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AT A GLANCE: MONITORING COMPLIANCE FRAMEWORKS FOR SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS

Final report

Version 1.0

Mae'r ddogfen yma ar gael yn y Gymraeg/This document is available in Welsh

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Abstract

The school age years are a crucial period of rapid growth and development (1–3) of which diet is a principal requirement (2–6). Owing to the time spent in school during childhood and the meal occasions provided during this time, school food contributes significantly to a child's dietary intake. It therefore poses a significant influence on the dietary intake of children and presents opportunities for population health improvement. For further reading on school food and child health outcomes please see '[Opportunities for improving children's health in Wales: the potential of school food](#)' (7).

Purpose of report

There is currently no national monitoring framework for school food and nutrient standards in Wales. As a result, implementation and compliance, and the enablers and barriers of implementation and compliance, in schools is unknown.

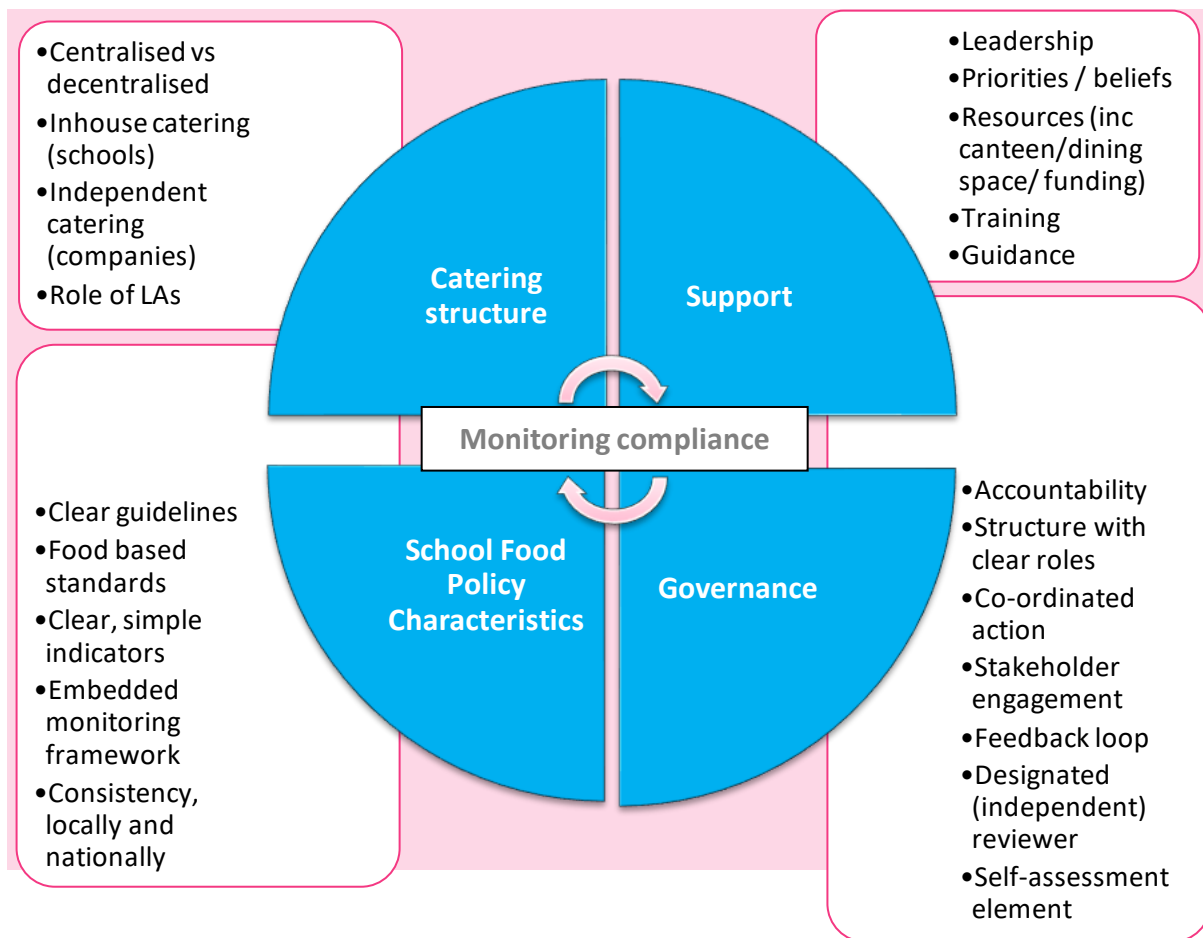
Examining the evidence base about monitoring frameworks for compliance with School Food Standards (SFS), is an important and timely issue supporting national priority areas in Wales.

This report provides a summary of the learning from a scoping search of the literature looking at the implementation of and compliance with SFS, and their monitoring processes, to identify ways to support the delivery of quality school food and compliance with the national standards. The technical report is available here [[link](#)].

Findings

Four core themes associated with monitoring of compliance with SFS were identified in the literature: catering structure, policy characteristics, governance structures and support.

Key findings for the development and implementation of a monitoring framework for SFS compliance.



Recommendations

The evidence synthesis has informed the development of a suite of recommendations which could support and improve the monitoring of, and compliance with, school food standards.

1. **Collaboration and engagement;** include multi-sector actors to establish clear goals, outcomes and actions required.
2. **Governance;** establish clear structure with accountability and feedback loop.
3. **Indicators with measurable outcomes;** adopt consistent, national indicators, with consideration of local variations. Consider embedding into

existing frameworks.

4. **Support provision**; provide clear guidance and training opportunities about the standards, the links between school food and child health and relevance to individuals' roles and responsibilities. Consider embedding into existing training, such as training for governors.

5. **Piloting**; pilot approach before wider rollout, include pupils / school community.

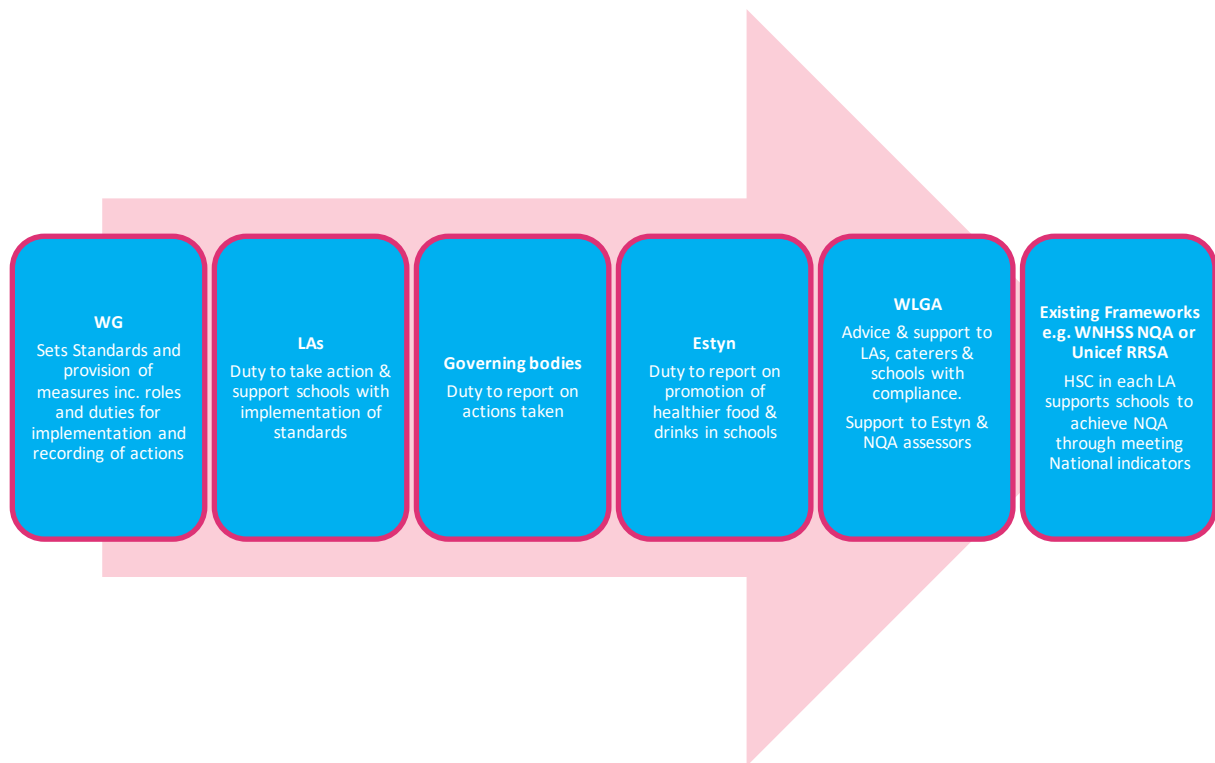
Background

School food is a core element in the Welsh Government (WG) National Strategy; Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales (HWHW) Moving Ahead in 2022-2024; Priority Area 4 (8). This includes a review and update of Wales's current Food and Nutrient Based Standards and Requirements for Schools (9,10), and the implementation of free school meals for all pupils in Wales by 2024 (11).

Monitoring and compliance of School Food Standards (SFS) are an essential consideration to ensure schools are appropriately supported in meeting required standards, and to ensure food provision is having the intended impact on children's health, well-being, and education outcomes.

The standards and guidance in Wales do not currently include a monitoring framework. Details for ensuring the standards and requirements are met are set out in The Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009 (10) (See Appendix 1). Monitoring is generally undertaken through a self-regulatory approach with support provided by Local Authorities (LAs), guidance from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and some reporting from Estyn (10). Additional frameworks which include the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Scheme (WNHSS) National Quality Award (NQA) and Unicef Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA), but these do not specifically relate to SFS (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Summary of Wales' governance structure for monitoring compliance with SFS, and actors involved



Aims and Objectives

Principal aim

Learn from existing, or research about, compliance and monitoring frameworks for SFS.

Objectives

1. Evaluate the enablers and barriers to the implementation and compliance of school food standards.
2. Evaluate the influences on the development and implementation of monitoring frameworks for school food standards.
3. Identify examples of frameworks, through national and international case studies, for the monitoring of school food standards.

Research Questions

To meet these objectives, three research questions were set:

1. What are the enabler and barriers to the implementation and compliance of school food standards?
2. What factors influence the development and implementation of monitoring frameworks for school food standards?
3. What monitoring frameworks for school food standards exist nationally and internationally?

Methodology

Search Strategy

To meet the objectives the systematic search had two phases:

- Phase one: literature search of peer-reviewed academic journals
- Phase two: grey literature search and personal contacts

Phase 1: Literature Search

Using a PICO format, a systematic search for peer-reviewed studies was undertaken. Two concurrent searches were undertaken 1) focused on the enablers and barriers to SFS compliance, and 2) focused on SFS monitoring frameworks.

Phase 2: Grey literature searches

Further searches were undertaken to capture a wide range of information from key actors with an influence and focus on school food, including government and voluntary organisations reports and reviews.

Direct contacts

Via the Food Standards Agency (FSA) SFS Compliance pilot team, who were contacted regarding their newly launched compliance pilot in England, several areas across the UK were highlighted as potential case studies for monitoring approaches. This included Lincolnshire, the Scottish school food inspectorate, and Southwark Borough (London). These areas were contacted directly about their school food policies via email. Virtual meetings were undertaken with each respective area, and information provided about their monitoring frameworks for SFS.

Search Results

Final shortlist: phase one

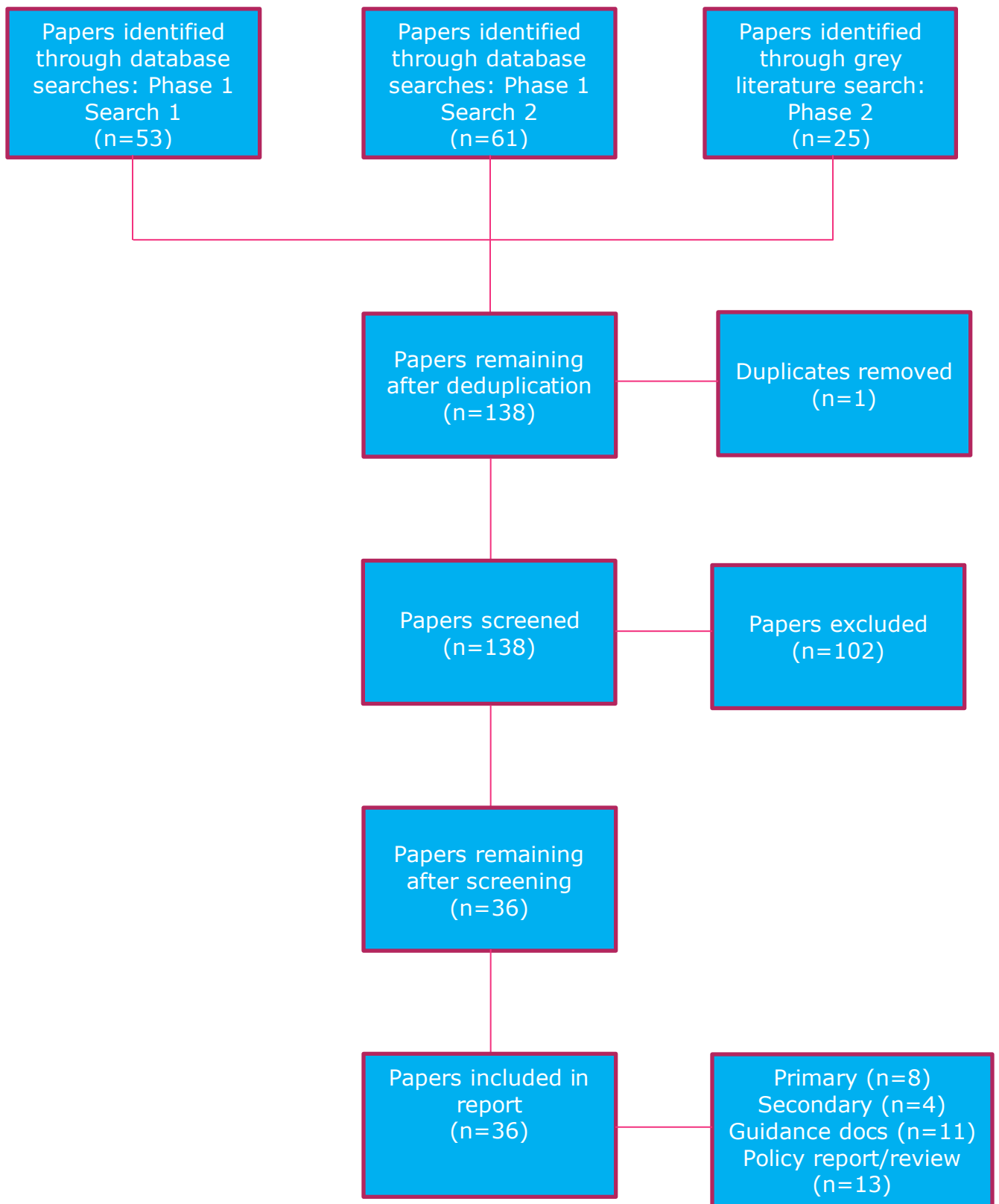
Searches were carried out in June 2023 on OVID Medline, Google Scholar, APA PsycInfo and EMBASE databases. A two-stage screening process was undertaken; title and abstract screening using inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by a full-text review. Forward and backward citation searches were also conducted.

A total of 16 final papers were retained following title, abstract and full-text screening (see PRISMA Figure 2).

Final shortlist: phase two

The grey literature search resulted in the selection of 11 UK SFS guidance documents, 7 reports about SFS and a further 2 studies related to SFS compliance (see PRISMA Figure 2).

Figure 2: PRISMA Diagram



Evidence synthesis: at a glance

This section provides a summary of the evidence synthesis on enablers and barriers for the implementation and compliance of SFS, key influences for monitoring compliance with SFS, and learning from existing monitoring frameworks through international and national case studies.

Enablers and barriers to the implementation and compliance of SFS

The literature revealed *four themes* that influence implementation and compliance of SFS:

1. Leadership and support
2. Resources
3. The Standards and policy enforcement
4. Priorities and beliefs

Leadership and support

Clear leadership and the engagement of stakeholders across multiple sectors and policy levels are enablers (18–25).

Senior leadership team priorities affect implementation and compliance (26).

Pupil, parent, and governor support is important, with principals/head teachers more likely to implement if they think they have this support (27).

Multiple studies supported the view that training provision is an important part of successful implementation and compliance and influenced attitudes and motivation (18,20–22,25,27,28).

Two global reports by WHO and the World Food Programme (WFP) recommended that strong collaboration is required between health and education departments (3,93).

Resources

The availability of funds, the cost of implementation and the profitability for catering services influence successful implementation (18–22,29).

Capacity factors are key influences including staffing, such as sufficient school cooks, lunchtime supervisors and facilities such as dining space and kitchen facilities (19,20,22,28,30).

The Standards and policy enforcement

Standards

A lack of implementation framework (22), long, complex guidelines (19), feasibility of the policy (19,21,29), misconceptions or lack of understanding can be barriers (19,20,22).

Simplicity, clear communication, and feasibility of guidelines are enablers (19,20,22).

Whether there are food or nutrient-based standards is influential (31). Overall food-based standards (FBS) produce better compliance (31), however, it is not possible to draw on systematic studies on this issue.

Strong collaboration between education and health sectors as part of policy development is also reported as essential (5,28).

Enforcement

Monitoring is a key part of enabling schools to achieve compliance with SFS (18,19,21–23,25,26,29,32,33).

Lack of enforcement (18,22,26,28,33), lack of monitoring (18,19,21–23,25,26,29,32,33) and having no external body to ensure schools adhered to standards (27), are barriers.

Appropriate policy governance and accountability measures including having clear, defined roles and consistency nationally are reported as

enablers (19,22,23,26,28,32–34).

Priorities and beliefs

Perceived burden and risk for child health and for implementing the standards for stakeholders is influential (19).

Beliefs about the purpose of the guidelines and contention around this were shown to be a barrier (18,22). For example, WHO reported 'responsibility conflict' when stakeholders are unclear of the boundaries of responsibility for ensuring pupils are provided with healthier diets is a barrier (28). These factors impact prioritisation and level of engagement.

Improvement of attitudes is attributed to training provisions about the SFS, child health outcomes and roles and responsibilities to enable individuals and organisations to understand how they fit in (27).

Establishing a common goal, engagement and coordinated actions are enablers (18,20,21,24,26).

Other themes

The wider school environment is likely to be a significant influence. Other themes that were present included access to less healthy food outlets surrounding schools (21,27,29), the school environment including foods outside of the standards remit (27), and timings of the school day (30).

Since the literature review focused on the monitoring and compliance of SFS, these wider themes were deemed outside the scope of this work. However, the whole school food environment must be considered in school food policy content and systems wide approaches.

Monitoring frameworks for SFS compliance

The literature revealed *four themes* that influence the development and implementation of monitoring frameworks for SFS:

1. Policy characteristics
2. Governance
3. Support
4. Catering structures

Policy Characteristics

Monitoring and outcomes are strongly influenced by the type of policy in place (35).

Policy content, the type of standards and the inclusion of simple, key indicators to monitor are key elements (5,22,32,35).

FBS are linked to simpler, easier monitoring compared to nutrient-based standards (NBS) (35).

Evidence suggested NBS are important for the nutritional quality of school food.

FBS compliance only did not always lead to achieving nutrient level recommendations, whereas having FBS and NBS provide better outcomes, such as greater dietary variety and lower intake of fat and salt.

Having no standards produce worse outcomes (36).

Synthesising key elements of both may be pertinent (35).

Governance

Mutual accountability and a lack of appropriate enforcement structures are barriers (37).

Streamlined governance structures with clear roles and a feedback loop are

enablers (5,34,37).

An independent (neutral) reviewer to carry out monitoring responsibilities and external auditing are also highlighted as a strength (32,35).

WHO reported that self-monitoring approaches are a strong way to engage stakeholders and guide self-learning (38). Therefore, a combined approach may be required.

Monitoring frameworks should not be created in parallel to existing ones that are used for assessing school performance (38).

Utilising existing resources and networks is outlined as important (5,32).

Support

The presence of training, guidance, and resources supported monitoring is highlighted as important to support monitoring (22,32).

In-person support in schools with opportunities to build relationships with the school community including pupils is also reported (34).

Training not only improves knowledge but leads to more positive attitudes with a better understanding of the link between dietary health, school food and educational attainment and child health outcomes (27).

Catering structures

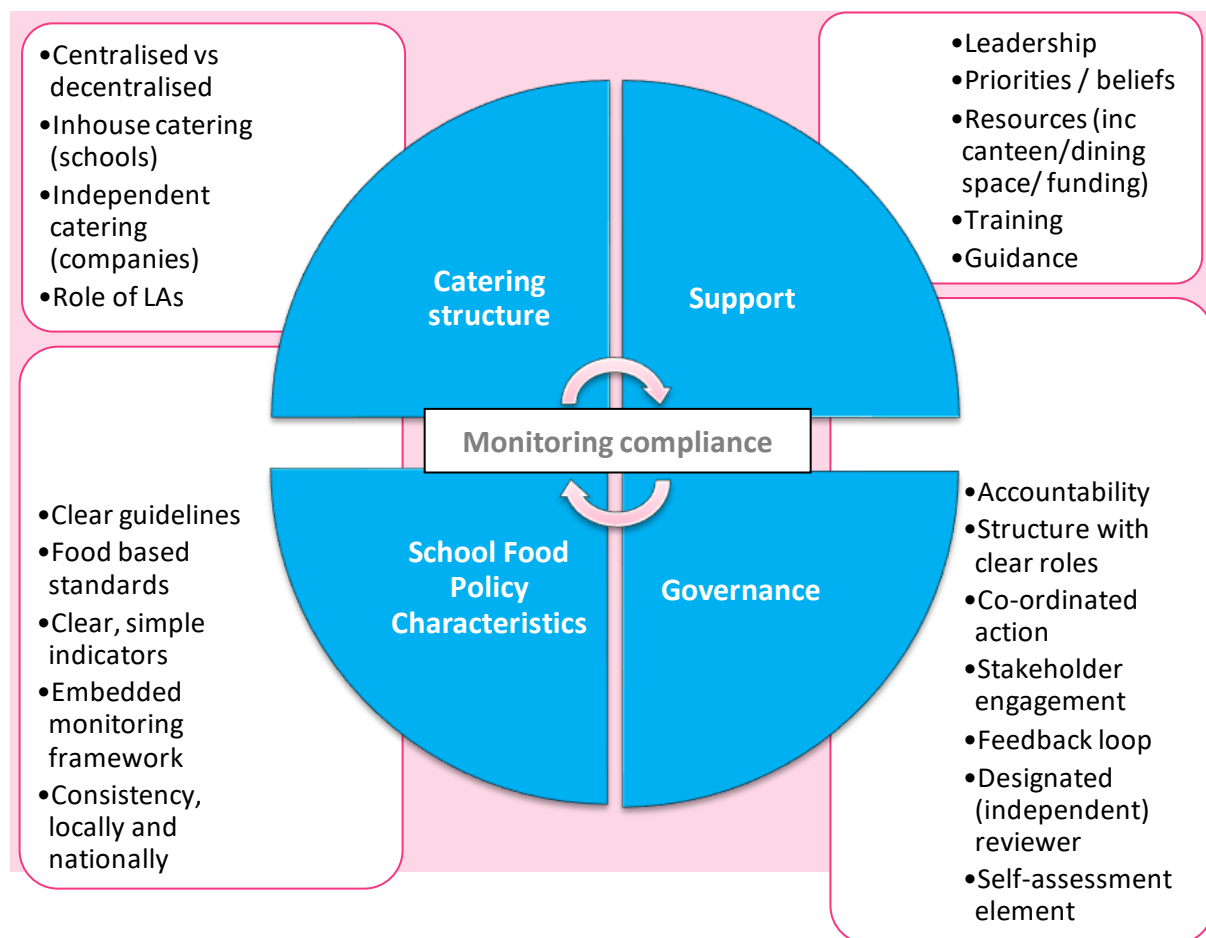
Whether there is centralisation or decentralisation of the school catering system influences monitoring structures and who needs to be involved (32).

Whether food is supplied in-house (in schools) or by a catering company, and who oversees setting and procuring, e.g., schools or LAs, also affects monitoring success (35).

Summary

Bringing together the core themes identified in the literature and the key issues within these themes indicated that the type of **catering structure** influences the roles and responsibilities in this space, and the feasibility of a using national unified framework or localised approach. School food **policy characteristics** influence the types of indicators to be used and the feasibility of monitoring. **Governance structures** should consider clear roles, feedback loops, and accountability and shared goals. **Support** could include training, guidance and sufficient resources which may also influence stakeholders' prioritisation and beliefs. Figure 3.

Figure 3: Key findings for the development and implementation of a monitoring framework for SFS compliance.



Case studies: summary



Source: School Food Sweden (39)

The literature highlighted different monitoring strategies used internationally with Australia, Sweden and Finland providing accessible information about their monitoring strategies. While other countries have school food policies, information about their monitoring approaches was scarce in the searches. These three countries, along with UK based examples were selected as case studies, summarised in this section.

International

Internationally there are mixed approaches depending on whether there are national statutory SFS or not. Sweden, Finland, and Australia were selected as case studies for international monitoring approaches.

The approaches taken aligned with themes detected in the evidence synthesis:

Sweden (40)

Key indicators and a unified audit system using a systematic web-based tool for self-assessment. Six domains to review whether the schools meet all the components aligned to national guidelines. The auditing is self-reported and completed by the school's head of catering with school management support. Automatic feedback provided to schools outlining performance reports, strengths, weaknesses, encouragement, and tips to help with action planning. Optional questionnaires for completion by pupils and staff (41,42).

Finland (43)

Monitoring undertaken by catering services during menu planning and implementation, supported by nutrition analysis software and suppliers' recipes. Pupil involvement via electronic or paper feedback forms. Stakeholder engagement includes University of Finland offering nutrition expertise and support (44).

Australia

Nationally, there is no standardised classification system in place. All states have their own school food strategies, and only New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA) governments have a monitoring and reporting system.

NSW (45) have external auditing providers with in-school visits, menu checking options with certification process. They report a 95% compliance

success rate.

WA (46) have a voluntary self-assessment via online survey completed by school leadership, with a reported 79% response rate (47).

Finland and Australia have a blended input between health and education government departments.

None of the case studies tailored their approach for Secondary schools, which was an issue raised in the evidence synthesis.

UK



National monitoring approaches are based on voluntary, self-monitoring data collection and includes:

- Provision of support to implement these standards takes the form of practical guidance documents, monitoring templates or checklists and certificates of compliance.
- Most often collated by schools such as governors, head teachers or catering staff.

Scotland

An official, unified route for monitoring with self-assessment and an independent monitoring element.

Scotland have Health and Nutrition Inspectors who work within Education Scotland and join inspection teams across the country as they inspect primary, secondary, and special school provision. To support a self-evaluative approach the Health and Nutrition Inspectors created a framework 'Food in schools across Scotland'. Features include templates for recording information to demonstrate meeting requirements.

Lincolnshire

Lincolnshire have a traded service run by the council, involving a whole

school approach, and designated independent assessors, to help schools better comply with standards. There is an ethos of communication and building relationships with schools at ground level.

Lincolnshire is a fee-based monitoring and compliance service. Hands-on tailored approaches year-long engagement/buy-in with a 12-month complete package. Voluntary but the schools team actively promotes services. There is direct contact with schools including in-school visits, bespoke training services and auditing services.

Southwark

Hands-on tailored approach with training options, in-school independent audits undertaken with an opportunity to engage with school and catering staff, pupils, and parents. Primary only.

A designated policy officer visits schools to speak directly with teachers, catering staff and pupils, experience the food environment, provide support, and undertake an audit checklist. If non-compliance is found, support is provided by the policy officer, and an improvement plan is provided.

Wales

Self-monitoring with support from nutritional analysis training with a certificate of compliance for demonstrating meeting the nutrient standards (48).

Wales also has case studies identifying how to improve governor's engagement with schools, through training and regular in person visits including improving monitoring activities with school leadership support, guidance, and a feedback loop process (49).

Considerations for policy and practice

The evidence synthesis has informed the development of a suite of recommendations which could support and improve the monitoring of, and compliance with, school food standards. These are outlined below.

Collaboration and engagement

- Establish mutual, agreed monitoring and compliance goals

Governance structure

- Identify and agree which members form monitoring structure
- Agree and specify clear roles and responsibilities
- Consider local variations of catering structures

Indicators with measurable outcomes

- Define what is meant by success and establish clear, verifiable, and measurable indicators
- Consider short term goals as well as long-term indicators
- Consider SFS characteristics - FBS simpler for monitoring purposes/ NBS important for nutritional quality of school food
- Explore opportunities to embed SFS monitoring within existing school monitoring frameworks, e.g., governors' reports, Estyn reports
- Explore options for national framework, with consideration of local variations
- Consider Secondary School variations

Support provisions

- Including in person contact and training – including for example SFS awareness, links between school food & child health and wellbeing, and monitoring processes to positively influence/ motivate key actors' priorities and beliefs.

- Consider embedding into existing training e.g., for governors
- Consider resource requirements

Piloting

- Due to the lack of existing frameworks local testing before wider rollout would be beneficial.

Technical report available here: [\(add link\)](#)

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