

Feed the Mind, Fuel the Grade

1. School Food Monitoring in light of the 2025 review of the School Food Standards



A report by The All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food

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The views expressed in this Report are those of the group.

The School Food APPG's view on Ofsted

In early 2025, Chair of the School Food All-Party Parliamentary Group, Sharon Hodgson MP, wrote to HMCI Sir Martyn Oliver to re-emphasise the critical importance of including school food standards within Ofsted's inspection framework.

The letter highlighted the existing legal requirements for school food, previous efforts to monitor compliance, and the proven link between good nutrition and educational outcomes. It urged Ofsted to integrate monitoring of school food into routine inspections, using established follow-up processes to ensure accountability and improvement, while inviting ongoing collaboration through the APPG.

Their response was lacklustre. While they acknowledged the letter as part of their wider review, they emphasised that inspection time is limited and the primary focus remains on the quality and safety of education for pupils, completely sidelining school food.

This response was sent to all members of the School Food APPG, and the responses are broadly categorised and summarised in this report.

Why is this important?

The School Food Standards are not merely guidelines; they are statutory requirements designed to ensure that every child receives a healthy, balanced meal during the school day. However, without systematic monitoring and enforcement, these standards risk being inconsistently applied, undermining their intended benefits.

Studies have shown that free school meals can reduce obesity rates and absenteeism,

improve academic performance, and enhanced lifetime earnings.¹

As Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent said in the 2013 School Food Plan: "what gets measured, gets done."²

There is currently no robust, national mechanism to ensure compliance with school food standards. Ofsted's current inspection framework does not routinely assess adherence to these standards, leaving a significant gap in oversight. This lack of monitoring means that some children may not receive the nutritious meals they are entitled to, potentially affecting their health and educational outcomes.

Moreover, the absence of enforcement mechanisms can lead to disparities in meal quality, with some schools providing substandard food options. Without proper enforcement, the school food standards are not worth the paper they are written on.

Ensuring that school food standards are met is not about adding burdens to schools or inspectors; it's about fulfilling our commitment to children's health and education. By implementing a clear, expert-led monitoring system, we can ensure that all children have access to the nutritious meals they need to thrive, both academically and physically.

This Government remains committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever.

We have to start with the food they are being served 180 days a year in school.

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<https://urbanhealth.org.uk/insights/reports/expanding-free-school-meals-a-cost-benefit-analysis>

² https://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School_Food_Plan_2013.pdf

The responses from the APPG are broadly categorised and summarised as follows.

1. Ofsted's Role and Capacity to Monitor School Food

Many agree that Ofsted currently lacks the expertise and capacity to effectively assess compliance with school food standards. Expanding Ofsted's remit in this area could increase pressure on educators and inspectors, especially given that schools often have limited control over external catering contractors. There is broad consensus that responsibility for monitoring should primarily lie with government bodies or specialised agencies with appropriate expertise.

Suggestions include appointing qualified nutritionists or paediatric dietitians to centrally review menus and conduct targeted spot checks, ensuring consistent oversight separate from Ofsted's broader inspection duties.

2. Alternative and Complementary Monitoring Approaches

There is widespread support for alternative monitoring mechanisms outside full Ofsted inspections. Dedicated monitoring visits, conducted either by Ofsted separately or by empowered local authorities, are seen as more practical and less burdensome.

Many also recommend involving school governors more actively in monitoring school food standards, given their statutory responsibility. However, without central monitoring, there are worries accountability will continue to be inconsistent.

3. Practical Challenges Around Inspection and Staff Wellbeing

It is widely acknowledged that school inspections are already demanding, and extending their scope to include detailed food

monitoring could affect staff wellbeing and inspection quality.

To improve consistency and effectiveness, almost all consider additional training for inspectors necessary, enabling them to provide more informed and valuable feedback, which is what currently occurs in Scotland.

4. The Critical Importance of School Food to Education and Wellbeing

There is strong agreement that school food is essential to pupils' education, health, and wellbeing. Nutrition impacts concentration, behaviour, academic performance, and lifelong health outcomes. School meals are not just about sustenance but form a core part of the educational environment, providing opportunities to teach important themes like cultural inclusion, sustainability, and healthy living, as well as ensuring no learner is excluded on the basis of dietary requirements. Without proper monitoring, we face dramatic inconsistencies on this issue from school to school.

International examples highlight the value of integrating mealtimes into the school curriculum. Ignoring school food risks sidelining a vital element of pupil development and achievement.

Conclusion

Overall, feedback calls for a clear, expert-led system to monitor school food standards that complements rather than overburdens existing inspection frameworks. Collaborative action is crucial, involving government agencies, local authorities, school governors, and specialist professionals is critical to ensuring high-quality, nutritious school meals that support children's education and wellbeing.

As Chair of the School Food All-Party Parliamentary Group, I am committed to advancing the quality and oversight of school food standards to support children's education, health, and wellbeing. Following recent engagement with Ofsted and extensive feedback from APPG members, it is clear that a collaborative, expert-led approach is essential to drive meaningful improvements without overburdening the existing inspection framework.

1. Establish a Specialist Monitoring Framework

We must advocate for the creation of a dedicated monitoring body composed of qualified nutritionists, paediatric dietitians, and food safety experts. This body would be responsible for reviewing menus, conducting targeted spot checks, and ensuring consistent compliance with statutory food standards across schools. There is a wide scope for whom this body could be directed by, whether it be within Ofsted, built on the Food Standards Agency's pilot which reported in 2024³, or an additional body directly within the Department for Education.

2. Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Accountability

Effective oversight requires collaboration between government departments, local authorities, and school governors. I will champion greater involvement of school governors in monitoring food standards, backed by clear guidance and appropriate training, reflecting their statutory responsibilities and enabling them to hold schools and providers to account. In the short term, there is also a role for Ofsted to hold schools and governors to account for this statutory role.

³ www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts/news/food-standards-agency-publishes-final-report-on-school-food-standards-compliance-pilot

3. Elevate the Importance of School Food in Education Policy

I will continue to highlight the critical role that nutritious school meals play in supporting academic outcomes, behaviour, and lifelong health. By sharing international best practices and robust evidence, we can strengthen political and public commitment to embedding high-quality food provision within the broader educational environment. This includes an expansion of free school meals not only as a health policy, but as a wider child poverty alleviation tool.

4. Maintain Ongoing Dialogue and Partnership

The APPG will remain engaged with Ofsted and relevant stakeholders to track developments, share expertise, and collaborate on piloting innovative monitoring approaches that balance rigour with practicality.

There is a particular opportunity at this moment as the Department for Education undertakes a review of the School Food Standards. Many across the sector are calling for this to place a renewed focus on the proper and continued implementation of these new standards.

This work will continue through the APPG with their next report, which will investigate what is needed in the review of the school food standards, because every child deserves access to nutritious meals that support their learning and wellbeing, regardless of where they go to school.

Sharon Hodgson MP

Chair, APPG on School Food

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We thank the membership of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food for their vital contributions which make up this report, as well as APSE for hosting the publication of this report here: apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/apse-networks/catering-school-meals/appg/reports

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