



FlexiLearnHub

Knowledge Hub

Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Safe Hot Holding & Meal Service in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 078

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Introduction

Understanding Safe Hot Holding & Meal Service

Once food has been cooked safely, it must continue to be protected until it reaches the person who will eat it. In care catering, there may be a significant period between **cooking, hot holding, plating, transporting and serving a meal.**

Good temperature control and hygienic handling throughout this period help prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying and reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

What Is Hot Holding?

Hot holding means keeping cooked food **hot and at a safe temperature before it is served.**

Examples may include food kept in:

- Bain-maries
- Heated service counters
- Hot cupboards
- Heated food trolleys
- Appropriate insulated or heated containers
- Other purpose-designed hot-holding equipment

Hot-holding equipment should be suitable for its intended purpose and used according to the manufacturer's instructions and the organisation's food safety procedures.

The 63°C Hot-Holding Requirement

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, food that requires temperature control and is being kept hot should generally be maintained at **63°C or above.**

This is an important control because allowing hot food to remain at lower temperatures can create conditions in which harmful bacteria may multiply.

Staff should therefore:

- Follow the organisation's hot-holding procedures
- Check temperatures at the required intervals
- Use an appropriate food thermometer or probe

- Record results accurately where required
- Take action promptly when temperatures are outside required limits

Never record a temperature that has not actually been checked.

Hot-Holding Equipment Does Not Replace Cooking

Hot-holding equipment is designed primarily to **keep food hot**, not to cook cold food or safely reheat previously cooked food.

Food should therefore normally be **properly cooked or reheated before being transferred to hot-holding equipment**.

Putting inadequately heated food into a bain-marie or heated trolley and expecting it to gradually become hot enough can create unnecessary food-safety risks.

Prepare Hot-Holding Equipment in Advance

Where equipment requires preheating, staff should allow sufficient time for it to reach the correct operating condition **before food is placed inside**.

Before service, check that:

- Equipment is clean
- Equipment is functioning correctly
- Required water levels are correct where applicable
- Controls are set appropriately
- The equipment has been preheated where required
- Food containers are suitable
- Temperature-monitoring equipment is available

Problems identified before food enters the equipment are generally easier to manage than problems discovered halfway through meal service.

Transfer Food Promptly

Once food has been cooked or reheated appropriately, unnecessary delays should be avoided.

Food intended for hot holding should be transferred promptly into the appropriate equipment and kept protected from contamination.

Staff should avoid leaving cooked food standing on work surfaces while waiting for:

- Other dishes to finish cooking
- Staff to arrive
- Dining rooms to be prepared
- Trolleys to become available
- Service equipment to be organised

Meal-service arrangements should therefore be planned so that the kitchen and care teams are ready at the appropriate time.

Checking Food Temperatures

Where temperature checks form part of the organisation's food safety system, staff should check the **food itself**, rather than relying solely on the temperature displayed by the hot-holding equipment.

A display may indicate the temperature of the equipment or surrounding environment and does not necessarily prove that every food item is at the required temperature.

When using a probe:

Clean/Disinfect → Insert correctly → Allow reading to stabilise → Record actual result → Clean/Disinfect

Particular attention may be needed for large containers, thick foods and dishes where temperature can vary throughout the product.

Protecting Food During Hot Holding

Temperature is only one part of safe meal service. Cooked food must also remain protected from contamination.

Staff should:

- Use clean utensils
- Maintain good hand hygiene
- Keep food appropriately covered or protected where possible
- Prevent contact with raw foods
- Keep dirty equipment away from service areas

- Avoid unnecessary handling
- Protect food from coughing, sneezing and other contamination
- Use dedicated serving utensils where required
- Maintain appropriate allergen controls

Hot food can still become unsafe if it is contaminated after cooking.

Avoid Mixing Old & Fresh Batches

Staff should not routinely add freshly cooked food to an older batch already being hot held.

Doing so can make it difficult to establish:

- How long the food has been held
- Which temperature checks apply
- Whether the older food remains suitable for service
- Which batch should be subject to corrective action

Follow workplace procedures for **batch cooking, replenishment and leftovers**.

Meal Service in Care Settings

Care catering can involve more complex meal-service arrangements than conventional catering.

Meals may be served:

- In a main dining room
- In smaller dining areas
- In residents' rooms
- On different floors
- In specialist units
- At different times according to individual needs

This means food safety controls must continue **beyond the kitchen door**.

The time between leaving the kitchen and reaching the resident should be managed carefully.

Heated Trolleys & Food Transport

Where heated trolleys or other food-transport systems are used, staff should follow the organisation's procedures for:

- Preheating equipment where required
- Loading food safely
- Protecting meals from contamination
- Maintaining appropriate temperatures
- Minimising unnecessary delays
- Checking temperatures where required
- Cleaning and disinfecting equipment after use

Trolleys should not be left unnecessarily in corridors or service areas while food temperatures gradually fall.

Food Safety & Meal Quality

Safe hot holding should not mean keeping food hot indefinitely.

Extended holding can affect:

- Appearance
- Texture
- Moisture
- Flavour
- Nutritional quality
- Overall enjoyment of the meal

This is particularly relevant in care settings, where an appetising meal can support **food intake and a positive mealtime experience**.

Good catering practice therefore aims to achieve both:

Food Safety + Food Quality

Good Practice Reminder

Cooking food safely is only the beginning. Temperature control and protection from contamination must continue until the meal reaches the person who will eat it.

Cook Safely → Hold Safely → Check → Protect → Transport → Serve Promptly

Safe Hot Holding, Food Transport & Meal-Service Procedures

Safe meal service requires coordination between the **kitchen, catering team and staff involved in distributing meals**. Food that leaves the kitchen in a safe condition must continue to be protected from inappropriate temperatures, contamination and unnecessary delays until it is served.

A clear meal-service procedure helps staff understand **who is responsible for the food at each stage**.

Before Hot Holding Begins

Before transferring cooked food into hot-holding equipment, staff should check that the equipment is ready for use.

This may include:

- Ensuring equipment is clean
- Preheating equipment where required
- Checking that controls are set correctly
- Checking water levels in bain-maries where applicable
- Ensuring suitable containers and lids are available
- Preparing clean serving utensils
- Making sure temperature probes are available
- Confirming that food can be transferred without unnecessary delay

Do not wait until cooked food is ready before discovering that hot-holding equipment has not been prepared.

Food Should Be Hot Before Hot Holding

Hot-holding equipment should **maintain the temperature of food that is already hot**.

It should not normally be relied upon to:

- Cook food
- Heat cold food
- Reheat chilled cooked food
- Bring inadequately heated food up to a safe temperature

Food should be properly cooked or reheated according to the organisation's procedures before entering hot holding.

Maintaining 63°C or Above

Food being hot held should generally be maintained at **63°C or above**.

Staff should follow workplace procedures regarding:

- When temperatures are checked
- How frequently checks are completed
- Which foods should be checked
- Where within the food the temperature should be measured
- How results are recorded
- What corrective action is required

Where several dishes are being held, checking one item does not necessarily establish that every other dish is at the correct temperature.

Using a Food Probe During Service

A clean and appropriately disinfected food probe can be used to check that hot-held food remains at the required temperature.

Staff should:

1. Clean and disinfect the probe appropriately.
2. Insert it into an appropriate part of the food.
3. Allow the reading to stabilise.
4. Read the actual temperature.
5. Record the result where required.
6. Clean and disinfect the probe before using it again.

Extra care should be taken when checking different dishes to prevent **cross-contamination and allergen cross-contact**.

The Limited Exception Below 63°C

Food Standards Agency guidance allows hot food to be kept **below 63°C for a single period of up to two hours**.

After this period, appropriate action must be taken. Depending on the circumstances and the organisation's food safety procedures, this may involve **reheating the food until it is steaming hot and returning it to hot holding, cooling it safely for later use, or discarding it.**

This provision should not become a routine substitute for effective hot holding.

Staff should follow the organisation's documented procedure whenever hot food falls below the required holding temperature.

Batch Cooking & Smaller Quantities

Where practical, preparing or finishing food in smaller batches can help:

- Reduce prolonged hot-holding periods
- Maintain food quality
- Improve appearance and texture
- Reduce unnecessary leftovers
- Support more responsive meal service

The appropriate approach will depend on staffing, kitchen facilities, resident numbers and the organisation's catering arrangements.

Preparing for Meal Service

Before service begins, staff should ensure that:

- Dining and service areas are ready
- Appropriate serving utensils are available
- Meal trolleys are ready
- Special dietary requirements are known
- Allergen information is available
- Texture-modified meals are correctly identified
- Staff understand where meals need to go
- Avoidable delays have been minimised

Good preparation helps reduce the amount of time food spends waiting between the kitchen and the resident.

Transporting Meals Around the Care Setting

Meals may need to travel some distance from the kitchen to dining rooms, individual bedrooms or specialist units.

Where appropriate equipment is used, staff should:

- Preheat heated trolleys where required
- Load meals promptly
- Keep food appropriately covered
- Avoid overloading equipment
- Keep hot and cold items appropriately controlled
- Minimise transport time
- Avoid unnecessary stops
- Check temperatures according to procedure
- Keep equipment clean and well maintained

Food should not be left unattended in corridors or other unsuitable locations for unnecessary periods.

Plating Meals

During plating, staff should work efficiently while maintaining hygiene and accuracy.

Good practice includes:

- Using clean serving utensils
- Avoiding unnecessary hand contact with food
- Keeping food protected where practicable
- Maintaining appropriate temperatures
- Preventing cross-contamination
- Following portion requirements
- Checking special dietary instructions
- Ensuring the correct meal reaches the correct person

The last point is particularly important where residents have **food allergies, medically required diets or texture-modified food and drink requirements**.

Allergen Controls During Service

Meal service can create opportunities for allergen cross-contact or the wrong meal being given to a resident.

Staff should follow the organisation's allergen procedures and:

- Confirm dietary information
- Check meal identification systems
- Use appropriate utensils
- Avoid cross-contact between dishes
- Treat substitutions carefully
- Never guess whether a meal is suitable
- Report uncertainty before serving

If staff cannot confirm that a meal is suitable for a resident with a food allergy, **it should not be served until the information has been checked.**

Texture-Modified Meals

Residents with dysphagia may require food prepared to a specific **IDDSI texture level**.

During hot holding, transport and service, staff should ensure that texture-modified meals:

- Remain correctly identified
- Are protected from contamination
- Are not confused with standard meals
- Maintain the required texture and consistency
- Are served to the correct resident
- Are not altered in a way that makes them unsuitable

Temperature control remains important, but **food safety and swallowing safety must both be maintained.**

Avoiding Delays at Ward, Unit or Bedroom Level

Once meals leave the kitchen, delays may occur because residents need assistance, staff are unavailable or care activities are taking place.

Where delays occur, staff should follow the organisation's procedure rather than allowing meals to remain uncontrolled indefinitely.

Good communication between catering and care staff can help coordinate:

Kitchen readiness → Meal transport → Resident readiness → Prompt service

Serving Utensils

Serving utensils can transfer microorganisms or allergens between foods.

Staff should:

- Use clean utensils
- Use separate utensils where required
- Avoid placing handles into food
- Replace contaminated utensils
- Protect utensils between uses
- Follow allergen-control procedures

A utensil accidentally transferred from one dish to another may create a food-safety or allergen risk.

What About Cold Items Served With Hot Meals?

Meal trays may contain both hot and chilled items.

Cold foods such as desserts, dairy products or other temperature-controlled items should not be placed in conditions that unnecessarily expose them to heat for prolonged periods.

Meal-service systems should therefore maintain appropriate controls for **both hot and chilled foods**.

After Meal Service

At the end of service, staff should not automatically return remaining food to storage for later use.

Leftovers should be managed according to the organisation's food safety procedures, considering factors such as:

- How long the food has been held

- Its temperature history
- Whether it has entered the service environment
- Whether contamination could have occurred
- Whether it has already been reheated
- Whether further storage is permitted

Food returned from an individual's plate must **never be returned to general food stock for reuse.**

Maintaining Records

Where required, meal-service records may include:

- Hot-holding temperatures
- Time of checks
- Food or dish checked
- Equipment checks
- Problems identified
- Corrective action taken
- Staff initials or identification

Records should always reflect the **actual checks and results.**

Never complete a temperature record simply because that is what the temperature was expected to be.

Good Practice Reminder

A safe meal-service system maintains control from the kitchen right through to the resident. Food should not become less safe simply because it has left the cooking area.

Prepare → Cook → Hot Hold → Check → Transport → Serve Promptly → Record

Temperature Problems, Corrective Action & Staff Responsibilities

Problems during hot holding and meal service need to be identified and dealt with promptly. A meal that was cooked safely can become unsuitable if **temperature control fails, service is excessively delayed, equipment breaks down or contamination occurs**.

In care catering, staff should never ignore a food-safety problem simply because residents are waiting for their meals.

Recognising Hot-Holding Problems

Potential warning signs include:

- Hot-held food falling below the required temperature
- Bain-maries or hot cupboards not heating correctly
- Heated trolleys failing to maintain temperature
- Food being placed into hot holding before it is sufficiently hot
- Excessive delays before service
- Food being left uncovered or inadequately protected
- Missing temperature checks
- Inaccurate or incomplete records
- Different batches being mixed together
- Staff being unable to establish how long food has been held

Any uncertainty should be investigated promptly.

When Food Falls Below 63°C

If food that should be hot held is found below **63°C**, staff should not simply ignore the reading or alter the temperature record.

Food Standards Agency guidance permits hot food to be held below 63°C for **a single period of up to two hours**.

The organisation's food safety procedure should determine the appropriate action. Depending on the circumstances, this may include:

- Reheating the food until it is steaming hot and returning it to hot holding
- Cooling the food safely for later use where appropriate
- Discarding the food

The two-hour provision should **not be repeatedly restarted** by reheating food simply to extend its holding time.

If staff do not know how long the food has been below 63°C, they should report the situation and follow the organisation's corrective-action procedure.

Equipment Failure

Hot-holding equipment can fail during meal service.

Possible problems include:

- Loss of electrical power
- Heating-element failure
- Incorrect thermostat settings
- Damaged plugs or cables
- Bain-marie water levels being incorrect
- Heated trolley failure
- Temperature displays showing unexpected readings

If equipment fails:

Stop → Check → Protect the food → Report → Take corrective action → Record

Do not continue using damaged or unsafe electrical equipment.

Service Delays

Unexpected delays can occur because of:

- Care activities
- Staffing shortages
- Residents not being ready
- Transport problems
- Equipment problems
- Dining-room delays
- Emergency situations

Staff should communicate promptly when a significant delay occurs.

Where necessary, food temperatures should be checked and the organisation's procedures followed to determine whether the food can still be safely served.

Never Guess How Long Food Has Been Held

Time is important when dealing with hot-holding failures.

Staff should be able to establish, where required:

- When hot holding began
- When the last satisfactory temperature was recorded
- When the problem was discovered
- How long food may have been below the required temperature
- What corrective action was taken

If this information is not known, staff should **not invent an approximate time simply to complete the record.**

Contamination During Service

Food may remain at an appropriate temperature but still become unsafe because of contamination.

Examples include:

- A dirty utensil falling into food
- Raw food contacting cooked food
- Staff touching ready-to-eat food with contaminated hands
- Cleaning chemicals contaminating a service area
- Foreign objects entering food
- A contaminated trolley or container
- Coughing or sneezing over unprotected food
- Pest activity

Temperature control does not make contaminated food automatically safe.

Affected food should be isolated and assessed according to workplace procedures.

Allergen Cross-Contact

Allergen incidents require immediate attention.

Possible problems include:

- The wrong serving utensil being used
- Foods touching each other during plating
- An incorrect meal being placed on a resident's tray
- A substitute ingredient being used without appropriate checks
- An allergen-free meal losing its identification
- Staff being uncertain about the ingredients in a dish

If the suitability of a meal for someone with a food allergy cannot be confirmed, **do not serve it until the information has been checked.**

Never remove an ingredient from the plate and assume the remaining food is safe after allergen cross-contact may have occurred.

Incorrect Meals & Special Diets

Care catering teams may be responsible for residents with:

- Food allergies
- Intolerances
- Diabetes or other dietary requirements
- Cultural or religious dietary requirements
- Fortified diets
- Texture-modified diets
- Individual nutritional care plans

If the wrong meal reaches the service area, staff should correct the error rather than attempting to adapt a meal without appropriate information or authorisation.

Problems With Texture-Modified Meals

For residents with dysphagia, a food-safety error is not the only potential risk.

Staff should also act if:

- The IDDSI level cannot be confirmed
- A meal has been incorrectly labelled
- The texture appears inconsistent with the required level
- Different texture-modified meals have been confused
- The meal has changed during holding or transport
- Staff cannot confirm which resident should receive it

Where swallowing safety is uncertain, the meal should **not be served until it has been appropriately checked.**

Corrective Action

A simple approach when a problem is identified is:

1. Stop

Do not serve potentially unsafe or unsuitable food.

2. Separate

Keep the affected food away from food known to be safe.

3. Check

Establish temperatures, times, labels and other relevant information.

4. Report

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

5. Correct

Follow the organisation's approved corrective-action procedure.

6. Record

Document what happened and what action was taken where required.

Stop → Separate → Check → Report → Correct → Record

Accurate Records

Hot-holding and meal-service records should reflect **what actually happened**.

Depending on workplace procedures, records may include:

- Food or dish checked
- Temperature
- Time
- Hot-holding equipment used
- Service or trolley checks
- Problems identified

- Corrective action taken
- Staff initials or identification

Staff should never:

- Invent a temperature
- Copy yesterday's result
- Record a check that was not performed
- Change an unacceptable result
- Hide an equipment failure
- Record corrective action that was not actually taken

An unacceptable result is useful information because it tells staff that **action is required**.

Staff Responsibilities

Staff involved in hot holding and meal service should:

- Follow the organisation's food safety procedures
 - Prepare hot-holding equipment correctly
 - Maintain required temperatures
 - Complete required checks
 - Use food probes hygienically
 - Protect meals from contamination
 - Maintain allergen controls
 - Follow special-diet and texture requirements
 - Minimise unnecessary service delays
 - Report equipment failures
 - Take corrective action when required
 - Complete records accurately
 - Never serve food when its safety or suitability cannot be confirmed
-

Managers & Supervisors

Managers and supervisors should ensure that:

- Suitable hot-holding and transport equipment is available
- Equipment is maintained appropriately
- Staff understand temperature requirements
- Clear meal-service procedures are established
- Allergen and special-diet systems are effective
- Temperature-monitoring equipment is available

- Records are reviewed
- Corrective actions are understood
- Repeated failures are investigated
- Catering and care teams communicate effectively

Repeated low temperatures or service delays should not simply become accepted as part of the normal routine.

Maintaining Control Until the Resident Is Served

Responsibility for food safety does not end when a meal leaves the kitchen.

The complete process should remain controlled:

Cook → Hot Hold → Check → Protect → Transport → Identify → Serve → Record

Good Practice Reminder

If a temperature, meal identity or food-safety control is wrong, record the problem accurately and take action. Never change the record to make the result appear acceptable.

Summary, Hot Holding & Meal Service Checklist & Further Information

Safe hot holding and meal service are important parts of food safety in care catering. Once food has been cooked or reheated, staff must continue to control **temperature, hygiene, contamination risks and service times** until the meal reaches the resident.

Hot food requiring temperature control should generally be maintained at **63°C or above**. Where food falls below this temperature, staff must follow the organisation's food safety procedures and take appropriate corrective action.

In care settings, safe meal service also requires careful management of **allergens, special diets, texture-modified meals and individual resident requirements**.

A simple approach is:

Cook → Hot Hold → Check → Protect → Transport → Identify → Serve Promptly → Record

Practical Hot Holding & Meal Service Checklist

Before and during meal service, consider:

- ☐ Has the food been cooked or reheated correctly before hot holding?
- ☐ Has hot-holding equipment been cleaned and prepared?
- ☐ Has equipment been preheated where required?
- ☐ Is hot food being maintained at **63°C or above**?
- ☐ Are required temperature checks being completed?
- ☐ Is the food probe clean, disinfected and used correctly?
- ☐ Are actual temperatures being recorded accurately?
- ☐ Is food protected from contamination during hot holding?
- ☐ Are clean and appropriate serving utensils being used?
- ☐ Are fresh and older batches being managed correctly?
- ☐ Are avoidable delays before service being minimised?
- ☐ Are heated trolleys or transport equipment operating correctly?
- ☐ Is food protected during transportation?
- ☐ Are hot and chilled items appropriately controlled?
- ☐ Have allergen requirements been checked?
- ☐ Are special dietary requirements clearly identified?
- ☐ Are texture-modified meals correctly identified and suitable for the resident?
- ☐ Is the correct meal reaching the correct person?
- ☐ Have temperature or equipment problems been reported?
- ☐ Has corrective action been taken where required?
- ☐ Are leftovers being managed according to workplace procedures?
- ☐ If food safety or suitability cannot be confirmed, has the meal been withheld from service?

Remember

A meal does not stop being a food-safety responsibility when it leaves the kitchen. Appropriate controls should continue until the food is safely served to the resident.

Further Information

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

Food Standards Agency – Cooking Your Food

Official guidance covering cooking, reheating and hot-holding practices, including the requirement to keep hot food at **63°C or above**, subject to the permitted limited exception.

[Food Standards Agency – Cooking Your Food](#)

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business

Practical food-safety management guidance for catering businesses covering cooking, chilling, cross-contamination, cleaning and management controls.

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

Food Standards Agency – Allergen Guidance for Food Businesses

Official information for food businesses on managing allergens and providing accurate allergen information.

[Food Standards Agency – Allergen Guidance for Food Businesses](#)

IDDSI Framework

International guidance and terminology for texture-modified foods and thickened drinks used for people with swallowing difficulties.

[International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative \(IDDSI\)](#)

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- **Resource 004 – Supporting Safe Mealtimes**
- **Resource 005 – Texture-Modified Food Awareness**
- **Resource 006 – Helping Someone Eat and Drink Safely**
- **Resource 031 – Managing Allergens in Care Catering**
- **Resource 071 – Food Temperature Control in Care Catering**
- **Resource 073 – Food Safety for Vulnerable People in Care Settings**
- **Resource 077 – Safe Cooling & Reheating of Food in Care Catering**

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

- **Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2**
- **HACCP Training**
- **Dysphagia Awareness & IDDSI Framework Training**

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