

BITE BACK: POLICY BRIEF

SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS: NEED FOR MONITORING OF COMPLIANCE

“Young students have been saying for years that what appears on school menus often doesn’t give us the fuel we need to concentrate, learn and get through the school day. If you’re not in a canteen every day, you might not realise that. We are surrounded by unhealthy products every day, even in the spaces that are supposed to help us grow and thrive. The new standards are a real opportunity-but the government needs to make sure they are actually followed.”

- Carrera, 19



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Later this year, England will see a significant expansion in access to Free School Meals (FSM). From the 1st September 2026, all school children from households in receipt of Universal Credit will be entitled to a free school lunch. The government estimates that half a million more children will benefit, compared to under the current policy. Bite Back welcomes this major step forward; we know this could have a transformative impact on the health, education and food security of children across the country. However, realising the ambition of this policy to change lives means ensuring that the food pupils are served supports their health. For this reason it's vital that this Government follows through on their planned improved updates to the School Food Standards (SFS) and - critically - ensures adherence to them.

Bite Back set out to uncover how closely the current 2014 SFS are being followed in secondary schools across England. This innovative, AI-supported analysis of nearly 400 school food menus reveals an unfortunate reality, and highlights the urgent need for a monitoring and enforcement framework.

Key Findings

- There is currently a **lack of transparency** in what is on offer in secondary schools.
 - Menus could only be located for 391 schools (78%).
 - Less than half (190, 49%) of accessible menus include a full 3-week rotation and a break offer, both of which are needed to fully assess compliance with the SFS.
 - Additionally, 164 schools (42%) did not publish a break menu, which is where the majority of violations occur.
- The food on offer in secondary schools is **not in line with the current 2014 SFS**.
 - The majority (76%) of menus had at least one confirmed violation.
 - The two most commonly flagged violations were processed meat on offer more than twice per week (224, 57%) and non-permitted snacks (206, 53%). This includes examples of sausage rolls as a standing menu item and branded snacks and confectionery such as Oreos, KitKats and Walkers crisps on daily break menus.

Key Recommendations

As a member of the School Food Review, Bite Back fully supports the following recommendations to the Department for Education (DfE) around the development of a robust national enforcement system including monitoring school's SFS compliance¹:

1. Strengthen school food governance structures to embed responsibilities and accountabilities over school food compliance
2. Introduce external monitoring of school food governance structures
3. Introduce a process for checking compliance with the SFS
4. Provide support for schools to deliver nutritious food for all children

¹ School Food Review (2026). From Standards to Practice: An Accountability Framework for Better School Food Compliance. https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2026-07/School%20Food%20Review_%20An%20Accountability%20Framework%20for%20Better%20School%20Food%20Compliance.pdf

CONTEXT

Bite Back's latest research comes at a pivotal moment for school food policy in England. The Government is currently working towards the most ambitious overhaul of school food in over a decade, making significant progress towards its ambition of raising the healthiest generation ever. The Government has committed to an expansion of FSM to all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit in September 2026 and to updating the current SFS, which were implemented in 2014. The Government's response to its consultation on the proposed updates to the SFS is expected in September 2026, with implementation set to begin the following year.

England is the only UK nation without any formalised mechanism for monitoring compliance to the SFS.² Implementing such a mechanism will be critical to ensuring that the bold efforts to improve the quality of school food in England are met. The Government recognised monitoring for compliance as a policy gap in its 2022, Levelling-up White Paper.³ In response, the DfE and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) developed the SFS Compliance Pilot to test if Food Safety Officers could carry out a compliance check alongside existing food hygiene inspections.⁴ The checks were run in 16 Local Authorities (LA). It found that secondary schools and schools not using LA catering services were on average, more likely to be flagged for non-compliance. Despite these findings, compliance checks have yet to be implemented.

The trends of non-compliance observed in the pilot is consistent with Bite Back's research into the dominance of unhealthy grab-and-go food provision in secondary schools, where nutrient-poor, predominantly carbohydrate-based items, including pizza, rolls, pastries and chips are often in the spotlight and cheaper than healthier options.⁵ A 2024 assessment of 36 secondary schools in England found that none of the schools were fully SFS-compliant.⁶ Food and drink served at breakfast and breaktimes were the most problematic, especially relating to restrictions on food and drink high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS).

This is not surprising in light of the BMJ's recent finding that more than a third of the firms on display at The School Food People Show and Forum in Birmingham in July 2026 sold HFSS products.⁷ In total, 52 of the 137 companies with stands were found to supply items including hot dogs, pizza, muffins and fizzy drinks. The School Food People are the main trade group for school food caterers and are sponsored by firms supplying pizzas, cakes, waffles and ice cream.⁸

The SFS were designed and implemented to protect and improve children's health – increasingly important as the Government's ambition of raising the healthiest generation is at risk of not being met. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's (RCPCH) State of Child Health 2026 report rang the alarm that the UK is in fact, raising one of the unhealthiest

² Food Foundation (2026). How the UK's School Food Standards Compare.

<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/how-uks-school-food-standards-compare>

³ Department for Levelling Up & Housing and Communities (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom. Gov.uk.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

⁴ Verian. (2024). School food standards compliance pilot: Feasibility phase 2 research. FSA Research and Evidence.

<https://doi.org/10.46756/sci.fsa.gsy115>

⁵ Bite Back (2026). Quick, cheap and profitable: Who is benefitting from the rise in grab-and-go canteen culture at the expense of child health?

⁶ Pallan, M., et al (2024). School food policy in secondary schools in England and its impact on adolescents' diets and dental health: the FUEL multiple-methods study. *Public Health Res* 2024;12(12). <https://doi.org/10.3310/TTPL8570>

⁷ Borland, S. (2026). Junk food suppliers have "shocking" major presence at UK's biggest school food event. *BMJ*. DOI: 10.1136/bmj-2026-100552. <https://www.bmj.com/content/394/bmj-2026-100552>

⁸ Borland, S. (2026). Junk food suppliers have "shocking" major presence at UK's biggest school food event. *BMJ*. DOI: 10.1136/bmj-2026-100552. <https://www.bmj.com/content/394/bmj-2026-100552>

generations of children in decades.⁹ The latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that children in England currently consume twice the recommended daily limit of sugar and only 4% of children of secondary school age are meeting the dietary recommendations on fibre.¹⁰ School provides a critical window of intervention but currently, the prevalence of obesity rises from 10.5% when children begin primary school to 22.2% by the time they leave – this jumps to nearly 30% in the most deprived areas.¹¹

For these reasons, the Government has committed to updating the standards to align with current guidance, increasing fibre, reducing sugar and restricting HFSS food and drink.¹² They are also proposing that all schools be required to publish their food policy and menus on their websites.¹³ The following research, conducted internally by Bite Back, serves to demonstrate the critical importance of - alongside the above - implementing a mechanism for monitoring of the compliance to the SFS, alongside the expansion of FSM and updated standards.

METHODOLOGY

This innovative pilot research project utilised the power of AI to supplement human-led research.¹⁴ The purpose was two-fold: 1) to test the use of AI in research and large-scale menu analysis and 2) to understand the scale of compliance with the current 2014 SFS among secondary schools in England.

The sample was taken from the publicly accessible, Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database,¹⁵ and filtered for state-funded secondary schools (academies, LA-maintained, and free schools). This resulted in a sampling frame of 3,411 schools which matches Government statistics accounting for 3,452 state-funded secondary schools in England in 2024.¹⁶ Using Python code developed with assistance from Claude, a stratified random sample of 500 schools (roughly 15% of all state-funded secondary schools in England) was drawn using a fixed random seed (42). The sample was stratified by region (proportional to the 9 English regions) and FSM quartile (roughly equal split across Q1–Q4).

The information obtained from GIAS included each school's URN, demographic data and URL. Each school website was manually searched to locate accessible school menus. Common menu locations included the parent page, student information or FSM section; where a search function was available, search terms used included 'cater', 'canteen', 'menu', 'meal', 'lunch', 'tariff' and 'price'. Lunch, breakfast/ break, drink menus and price lists were downloaded and converted into a merged PDF format, and stored securely.

⁹ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2026). State of Child Health. <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/state-of-child-health>

¹⁰ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2025). National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023: report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023-report>

¹¹ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2026). State of Child Health. <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/state-of-child-health>

¹² Public Health England (2015). SACN Carbohydrates and Health Report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-carbohydrates-and-health-report>

¹³ Department for Education (2026). School food standards: updating the legislative Framework. Government Consultation.

https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-food-policy-team/school-food-standards-updating-the-leg-framework/supporting_documents/school-food-standards-updating-the-legislative-framework-government-consultationpdf

¹⁴ Anthropic. (2026). Claude (claude-sonnet-4-6) [Large language model]. <https://www.anthropic.com>

¹⁵ <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>; accessed on 23 July 2026

¹⁶ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/24b3a94a-8bb6-41d0-1318-08dd12e09af5>

With the assistance of Claude, the researcher developed an automated analysis pipeline for use in Google Colab, a cloud-based Python environment, to assess menu compliance with the 2014 SFS.¹⁷ The pipeline functioned as a structured prompt that instructed the Claude API how to assess each menu against the SFS and identify whether menus covered 3+ weeks and/ or break time. The development of this pipeline was iterative. Originally, it was designed to analyse a menu against each rule in the SFS, assessing the menu across three weeks and break offerings. All 391 PDFs were analysed using the Claude API with this original V1 pipeline. Half of these results were then reviewed manually by the human researcher. This first round of analysis and human review was used exclusively to look for trends and patterns of non-compliance so as to further refine the pipeline.

The pipeline was adjusted to flag the most obvious violations that had been identified in the first round of review (V2; see Appendix 1). These adjustments were made to account for the fact that physical menus cannot explicitly determine cooking methods, e.g. whether starchy foods were cooked in oil or if desserts contained confectionery. Again, all 391 menus were run through the Claude API using the V2 pipeline, which flagged for nine potential violations. All flagged menus were then reviewed by the human researcher who confirmed whether or not a violation was actually present. If one violation was confirmed, the entire menu was considered non-compliant.

Limitations

The sample is limited to schools with publicly available menus, which could suggest a sample bias. However, the menus included in our analysis were broadly representative across region and FSM quartile.

This research found that menus were often published on a rotating basis, often out of date and sometimes referred to as ‘sample menus’. Less than half (49%) of all menus provided enough information to do a thorough assessment across the entire school day. As such, published menus only cover the intent of food served. Violations can therefore only be considered potential and would require a physical, in-school assessment to confirm actual violations. However, if caterers include violations on published menus, the actual violations likely exceed what’s captured.

Similarly, many menu items cannot be fully assessed without asking catering staff/ school cooks about cooking methods or ingredients; e.g. starchy foods cooked in oil, baked or fried items, confectionery and drinks (specification and portion size). We therefore did not include these items as potential violations, likely resulting in an underestimate of overall non-compliance.

As this was a pilot research project testing the use of AI, each flagged menu was reviewed manually. Therefore, a full analysis of each individually flagged violation was not possible due to researcher capacity. Additional research time and resources are needed to do a thorough breakdown of confirmed violations by type.

¹⁷<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/school-food-standards-practical-guide>

Data and AI ethics and governance

The use of AI in research comes with inherent risk. The Anthropic API can be prone to error. We thoroughly considered the risks of AI and consulted with various experts in the sector. To mitigate risk and in consideration of a relatively small sample size, we manually reviewed each menu so that human review covered 100% of all confirmed violations.

We retrieved menus manually (without additional researchers, this would not be realistic beyond a 500-school pilot) and removed school identifying data after analysis. All data was stored securely with limited access.

FINDINGS

Sample

Of the 500 schools in our representative sample of state-funded secondary schools in England, 492 had functioning websites linked in the GIAS database. A manual search of each website resulted in 391 accessible menus. Of these, less than half (190, 49%) published a full 3-week menu rotation and a break menu – both of which are needed to fully assess compliance with the SFS. The vast majority of schools did publish their menus on a 3-week rotation (334, 85%); however, 164 schools (42%) did not publish a break menu.

Table 1: Available menus

Menu coverage	Count (% of sample)
< 3 weeks	57 (15%)
3+ weeks	334 (85%)
Break menu available	227 (58%)
3+ weeks + break menu	190 (49%)

Compliance

Even with 42% of menus omitting the break offer, our analysis revealed the majority of schools (299, 76%) had a confirmed violation of the SFS. The remaining 92 (24%) menus that did not publish a confirmed violation, also did not publish a break menu which suggests a high likelihood that these menus would also be non-compliant if the entire offer was analysed. This implies the current 76% non-compliance finding could be an underestimate.

Table 2: Menu compliance to the SFS

Violation confirmed (% of sample)	299 (76%)
No violation confirmed (% of sample)	92 (24%)

AI as a viable research tool

The V2 pipeline originally flagged 311 menus (80%) for potential violation. The breakdown of flagged violations is as follows (see Appendix for more detail):

- Processed meat 3+ days — flagged in 224 schools (57%)
- Non-permitted snacks — flagged in 206 schools (53%)
- Processed meat as daily break offer — flagged in 153 schools (39%)
- Starchy food cooked in oil as daily break offer — flagged in 144 schools (37%)
- Confectionery as ingredient — flagged in 123 schools (31%)
- Pastry 3+ days — flagged in 90 schools (23%)
- Chips 3+ days — flagged in 90 schools (23%)
- Standalone confectionery — flagged in 8 schools (2%)
- Non-permitted drinks — flagged in 3 schools (1%)

Of the 311 menus flagged for potential violations, 299 (96%) were confirmed by human review to have at least one confirmed violation. These results suggest the pipeline could support population-scale analysis with targeted human spot-checking rather than full manual review of all flagged cases.

CONCLUSION

To the best of our knowledge, this project is the largest analysis to date of secondary school compliance with the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014 in England. It reflects what young people have been saying for years. Instead of nutritious, healthy options to fuel their learning, young people are too often flooded with options that are beige, bland and boring. This analysis demonstrates the urgent need for immediate implementation of a monitoring and enforcement mechanism both for the violations it identifies and the gaps in transparency it surfaces. Incomplete menu provision and the lack of key information needed to assess compliance, which can only be assessed by a standardised monitoring framework, mean that the scope of non-compliance is likely larger than this research suggests.

With the current Government's ambitions to raise the healthiest generation ever, expanding access to FSM and improving the quality of school food in England for the first time in over a decade are two incredible steps forward. But for the Government to ensure their efforts make the biggest and most measurable difference in the lives of children across England, it needs to ensure the new standards are monitored, enforced, and actually come to life. This is a once in a generation opportunity to ensure every child across England has access to healthy and nutritious school food, no matter where they live.

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