School Meals and Packed Lunches

Reviewed - September 2026

At Co-op Academy Medlock, we believe that good food is vital to children's health and academic achievement, as well as enhancing children's social learning experiences.

Many studies have shown that hunger affects concentration and that well-nourished children fare better at school. Equally, the comradery of sharing experiences whilst enjoying a meal can enhance children's ability to form positive and meaningful relationships. These principles underlie our School Food Policy.

The children at Medlock are encouraged to treat meal times as an integral part of the school day. It is a time to share news and experiences as well as to simply enjoy each other's company. Teachers, learning assistants and office staff are encouraged to join the children. They model appropriate behaviour, good manners and support all children to develop social skills.

Universal Free School Meals (UFSM)

Since September 2014, the Children and Families Bill places a legal duty on state-funded schools in England to offer a free school lunch to all pupils in Reception, Year One and Year Two through the introduction of the Government's Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) Policy.

Eligibility Rules in England

- **Universal Credit:** All families receiving Universal Credit are now eligible, removing the previous £7,400 net earned income threshold. [1, 2]
- **Universal Infant Free School Meals:** All children in **Reception, Year 1, and Year 2** in state schools automatically get free school meals regardless of benefits or income. [1, 2]
- **No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF):** Children in certain low-income households with NRPF status may also qualify. Ask your school or local council for details. [1, 2]

You can find more information here
-https://www.manchester.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/education-benefits/free-school-meals

You can apply for free school meals here, we encourage all families to apply-
https://fsm.lgfl.net/

Hot Meals Menu

Our cater company is caterlink

Caterlink is a specialist education caterer in the UK that provides fresh, nutritionally balanced daily meals and food education programs tailored specifically for primary and SEN (Special Educational Needs) schools.

Food and Menus

- **Freshly Prepared:** Meals are cooked fresh on-site daily by trained chefs. [1, 2]
- **Nutritional Standards:** All menus comply with or exceed government school food standards, typically holding a Soil Association **Food for Life Silver Standard**. [1, 2]
- **Balanced Options:** Each lunch includes a portion of protein, a portion of carbohydrates, two portions of vegetables, and access to a daily salad bar. [1]

Catering for pupils with special dietary requirements

1. The Application and Verification Process

- **Formal Request:** Parents must complete a digital or physical Caterlink Allergy & Intolerance Form via the school.
- **Medical Evidence Required:** The form **must** be submitted with supporting clinical evidence from an NHS professional (such as a GP letter, registered

dietitian note, or signed Allergy Action Plan). Special diet menus are strictly for medical needs and do not cover lifestyle or religious preferences.
- Interim "Safe Meals": Developing a bespoke menu can take up to 4 weeks. While waiting for approval, Caterlink provides a standardized "safe meal" (typically a jacket potato with baked beans, seasonal vegetables, and a fresh fruit to guarantee the child can eat safely right away.

2. Menu Safety and Risk Analysis

Caterlink follows a strict, multi-step Special Diet and Allergen Management Process to ensure child safety in the dining hall.

- LACA Risk Analysis: The Caterlink nutritionist team evaluates the application using the LACA Special Diet Risk Analysis Process. This reviews the severity of the allergy, the kitchen's cross-contamination limits, and the school environment to determine if a menu can be safely accommodated.
- Bespoke Menus: Once approved, nutritionists build a custom menu ensuring the child has at least one safe, nutritionally balanced hot meal option every day.
- Strict Ingredient Tracking: Kitchens use a centralized Allergen Matrix that tracks the 14 major food allergens across all recipes.

3. Safeguarding in the Dining Hall

- Visual Identification: To ensure the right meal reaches the right child, schools use visual charts with the child's name, class, picture and allergy.
- Staff Training: Caterlink implements an induction and continuous training program for all permanent and cover kitchen staff, appointing Allergen Champions to supervise service times. Photo identification sheets of children with severe allergies are often displayed internally near the service hatch for the kitchen team

Reluctant Eaters

No child will be forced to eat anything that they don't like although they will be encouraged to try foods which they may not have had experience of.

The amount of food children eat is monitored and liaison with parents (through their class teacher) ensures issues are picked up quickly. We actively encourage parents voicing concerns

about their children's eating so collaborative support can counter any issues a child may have.

The Dining Experience

The Nursery children eat in the Foundation Unit's dining room and are supported by their teachers, key workers and lunchtime organisers.

Reception, Key Stage One and Key Stage Two children all eat in the main dining hall.

The children having school meals are served at the counter and carry their meals to a table. Children who have a packed lunch collect the food from the appropriate trolley before sitting.

Politeness and manners are encouraged. It is the expectation that all interactions are calm, polite and appropriate to context. Pleases and thank yous are expected at all times and adults and older children model this for the younger children.

Once children have finished their meal, they clear their own tray at the waste disposal points provided. Packed lunch children throw away empty packets and rubbish. Uneaten food is packed into their lunch box to support parents monitoring their child's eating habits.

We firmly believe that the dining experience is crucial in developing good food habits and also contributes to a successful afternoon in the classroom. We are therefore constantly looking for ways to further improve the dining experience through feedback from parents and children.

Curriculum

We understand that providing a wholesome lunch for children is only half the battle. We also need to equip children with the skills they need to feed themselves and to develop healthy eating habits.

Therefore, food preparation lessons are a part of our school curriculum, form part of our enrichment programme and opportunities to cross link cooking and food preparation into the wider curriculum are encouraged.

Break Time Snacks and Refreshment

All children are provided with a daily fruit or vegetable snack. No charge is made for this. Children are not allowed to bring break time snacks to school.

Milk is offered to all children up to the age of 5 years in our early years setting.

In Nursery and Reception classes, children are given the option of having milk with added fluoride. This is on a 'opt in' basis with parents giving consent for their child to receive fluoride enriched milk. If they don't opt in, non-enriched milk is provided.

Children are encouraged to drink water from the school water fountains during break times but they are also allowed to access water during learning as all classes have space for water bottles in each room. Water bottles are to be provided by parents. There are water fountains for children on each floor. Juice or flavoured water is not permitted during the school day except as part of a child's packed lunch box.

Packed Lunches

Research undertaken by the 'School Food Plan' showed that many parents mistakenly imagine that a packed lunch is the healthiest option. The School Food Plan demonstrates that it is far easier to get the necessary nutrients into a cooked meal. The School Food Plan research also showed that only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards that currently apply to school food. Packed lunches are therefore strictly monitored so that they are in accordance with our 'Medlock Meals' School food policy.

All children have the option of bringing a packed lunch to school.

Children who bring a packed lunch to school are subject to the same support and expectations as those who opt to have a cooked meal (as outlined above in the 'Dining Experience' section).

To support families provide an appropriate and healthy packed lunch Medlock will;

- will provide facilities for pupils bringing in packed lunches and ensure that free, fresh drinking water is available;
- provide healthy lunches guidance at the beginning of academic year (appendix 1)
- monitor the content of school lunches and liaise with home (through the class teacher) to ensure the content of packed lunches follows the guidance provided.

To Monitor packed lunches staff use the following guidance based on the NHS document 'The Eatwell Plate'

www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/eatwellplate/

Packed lunches could INCLUDE:

- Sandwiches with savoury filling
- Cereal bars rather than cakes and biscuits.
- Seeds, fruit, crackers and cheese, and vegetable or bread sticks
- Roti (instead of parantha
- Curries (vegetable or chicken)
- Boiled rice

Packed lunches should NOT INCLUDE:

- Fast food
- Sandwiches made with sweetbreads (E.g. brioche) or sweet fillings such jam.
- More than one 'treat' (biscuit or crisps)

Where monitoring raises a concern, said concern is then passed to the parent by the class teacher. If appropriate, the guidance sheet will again be provided. If monitoring raises further concerns, schools will endeavour to source appropriate support both internally through pastoral support and externally through the school nurse service to enable parents to provide a healthy packed lunch for their child. If these steps are not successful, parents or carers will be asked to come in for a consultation with the Head Teacher or Governors.

Special diets

The school also recognises that some pupils may have verified medical conditions requiring special diets that do not allow for the standards to be met exactly. In this case, parents are urged to discuss this with their class teacher and to be responsible in ensuring that packed lunches are as healthy as possible. Evidence may be requested to support dietary requirements.

All school staff, including teaching and catering staff, will be informed of this policy and will support its implementation.