



13 - 04 Issues for school caterers and contaminated products containing horse meat

Key issues;

- This briefing covers the issues that affect school caterers in relation to horse meat and how they buy meat products.
- This briefing may also be used to reassure parents, head teachers and school governors about measures taken by local council caterers.
- Parents are encouraged to retain confidence in school meal safety.

1. Introduction

A number of UK processed beef products have been found to contain traces of horse meat DNA and, in some cases, a significant proportion of horse meat described as 'beef' in product labelling. A number of statements have been made which suggest contamination in school meals, and, whilst this cannot be entirely discounted, the risk is thought to be low because of measures already taken by local authority caterers. This briefing is therefore designed to be used by caterers looking to reassure parents and by local councillors who may face constituents raising concerns about school food safety. Please feel free to pass on copies of this briefing to head teachers, parents and governors.

2. School food procurement

The procurement (the purchasing) of the food used in school meals is no longer a UK wide issue and how school meals are provided and funded varies across UK governments. Within England school budgets are generally 'devolved', which means money is given to each school individually; the school can provide their own school meals, choose to use the local authority caterer, or a private caterer to provide school meals. Within Scotland school meals are generally sourced through the local authority and within Wales primary schools tend to source school meals through the local authority but secondary schools budgets are devolved. Therefore many schools across the UK will exercise a choice about which caterer they use to provide school meals. Whoever is chosen as the school caterer will then make arrangements to buy supplies which go into making school lunches. This includes supplies such as bread, meat, fish, poultry, vegetables and fruit.

However school food in local authority schools must comply with strict standards. These standards mean that the meal served as part of a school lunch is nutritionally balanced and, that wherever possible, the meal is freshly cooked on the school site using fresh produce. The standards restrict processed foods, which often contain a lot of fat, salt and sugar from going onto school menus. This means that school caterers on the whole will not be using the types of processed meat products that have been found to contain horse meat or traces of horse DNA.

Certain processed products, such as beef burgers, are still used as part of school menus, but these are very limited and must meet the nutritional standards set for school meals.

3. What have local authority caterers been doing to reassure parents?

As an independent not-for-profit organisation working with those local authorities that provide school meals services to schools APSE (the Association for Public Service Excellence) has contacted caterers to establish what action they have taken to reassure parents and these are detailed in this briefing note:-

- Local authority caterers already procure (buy) food to a very high standard.
- The caterers put quality measures in place to make sure that the food suppliers they use conform to all food safety standards, nutritional standards, hygiene regulations and follow all food standards set by Government bodies, such as the Food Standards Agency.
- Local authority caterers often use procurement consortiums to help procure high quality products and ensure they get best value in buying food. These consortiums are also staffed by procurement (buying) experts who can enforce high standards in food contracts.

In addition to these existing measures local authority caterers have also sought new reassurances from their suppliers and have asked suppliers to confirm that:-

- They are not affected by the meat processors involved in the contaminated meat products
- That they have separate production lines or production days to avoid cross-contamination of products
- That they are carrying out additional testing on products such as swab tests and DNA analysis
- That they are complying with any new guidance or best practice recommended by official agencies in terms of meat production
- That they are able to avoid any cross-contamination (for example in the production of Halal products)

A number of major food suppliers to school caterers have already issued statements to school caterers confirming that they do not use the suppliers, or products, implicated in the latest revelations about beef products contaminated with horse meat. Therefore these companies have been able to confirm to school caterers that they consider the risk, of contaminated beef or other meat products entering school food, to be very low.

In addition, most local authority caterers have adopted traceability agreements with their meat suppliers; this can track not just the farm and slaughter house but the individual cattle from which meat is sourced. In addition suppliers have already acted to reassure local authority caterers that vigorous checks and testing processes are in place.

Many authorities, even before the horse meat issue came to light, have, in recent years, also adopted locally sourced meat products, organic meat and / or meat products which carry the quality assurance measure and are listed as 'red tractor' meat.

These measures mean that the risk of a child eating contaminated meat products is probably much less, in terms of school meals, than ready meals or 'value' brands consumed at home or in other catering settings.

4. What should school caterers now do?

Local authority caterers have already put into place stringent additional monitoring and are in contact with suppliers to ensure the continuing safety of the products used in school meals. Where possible they will endeavour to offer alternatives to pupils who may be put off eating beef products but would want to reassure pupils and parents that the Food Standards Agency maintains that the risk to human health – even if horse meat is consumed is minimal. This is an extract from the Food Standards Agency advice on horse meat:-

What should I do if I have already eaten the products named?

At the moment, we [the FSA] have no reason to think there is a food safety problem with the horse meat. Horse meat is not a risk in itself. However, if the horses have illegally got into the food chain, they may contain the veterinary drug phenylbutazone, or 'bute'. 'Bute' is not allowed in the food chain because in humans it can cause rare cases of a serious blood disorder, aplastic anaemia. Because it is not possible to say what triggers the anaemia, it is not possible to identify a safe level of residue in meat.

Bute was banned from use in humans after it was found that about 1 person in 30,000 recipients suffered a serious side effect. But in levels reported in previous FSA testing of contaminated meat, the maximum level found would have to be multiplied a thousand-fold to be at the same level as that which used to be given to humans.

This suggests that even if you have eaten products which contain contaminated horse meat, the risk of damage to your health is very low.

5. What should worried parents do?

Parents who are worried about school meals should rest assured that local authority caterers are committed to the highest standards in school food and nutrition. Local authority procurement rules also safeguard against poor practice in purchasing food for use in school meals. Therefore, if you are considering removing a child from the school meals service we would urge parents to first seek advice from the school and the school caterer about their concerns. Parents should assess the benefits to their child of a hot healthy school lunch. A hot healthy school lunch has many positive benefits on health and learning, compared to the very minimal risks posed by the remote possibility of contaminated meat products in school food. Parents are already aware of the temptation, particularly amongst older pupils, to consume unhealthy takeaway foods loaded with saturated fats, salt and sugar which are very harmful to health. These products are not suitable alternatives to a healthy school lunch.

The nutritional based standards and huge improvements in school meals, with the use of freshly prepared food, rather than pre-cooked 'ready meals' and product traceability should help to avoid any major contamination issues within school meals. Rigorous standards are in place to safeguard school food and may go beyond those which parents could reasonably achieve at home. Indeed most parents, cooking for children at home, do not unfortunately have access to food supplier information which caterers in a school setting are able to access and this should help to reassure parents.

6. Other caterers

APSE is a not-for-profit independent body helping over 300 member local councils provide excellence in frontline local public services. This briefing therefore covers those schools which use the local authority caterer (the council provider) for their school meals service and whilst it is likely other catering providers (private catering companies) may have carried out similar checks APSE has not contacted these companies to verify their actions. If in doubt parents should check with their child's school and catering provider.

Mo Baines, APSE Principal Advisor (Procurement)

Rob Bailey, APSE Principal Advisor (School Meals)