

Prioritising Child Health: Strengthening Monitoring and Accountability in the School Food System



Summary

The nutritional quality of school meals is regulated by compliance with mandatory school food standards (SFS).

However, without a robust and independent system of monitoring, it is unclear to what extent schools and caterers currently comply, increasing the risk of nutritional inadequacy and poor accountability. Research by FixOurFood highlights systemic non-compliance with SFS in meals served, which worsens when measuring what children actually eat. The research also highlights confusion over the responsibility and accountability for SFS compliance, a lack of understanding of the regulations, and an inability for local authority public health teams to oversee and manage nutritional quality.

This brief recommends that the Department for Education (DfE) establish a mandatory national system of compliance monitoring and accountability, supported by research to establish the most appropriate method to achieve this, for example, through incorporation in existing Ofsted or Food Standards Agency checks.

Description of the problem

Childhood obesity prevalence doubles between the ages of 5 and 11 in England. Young people are not receiving, nor consuming, nutritionally sufficient diets; only 9% meet their 5-a-day fruit and vegetable target, whilst consuming double the recommendation of free sugars (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2025).

Given that young people consume almost 30-50% of their daily calories at school (Schanzenbach, 2009), the school food environment holds a prominent influence on the nutritional quality of young people's diets.

The SFS can help ensure that school food is meeting nutritional recommendations and that children are consuming a healthy and varied diet that will aid their physical and cognitive development. This is especially important for children who are registered to receive free school meals, who are most likely to rely on school food to meet recommendations (and who experience worse health outcomes).

However, the SFS lacks routine external monitoring and little accountability to non-adherence, and as such compliance rates are low across both primary and secondary schools (McGinty et al; Pallan et al., 2024). There are inconsistencies in interpretation of the standards, communication gaps between school leadership and catering providers/kitchen staff which hinder efforts to ensure improvement and adherence to SFS, and a lack of expert advice by local authorities to support SFS implementation within schools (Verian, 2024).



Research Findings

Researchers from the [FixOurFood](#) research programme analysed menus alongside over 4,000 plates from 25 Yorkshire schools to compare food served versus food actually consumed. Twenty two semi-structured interviews were also conducted with caterers, public health officials and advocates to explore what those responsible for the provision of school food understand and apply in practice in relation to influencing the quality of meals provided (Nixon, 2025). Through collaboration with Bradford City Council, a menu swaps pilot study was also conducted with 5 primary schools that sought to increase school food quality and sustainability whilst remaining cost-neutral. Further to this, the team worked with a School Foods Standards Agency (FSA) intern to apply the FSA compliance pilot questions to the FixOurFood Yorkshire-based dataset (18 primary school menus and 11 meal observations).

Key findings include:

- Menu compliance does not guarantee healthier meals. Menus that met the standards on paper did not always translate into meals that supported better dietary quality. Staff often prioritised meal uptake over nutritional value to ensure no child went hungry. This led some schools to use loopholes in the standards, such as over reliance on processed foods or sugary desserts, and pairing more expensive but less popular items with cheaper, less healthy favourites. Compliance was often interpreted at the level of the menu overall rather than the nutritional quality of individual dishes (Nixon, 2026).

Research Findings

- Independent checks reveal low compliance with the standards. When the Food Standards Agency pilot questions were applied, only one menu cycle and 11 meal services were fully compliant. Eighty eight per cent of schools failed all three question sets used in the pilot (McGinty, Nixon, and Oxley, 2026). This highlights a significant gap between the standards and what is delivered in practice.
- School leaders and public health teams lack the authority and expertise to influence food quality. Interviewees described limited commercial expertise, time and training to manage catering contracts effectively. Public health teams reported feeling unable to intervene because they lack legal jurisdiction. This leaves schools vulnerable to poor quality contracts with providers who may prioritise profit or meal uptake over nutritional quality.
- Catering teams face structural pressures that undermine nutritional quality. Kitchen staff often work within tight budgets, limited staffing and strong expectations to maximise uptake. These pressures can reinforce a focus on popularity rather than health, making it difficult to shift towards more nutritious menus even when staff are motivated to do so.

Together, these findings show that the current system does not support consistent delivery of nutritionally adequate meals and that accountability mechanisms are too weak to drive improvement.

Policy Recommendations

To address accountability failures, the following specific changes are recommended:

1. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) should expand its compliance pilot into a national tiered framework, with a more extensive question set, comprising essential questions and accompanied by supplementary school-specific questions, to capture diverse aspects of menu compliance. FSA checks should include a review of the accountability structures in schools alongside menu compliance. Menu-compliance checks should be extended to include spot-checks of “actual intake” and “plate waste” metrics to secure child health and prevent resource waste.
2. The Department for Education (DfE) should integrate SFS compliance checks into statutory Ofsted inspections. This provides a robust enforcement mechanism with clear consequences for non-compliance, signalling school food as a system-wide priority.
3. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and DfE should provide ring-fenced funding, alongside relevant training, to Local Authority Public Health teams to reinstate School Food Improvement Officers. These teams require the legal jurisdiction to oversee all provision types (Local Authority, commercial, and in-house) and provide tailored nutritional support to schools. This will support schools to embed rigorous accountability within existing governance structures.
4. The DfE should develop a mandatory standard contract for school meals for all outsourced provision that is aligned with the updated School Food Standards. This would place all providers on an equal starting point and provide school leaders with adequate power to enforce consistently high-quality meals for all children. It would also empower school leaders with clear Key Performance Indicators for nutritional quality, ensuring that nutritional value is offered in both what is provided and consumed, whilst ensuring that school meals deliver a health benefit, and thus a return on investment of public funds spent.

Priority Actions

- The DfE must immediately publish revised, mandatory School Food Standards that include clear definitions alongside examples of compliant and non-compliant menus to contextualise the standards. For instance, differentiation between unprocessed meat/poultry, and manufactured meat products, could help improve understanding and compliance of standards.
- In the next 12-24 months, Ofsted should pilot the inclusion of food quality observations in its inspection framework, supported by DHSC/DfE-funded specialist nutritional and skills-based training for inspectors and catering staff. Training would include technical interpretation of SFS, for instance allowing inspectors to differentiate between different food preparation methods that could impact on SFS compliance (e.g. prepared from scratch vs. pre-packaged defrosted foods). Training for catering staff would include up-skilling in food preparation methods, alongside evidence-based insights into effective strategies or “nudges” that could help promote food consumption (e.g. taster sessions).
- The FSA should conduct regular mandatory, independent audits of menus and food consumption in a representative sample of schools to ensure compliance with school food standards whilst commissioning the evaluation of health benefits received by children and young people. The commission should include the investigation of cost-effective methods to collect food intake data within audits.

FixOurFood

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