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Food Delivery Checks in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

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Introduction

Understanding Safe Food Delivery Checks

Food safety begins when food and ingredients **arrive at the premises**. Effective delivery checks help ensure that food has been transported appropriately, arrives in satisfactory condition and is suitable to enter the care catering environment.

Once an unsuitable delivery has been accepted and placed into storage, it can become much harder to identify and control the original problem.

Why Are Delivery Checks Important?

Food can potentially become unsafe before it reaches the kitchen.

Problems may include:

- Chilled food arriving too warm
- Frozen food beginning to thaw
- Damaged or leaking packaging
- Food delivered beyond its use-by date
- Evidence of contamination
- Signs of pest activity
- Incorrect products being supplied
- Missing or unclear allergen information
- Food being transported under unsuitable conditions

Delivery checks provide an opportunity to identify these problems **before affected food enters normal kitchen storage or preparation areas**.

Use Appropriate Suppliers

Food businesses should obtain food and ingredients from appropriate, reputable suppliers.

Care catering organisations should follow their own purchasing and approved-supplier procedures.

Staff receiving deliveries should know:

- Which suppliers are expected
- What products have been ordered
- Where deliveries should be received
- What checks are required
- What records need completing
- Who should be informed if a problem is identified

Unexpected or unidentified deliveries should be dealt with according to workplace procedures.

Check the Condition of the Delivery

Before accepting food, staff should look at its general condition.

Check for problems such as:

- Torn or damaged packaging
- Broken seals
- Leaking containers
- Dented or damaged cans where safety may be affected
- Cracked or broken jars
- Swollen packaging
- Water damage
- Visible contamination
- Unusual odours
- Evidence of pests

Food should not be accepted simply because **most of the delivery appears satisfactory**. Any affected items should be dealt with according to the organisation's procedure.

Check Chilled Food

Chilled foods need to remain under appropriate temperature control during transportation and delivery.

Staff should:

- Follow the organisation's delivery temperature limits
- Check temperatures where required
- Use an appropriate method of temperature checking
- Record results where required
- Transfer accepted chilled food into refrigerated storage promptly
- Take action if food is outside the organisation's acceptable limits

For most chilled food, the legal maximum temperature in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is generally **8°C**, although businesses commonly operate refrigerators at **5°C or below** to provide a safety margin.

Staff should always follow the limits specified within their own food safety management procedures.

Check Frozen Food

Frozen food should arrive **properly frozen** and in satisfactory condition.

Warning signs may include:

- Food that feels soft
- Evidence of partial thawing
- Liquid within packaging
- Excessive ice or unusual ice crystals
- Damaged packaging
- Products sticking together where they would normally remain separate

These signs do not automatically establish what has happened to the food, but they should prompt staff to follow the organisation's delivery procedure rather than simply accepting the product.

Accepted frozen food should be transferred into appropriate frozen storage promptly.

Check Dates

Date checking is an important part of receiving food.

Use-By Dates

A use-by date relates to food safety.

Staff should ensure that delivered food has an acceptable use-by period in accordance with the organisation's purchasing and stock-management requirements.

Food should not be accepted if it is already beyond its use-by date.

Best-Before Dates

A best-before date primarily relates to food quality rather than safety.

Staff should still follow workplace requirements regarding acceptable shelf life and product quality.

Check Food Labels & Allergen Information

The correct product and its accompanying information are particularly important where food is used for people with **allergies or specific dietary requirements**.

Staff should check that:

- The expected product has been supplied
- Packaging and labels are intact
- Required ingredient and allergen information is available
- Substitute products are identified
- Unfamiliar replacements are not automatically treated as equivalent

A substitute product may contain **different ingredients or allergens**, even when it appears very similar to the product normally purchased.

If the information is unclear, staff should **stop and check before the product is used**.

Look for Signs of Pest Contamination

Deliveries and packaging should be checked for signs that could indicate pest activity.

These might include:

- Droppings
- Gnaw marks
- Insects
- Damaged packaging
- Contaminated outer packaging

Suspected contamination should be reported and dealt with according to workplace procedures.

Move Accepted Food into Storage Promptly

Delivery checks should be completed efficiently so that temperature-controlled food is not left unnecessarily in the delivery area.

Once accepted:

Chilled food → Refrigerated storage

Frozen food → Frozen storage

Dry food → Clean, dry and appropriate storage

Food should also be rotated according to the organisation's stock-control procedures.

Good Practice Reminder

Receiving a delivery is a food-safety control, not simply an administrative task. Check the food before accepting it and never record a temperature or condition that you have not actually checked.

Checking Temperatures, Packaging, Dates & Delivery Records

Delivery checks should be **consistent and systematic**. Staff receiving food should know what needs to be checked, the organisation's acceptable limits and what action to take when a delivery does not meet requirements.

Checks should be carried out **when the delivery arrives**, rather than after food has already been placed into storage.

Checking Delivery Temperatures

Temperature checks help establish whether chilled and frozen foods have been transported under appropriate conditions.

Staff should follow the organisation's food safety procedures regarding:

- Which foods require temperature checks
- How temperatures should be measured
- Acceptable temperature limits
- How frequently checks are required
- What information should be recorded
- What corrective action is required

Never simply write down an expected temperature without performing the required check.

Using a Food Probe Thermometer

Where a probe thermometer is used, staff should take precautions to prevent contamination.

Good practice includes:

- Using a suitable, working thermometer
- Cleaning and disinfecting the probe appropriately before and after use
- Following workplace procedures for taking temperatures
- Avoiding unnecessary damage to packaging
- Preventing cross-contamination between different foods
- Recording the actual temperature obtained
- Reporting problems with the thermometer

Probe thermometers should also be checked for accuracy according to workplace procedures.

Checking Without Opening Packaging

Depending on the organisation's procedures, it may sometimes be possible to check the temperature of packaged food **without inserting a probe directly into the product**.

For example, a probe may be placed between two packs to obtain an indicative temperature reading.

Where this method does not provide sufficient assurance, staff should follow the organisation's procedure for obtaining an appropriate product temperature.

The method used should protect both **food safety and packaging integrity**.

Chilled Deliveries

When receiving chilled food, staff should consider:

- The temperature of the food where required
- Whether packaging is intact
- Whether the food appears appropriately chilled
- Use-by dates
- Product condition
- Whether the delivery has been left unnecessarily at ambient temperature

Accepted chilled food should be moved into appropriate refrigeration **as soon as practicable**.

Staff should not leave chilled deliveries waiting in corridors, loading areas or kitchens while other tasks are completed.

Frozen Deliveries

Frozen food should be checked for evidence that temperature control may have been compromised.

Possible warning signs include:

- Partial thawing
- Soft products
- Liquid inside packaging
- Damaged packaging
- Unusual quantities of ice crystals
- Signs that products may previously have thawed and refrozen

Where there is doubt, staff should follow the organisation's procedure and seek guidance rather than assuming the food is safe.

Inspect Packaging Carefully

Packaging protects food from contamination and damage.

Staff should look for:

- Tears
- Holes
- Broken seals
- Leakage
- Crushed packaging
- Contamination
- Damaged containers
- Signs of pests
- Swollen packs or cans
- Broken or cracked glass

A damaged outer box does not necessarily mean that every item inside is unsafe, but the affected products should be **properly assessed according to workplace procedures**.

Check Use-By & Best-Before Dates

Delivery checks should include appropriate examination of date markings.

Use-By

Use-by dates relate to **food safety**. Food should not be accepted or used beyond its use-by date.

The organisation may also require sufficient remaining shelf life when products are delivered.

Best-Before

Best-before dates primarily relate to **quality**.

The organisation may have purchasing standards governing the remaining shelf life it expects from delivered products.

Staff should follow these requirements rather than accepting unsuitable stock simply because it has not yet reached its date.

Check the Correct Products Have Arrived

Receiving the wrong product can create operational and food-safety problems.

This is particularly important when products are used for:

- Allergen-controlled meals
- Special diets
- Texture-modified meals
- Fortified foods
- Individual dietary requirements

If a supplier substitutes a product, staff should **not assume that its ingredients or allergen profile are identical**.

Check the available product information before approving it for use.

Delivery Records

Depending on the organisation's food safety system, delivery records may include:

- Date and time
- Supplier
- Products checked
- Chilled or frozen temperatures
- Packaging condition
- Date checks
- Problems identified
- Rejected items
- Corrective action
- Name or initials of the person completing the check

Records should be clear, accurate and completed at the appropriate time.

When a Delivery Does Not Meet Requirements

If a delivery fails an appropriate food-safety check, staff should follow workplace procedures.

Possible actions may include:

Rejecting the item → Separating affected food → Contacting the supplier → Informing a manager → Recording the problem

The correct action will depend on the nature of the problem and the organisation's food safety management system.

Staff should not accept unsuitable food simply because:

- The kitchen needs the ingredients
- Replacing the product would be inconvenient
- The driver is waiting
- The delivery has already been invoiced
- The problem appears minor

Food safety should determine whether the food is accepted.

Maintain Traceability

Delivery information can become important if a product is subsequently subject to a **food recall, withdrawal or food-safety investigation**.

Where required, staff should retain appropriate supplier, product, batch and delivery information according to workplace procedures.

Do not remove or discard important product information prematurely.

Good Practice Reminder

Check → Measure → Inspect → Record → Act

A delivery record should show **what was actually checked and what was actually found**. Never invent a temperature or alter a result simply to make a delivery appear acceptable.

Rejecting Deliveries, Corrective Action & Staff Responsibilities

When a food delivery does not meet the organisation's required standards, staff need to know **what action to take and who to inform**.

Accepting unsuitable food can introduce food-safety hazards into the kitchen. Problems should therefore be addressed **at the point of delivery wherever possible**, rather than discovered later during preparation or service.

When Might a Delivery Need to Be Rejected?

Reasons for rejecting all or part of a delivery may include:

- Chilled food outside the organisation's acceptable temperature limits
- Frozen food showing signs of thawing
- Food beyond its use-by date
- Insufficient remaining shelf life under workplace purchasing requirements
- Damaged or leaking packaging
- Broken seals
- Swollen or seriously damaged containers
- Evidence of pest contamination
- Visible contamination
- Incorrect products
- Missing or inadequate product information
- Allergen information that cannot be confirmed
- Food delivered under obviously unsuitable conditions

The decision should be based on the organisation's **food safety management procedures**, rather than personal judgement alone.

What Should Staff Do?

When a delivery problem is identified, a simple approach is:

1. Stop

Do not automatically move the affected food into normal kitchen storage.

2. Separate

Keep questionable food away from accepted stock so that it cannot accidentally be used.

3. Check

Confirm the nature of the problem using the organisation's required checks.

4. Report

Inform the appropriate chef, catering manager, supervisor or other responsible person.

5. Take Corrective Action

Follow the organisation's procedure. This may include rejecting the product or delivery and arranging replacement stock.

6. Record

Document the problem and action taken where required.

Rejecting Only Part of a Delivery

A problem with one product does not necessarily mean the entire delivery must be rejected.

For example, one damaged package may be identified among otherwise satisfactory products.

Staff should follow workplace procedures to determine:

- Which products are affected
- Whether unaffected products can be accepted
- How rejected products should be separated
- What information needs recording
- Whether the supplier needs to be contacted

The affected product should not become mixed with accepted stock.

Do Not Allow Pressure to Influence Food-Safety Decisions

Staff receiving deliveries may sometimes feel under pressure because:

- The kitchen urgently needs the ingredients
- A meal service is approaching
- Replacement stock may be difficult to obtain
- The delivery driver is waiting
- Rejecting food may create additional work
- The product is expensive

These factors should **not override food-safety requirements**.

If food does not meet the organisation's acceptance criteria, staff should follow the established procedure.

Dealing with Substitute Products

Suppliers may occasionally provide an alternative product when the ordered item is unavailable.

Substitutions require particular attention because the replacement may have:

- Different ingredients
- Different allergens
- Different preparation instructions
- Different storage requirements
- Different use-by or best-before dates
- Different nutritional characteristics
- Different suitability for special diets

This is particularly important in care catering where meals may be prepared for residents with **food allergies, intolerances, texture requirements or other individual dietary needs**.

Never assume that a substitute is equivalent simply because the packaging or product appears similar.

Problems Discovered After Acceptance

Occasionally, a problem may only become apparent after a delivery has been accepted.

Examples might include:

- Hidden packaging damage
- Incorrect products inside an outer case
- Evidence of contamination
- Missing allergen information
- A product recall or withdrawal
- A temperature-control concern discovered later

If this occurs:

Stop using the affected food → Isolate it → Inform the appropriate person → Follow workplace procedures → Record action where required

Do not continue using the food simply because it has already been accepted and stored.

Food Recalls & Withdrawals

Information retained from deliveries can help an organisation identify affected products if a **food recall or withdrawal** occurs.

Staff may need to check information such as:

- Product name
- Manufacturer or supplier
- Batch or lot number
- Use-by or best-before date
- Delivery date
- Quantity received
- Quantity remaining

Affected food should be removed from use promptly and managed according to the recall or withdrawal instructions and workplace procedures.

Supplier Problems

Repeated problems with a supplier should be reported to the appropriate manager.

Examples might include:

- Repeated temperature failures
- Regularly damaged packaging
- Short-dated products
- Incorrect products
- Poor delivery hygiene
- Missing product information

Keeping accurate records can help management identify **recurring patterns rather than isolated incidents**.

Accurate Corrective-Action Records

Where a problem is identified, records should clearly show what actually happened.

A useful sequence is:

What was wrong → Which food was affected → What action was taken → Who was informed → What happened to the food

Staff should never:

- Invent delivery temperatures
- Change an unacceptable result to an acceptable one
- Record that food was rejected when it was actually accepted
- Sign for checks that were not performed
- Conceal a problem to avoid inconvenience

Accurate records support both food safety and accountability.

Staff Responsibilities

Staff involved in receiving food deliveries should:

- Know the organisation's delivery procedures
 - Carry out required checks promptly
 - Check chilled and frozen foods appropriately
 - Inspect packaging and date markings
 - Check product and allergen information
 - Recognise signs of contamination or pest activity
 - Transfer accepted food into appropriate storage promptly
 - Reject or isolate unsuitable food according to procedure
 - Report problems
 - Complete required records accurately
 - Protect traceability information
 - Ask for guidance when unsure
-

Managers & Supervisors

Those responsible for managing food deliveries should ensure that staff understand:

- Approved supplier arrangements
- Delivery acceptance criteria
- Temperature requirements
- Recording procedures
- Corrective-action procedures
- Allergen controls
- Product substitution procedures
- Recall and withdrawal arrangements

Recurring delivery problems should be reviewed and appropriate action taken.

From Supplier to Safe Storage

A safe delivery process should follow a clear sequence:

Receive → Inspect → Check → Accept or Reject → Record → Store Promptly

Good Practice Reminder

A delivery should not be accepted simply because rejecting it is inconvenient. If food does not meet the required safety standards, follow the organisation's procedure and take appropriate action.

Summary, Food Delivery Checklist & Further Information

Safe food delivery checks are an important first stage of food safety in care catering. Staff should ensure that food arrives **in satisfactory condition, at appropriate temperatures and with the information required for its safe storage, preparation and use.**

Effective delivery procedures help prevent unsuitable food from entering the kitchen and support traceability if a food-safety problem, recall or withdrawal occurs later.

The process should be consistent:

Receive → Inspect → Check → Accept or Reject → Record → Store Promptly

Practical Food Delivery Checklist

When receiving a food delivery, consider:

- ☐ Is the delivery from the expected or approved supplier?
- ☐ Have chilled foods been checked according to workplace temperature procedures?
- ☐ Are frozen foods properly frozen with no concerning signs of thawing?
- ☐ Is all packaging intact, clean and undamaged?
- ☐ Are seals secure and containers free from leaks?
- ☐ Are cans, jars and other containers in satisfactory condition?
- ☐ Are use-by dates acceptable?
- ☐ Is there sufficient remaining shelf life under workplace requirements?
- ☐ Are the correct products being delivered?
- ☐ Have any substitute products been identified and checked?
- ☐ Is required ingredient and allergen information available?
- ☐ Are there any signs of contamination or pest activity?
- ☐ Have required delivery checks been recorded accurately?
- ☐ Have unsuitable products been rejected or isolated according to procedure?
- ☐ Have any problems been reported to the appropriate person?
- ☐ Has relevant traceability information been retained where required?
- ☐ Have accepted chilled and frozen foods been moved into appropriate storage promptly?

Remember

Never accept unsuitable food simply because rejecting it would be inconvenient. If a delivery does not meet the organisation's acceptance criteria, follow workplace procedures and take appropriate corrective action.

Further Information

For further professional guidance, staff and organisations can refer to:

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business

Practical food-safety management guidance covering areas including suppliers, deliveries, storage, cooking, chilling, cleaning and management procedures.

[Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business](#)

Food Standards Agency – Chilling

Official guidance covering the safe chilling and storage of food, including temperature control.

[Food Standards Agency – Chilling](#)

Food Standards Agency – Best-Before and Use-By Dates

Official guidance explaining the important difference between **use-by dates, which concern food safety, and best-before dates, which concern food quality.**

[Food Standards Agency – Best-Before and Use-By Dates](#)

Food Standards Agency – Food Recalls & Allergy Alerts

Official information about food products that have been withdrawn or recalled because of food-safety or allergy risks.

Food Standards Agency – Food Recalls & Allergy Alerts

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- Resource 031 – Managing Allergens in Care Catering
- Resource 032 – Preventing Cross-Contamination in Care Catering
- Resource 071 – Food Temperature Control in Care Catering
- Resource 072 – Safe Food Storage in Care Catering
- Resource 073 – Food Safety for Vulnerable People in Care Settings
- Resource 074 – Preventing Foodborne Illness in Care Catering
- Resource 075 – Kitchen Cleaning & Disinfection in Care Catering

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- Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2
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