-school allergy policies
- Training for staff to recognise and respond to allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis
- Access to emergency adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs) where needed
- Individual healthcare or allergy action plans for pupils with diagnosed allergies
- Improved communication and record-keeping around allergies.

Click for more info about our Allergy Management System

Join the Team At HCL

We're always looking for reliable and driven individuals to join our team!

Whatever your experience or preferred way of working, we have roles to match your needs.

CURRENT VACANCIES

Food and Menu Coordinator
Welwyn Garden City

Cook Manager
Scientia Academy School
Burton-upon-Trent

Chef Manager
Edmonton County School
Cambridge Campus
Enfield

Click to see the full list of vacancies



UNDERSTANDING

Ultra-Processed Foods



Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have been receiving a lot of attention recently, and it's understandable that this has led to questions and confusion. What exactly are UPFs? Are they unhealthy? Should they be avoided altogether?

At HCL, we believe food education is the key to a healthy relationship with food in the future. Below, we've summarised the key things you need to know about UPFs so you can feel informed and confident about the choices you make for your family.

What are Ultra-Processed Foods?

The most widely accepted definition of UPFs comes from the NOVA classification system. The NOVA food classification system groups foods into four categories based on the extent and purpose of their processing. According to NOVA, UPFs (which are Group 4 in the framework) are defined as:

"formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, typically created by series of industrial techniques and processes".

You could think of it as food containing ingredients that you would not find in your cupboards normally, e.g. additives, emulsifiers, preservatives etc. In the UK it is believed that UPFs make up over half of the calories in a person's diet.

It's also useful to remember that many foods exist in both minimally processed and ultra-processed forms. For example, natural and plain yogurts can be classed as minimally processed, category 1 foods. However, flavoured and low-fat yogurts can contain added sugars, sweeteners, and additives, making them category 4 ultra-processed foods. Now families can make educated food swaps that reduce UPFs in their diet without removing whole food groups.

Are UPFs Safe?

The answer to this question largely depends on how we consume ultra-processed foods. It is not surprising that many UPFs are appealing, palatable foods such as confectionery, cake, biscuits, crisps and other foods that are considered 'High Fat, Sugar, Salt' or HFSS foods. This means that they're easy to overconsume even though they're only supposed to make up a very small portion of an individual's diet. There are studies that have linked diets high in UPFs to obesity, cancer and type 2 diabetes, but that doesn't mean that these HFSS foods can't be enjoyed sensibly and in moderation. Whilst many UPFs offer a low nutritional value that can contribute to poor dietary patterns, there are some UPFs - such as baked beans and wholemeal bread - that can be

**“
... like any other food group, moderation is key...
”**

beneficial to a person's diet by contributing things like fibre and essential vitamins and minerals.

The question of safety when it comes to UPFs is still being answered, with lots of ongoing studies analysing various factors of UPFs and the impact they have on human health. As discussed above, like any other food group, moderation is key and whilst UPFs shouldn't make up most of the foods you eat, they shouldn't be ruled out either - infant formula is

classed as a UPF yet globally it's considered a safe (and in some cases life-saving) form of nutrition for newborns.

What role do UPFs play in our School Menu's?

At HCL, we are committed to providing nutritious and balanced meals that meet the Government's School Food Standards. These standards, introduced in 2015, were designed to improve young people's diets. You can find more details about these guidelines here: [School Food Standards](#).

We don't use any UPFs such as bagged snacks, confectionery, bought-in cakes, fizzy drinks etc. Additionally, we do not purchase any fully ready-made meals. All of our meals are freshly prepared by our cooks each day.

We try to design our menus to support children’s health and well-being, whilst ensuring the meals remain affordable, practical and safe to prepare on a large scale. While some processed foods are included in our menus, we take great care in selecting products that contribute positively to a healthy diet and all are reviewed by our registered Nutritionists before being used in menus.

For example, Quorn is classed as an ultra-processed food but is also a high-quality source of protein, containing all nine essential amino acids, high in fibre, and low in saturated fat—making it a beneficial meat alternative for school meals. Similarly, our burgers and sausages, made by a family butcher, include plant protein to offer a healthier take on familiar foods that children enjoy.

In addition we are proud to have achieved the Food for Life Bronze certificate, a Soil Association Award, which reflects our commitment to using high-quality ingredients. Part of the certificate ensures we avoid certain undesirable artificial additives, flavourings, sweeteners, and preservatives in line with research commissioned by the Food Standards Agency.

Healthy Swaps for UPFs

Whilst we shouldn’t entirely cut out ultra-processed foods, aiming to eat less of foods high in fat, salt and sugar is beneficial for our health. Here are some food swaps you could make to reduce the amount of UPF’s in your diet:

You could swap:	For:
Sugary breakfast cereals	Overnight oats with fruit, Shredded Wheat
Flavoured or sugary yogurt	Greek yogurt with honey or fruit
White bread	Traditional sourdough, Wholegrain bakery bread
Crisps	Air-popped popcorn, Unsalted nuts
Chicken nuggets/dippers	Homemade breaded chicken, Grilled chicken pieces
Processed burger cheese	Real cheddar, feta or mozzarella
Fizzy drinks	Sparkling water with lemon/lime or berries
Frozen chips/fries	Homemade potato wedges
Cakes and traybakes	Homemade banana bread
Ready-made pasta sauces	Tinned tomatoes and herbs

Examples of common UPFs include:

**Packaged cupboard foods:**
Crisps, biscuits, breads, cereals, sweets and confectionery.

**Beverages:**
Fizzy drinks, energy drinks and sweetened fruit drinks.

**Frozen foods:**
ready-meals, pizzas, ice-creams and lollies.

**Meat products:**
pre-sliced lunch meats, hotdogs and sausages.

**Refrigerated:**
sauces, spreads, yogurt, burger cheese and butter spreads.

**Dietary substitutes:**
vegan alternatives to meats, cheeses etc.

A Message From Our Food Team



The Food Team are a group of passionate Chefs and Nutritionists responsible for creating your children's school meals. Our purpose is simple – we feed growing minds.

We love food and want your children to be excited by the prospect of lunch! We endeavour to produce a choice of delicious, nutritious, inclusive meals, which cater for every child regardless of taste, culture or dietary need. We want lunchtime to be a positive experience, with pupils leaving the dining room energized and ready to learn.



Every dish that goes on to our menus has been:

- Taste tested by children to get the thumbs up
- Checked by our Nutritionists to ensure they meet the School Food Standards and sugar limits for our Sugarwise accreditation.

We hope your children love our food as much as we love creating it for them.





Tell Us What You Think



Thank you for reading our very first
What's Cookin' at School magazine!

We're so pleased you've joined
us for this first edition and hope
you've enjoyed reading it as much
as we've enjoyed creating it.

This magazine is for you, so we'd
love to hear what you think. Is there
a topic you'd like us to cover? A
question you'd like answered? Or a
story you'd like to see featured?

Please share your feedback with us
and help shape future editions. We
can't wait to hear from you.



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