



Food Research  
Collaboration

# Rethinking Food Governance

## **Food policy connections and disconnections in England**

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## Introduction

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This Policy Brief shows the extent to which food policy in England is ‘connected’. By this we mean how effectively different parts of the national government are working together on issues that cut across departmental boundaries. Based on research conducted in 2019, it identifies nine issues important to food policy where there is good evidence of connected cross-government working, and 14 issues where connections could be improved. Some issues fall into both categories – because while certain aspects are being joined up, others are not.

The Brief summarises research published in the second report in the FRC’s Rethinking Food Governance series, *How connected is national food policy in England? It builds on the first report, Who makes food policy in England?*, which showed how, in England, responsibility for policy-making that affects the food system involves no fewer than 16 key government departments and public bodies. The research used documentary analysis and interviews with senior stakeholders. Although it describes the situation in England, the policy mapping and screening methods used could be applied in other countries, or at other levels of governance, such as urban or regional.

Policy connections are important because many urgent food system issues – such as obesity or climate change – are multi-faceted and do not easily fit the institutional structures of government, which tend to be organised by responsibility for individual policy sectors, such as health, agriculture or trade. Major food-related challenges are seen to be systemic in that their causes and outcomes are complex and connected,

spanning several policy areas. To tackle such problems effectively, policy-making needs to be connected across departments, so the resulting policies work together and achieve benefits across the system.

Connected policy-making (also referred to as ‘coordinated’ or ‘joined-up’ policy-making) helps to produce policies that tackle systemic problems in a holistic way. It produces policies that are coherent across issues and government departments. Disconnected policy-making, on the other hand – where different parts of government work separately on different aspects of the same issue – risks producing policies that:

- Address some aspects of a problem but not others;
- Have unforeseen impacts on other parts of the system;
- Waste effort and resources by duplicating each other;
- Make it hard to identify who has overall responsibility for an issue;
- Allow some problems to fall through the cracks between policies;
- Contradict or undermine each other.

Disconnected policy-making can therefore create policy incoherence.

Along with the disconnects on policy issues, there were also disconnected *perspectives* on where connections were needed, with those working inside government (as civil servants or other officials) tending to think that food policy was *already* fairly well connected, and those working on food policy from outside government (in business, civil society or academia) thinking it was not. Fixing connections is therefore not merely a technical

exercise: while some disconnects are logistical, some arise from ideological or political differences, which require open acknowledgement and continuous negotiation.

In the following pages, Table 1 presents the nine selected examples of policy issues where evidence of good cross-government working was found (in published sources or interviews). For each issue, the Table identifies some specific policies that exemplify connected working, describes the policy objective, and lists the government departments found to be working together on the issue (there is a list of abbreviations on the back page). Table 2 identifies the issues where evidence (from interviews or published sources) suggested better connections could be made. For each issue, the Table gives details of how and where policy is considered to be disconnected. Figure 1 presents the connections as a diagram and Figure 2 presents the disconnects. The latter are harder to show than connections, for obvious reasons: the broken chains in the diagram hint that connections could be made (but do not specify precisely where).

The lists presented here should be viewed as a starting point for exploring how future food governance might be better connected. The examples of connected working are a foundation on which to build, and help provide some nuance to the long-standing blanket criticism that there is a failure to join up food policy in England.

Recommendations include the need for improved communication and transparency about what is happening in government, a more connected approach by civil society, increased participation in policy-making by external stakeholders, and for a governance mechanism or mechanisms to bring actors and activities together.

## Table 1: Selected examples of connected food policy-making in England

Policy issue	Examples of specific policies	Objectives	Key departments involved
Agricultural Technology	Agri-tech Strategy	To promote agricultural technology, innovation and sustainability	BEIS, DEFRA, FCDO
Animal and Plant Health	UK Partnership for Animal and Plant Health	To bring together government, public research funders and wider research stakeholders on animal and plant health	BEIS, DEFRA, FCDO, FSA, PHE
Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)	AMR National Action Plan UK One Health Report Global AMR Innovation Fund	To address adverse impacts of the rise in pathogens resistant to antibiotics, linked to use of antibiotics in animal husbandry	DEFRA, DHSC, FCDO, FSA, PHE
Brexit	Various	Various measures to replace EU food law with UK law, or embed EU food regulation into UK law; also trade measures to address UK's changing status as importer and exporter of food and feed	Multiple
Childhood Obesity	Childhood Obesity Plan (COP)	To reduce childhood obesity in England. Various elements (see separate items in this table)	CO, DCMS, DEFRA, DfE, DHSC, HMT, MHCLG, PHE
	Soft Drinks Industry Levy (COP)	To reduce children's sugar intake from sweetened beverages	DEFRA, DHSC, HMT
	National Planning Policy Framework (COP)	To create healthy food environments through planning policy	DHSC, MHCLG
	Nutrient Profiling Model (COP)	To restrict children's exposure to promotion of unhealthy foods	DCMS, DEFRA, DHSC, PHE
	Natural Environment and Health (no specific policy) (COP)	To explore links between access to the natural environment and higher levels of physical activity	DEFRA, DHSC
Climate Change	National Adaptation Programme	To reduce the UK's contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, including from food production, distribution and consumption	Multiple

Food Labelling	Enforcement of EU Labelling Requirements Allergen Labelling Review	To signal different attributes of food products to consumers	DEFRA, DHSC, FSA, PHE, (plus Local Authorities)
Public Food Procurement	Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services	To specify standards, e.g. for nutrition, food quality and environmental care, required in food purchased by government departments and some other public bodies	DEFRA, DHSC, PHE
Rural Issues	Rural Proofing	To monitor impacts of policy on rural areas, including access to food	DEFRA, DHSC, MHCLG

Source: Parsons, K. (2021) How connected is national food policy in England? Rethinking Food Governance Report 2. London: Food Research Collaboration.

## Table 2: Selected examples of food policy disconnects in England

Policy Disconnect	Details
Agriculture and Public Health	<p>'Health in all policies' approach not extended to agriculture policy, despite arguments that public health should be a goal of agriculture policy, and classed as a 'public good'</p> <p>Incoherence of providing subsidies which support production of foods, such as red meat (feed and animals) or sugar, where dietary and /or environmental advice urges reduced consumption</p> <p>Prioritising economic growth over health</p> <p>Health policies focused on reducing consumption of unhealthy foods not production of healthier foods</p> <p>Public health policy being made without the involvement of agricultural stakeholders</p>
Agri-tech and Rural Connectivity	Inconsistency between objectives to utilise agricultural technology and persistence of poor rural digital connectivity
Children's Food Interventions	Programmes such as Healthy Start Vouchers and Free School Meals spread across multiple departments

Climate Change	<p>Failure to sufficiently integrate ambitions laid out by the Climate Change Committee into agriculture policy</p> <p>Support for high-impact forms of agriculture, e.g. livestock production (and aims to expand UK exports of high-impact products to other markets)</p> <p>Impacts of climate change on food security not sufficiently recognised</p> <p>Failure to balance agricultural production priorities and environmental priorities</p>
Dietary Guidelines	<p>Failure to include environmental impacts in official dietary guidance</p> <p>Failure to underpin other food policy with national dietary guidelines</p> <p>Failure to connect DEFRA's sustainable consumption recommendations to reduce meat intake to official dietary guidelines</p>
Food Supply Chain Policy	Fragmented approach to the food chain by different government departments
Food Labelling and Composition	Responsibilities fragmented across multiple departments: resulting complexity and confusion highlighted in recent reviews of food allergen policy, and recommendations following the horsemeat scandal
Hunger	No department assigned responsibility for hunger
Innovation and Nutrition	<p>Multiple activities involving different departments which could be better brought together</p> <p>Failure to prioritise nutrition in innovation objectives</p>
Interests of different client groups	Different departments have links with different sectors (e.g. DEFRA to farmers, DHSC to healthcare providers), which can cause tensions
International Development	<p>Failure to take into account coherence of domestic policy (in particular agriculture policy) with objectives (economic, environmental) of other (developing) countries</p> <p>Failure to recognise importance of supporting better production in developing countries, including tackling pests and diseases which may ultimately impact domestic interests</p>
Land Use	Diverging interests across energy, transport, agriculture and environmental policy – and competition for land
Nutrition, Obesity and Income	Failure to include food poverty as a consideration in obesity policy
Trade	<p>High domestic food production standards incoherent with a trade policy which permits lower standard food from elsewhere</p> <p>Failure to connect with health objectives around nutrition or food safety</p>

Source: Parsons, K. (2021) How connected is national food policy in England? Rethinking Food Governance Report 2. London: Food Research Collaboration.

Figure 1.

## Selected issues with good connections in England's national food policy

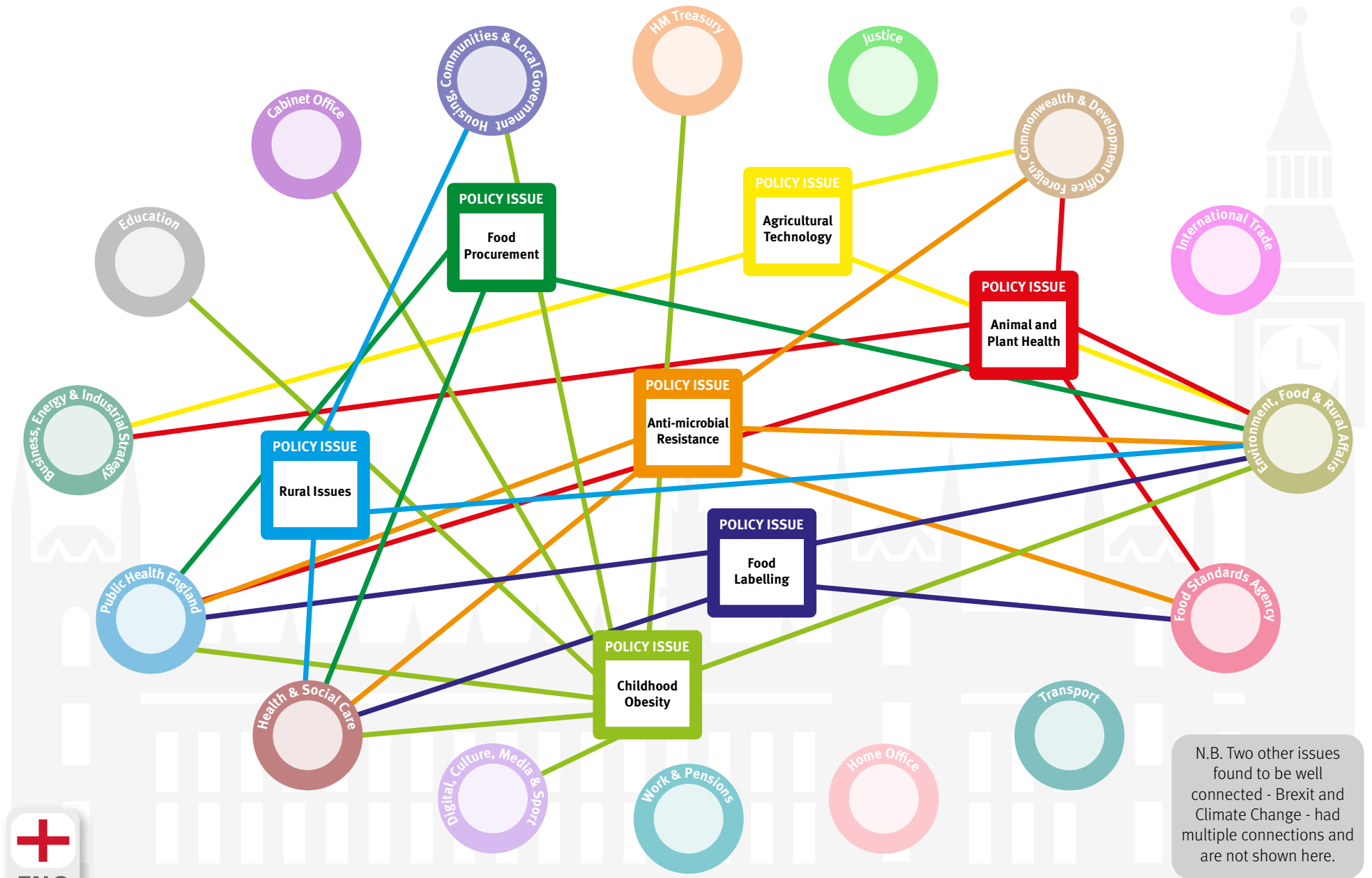


Figure 2.

## Selected issues with scope for better connections in England's national food policy



Source: Parsons, K. (2021) How connected is national food policy in England? Rethinking Food Governance Report 2. London: Food Research Collaboration.

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## Abbreviations

BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
CO	Cabinet Office
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
DEFRA	Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs
DfE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FSA	Food Standards Agency
HMT	HM Treasury
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
PHE	Public Health England



## Food Research Collaboration

This brief is based on the Food Research Collaboration publication, ***How connected is national food policy in England? Mapping cross-government work on food system issues***, by Kelly Parsons. London: Food Research Collaboration, 2021. Full references can be found in this report.

The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the Centre for Food Policy, facilitating joint working between academics and civil society organisations to improve the UK food system

The Rethinking Food Governance series aims to show how the government makes food policy, so that researchers and civil society organisations can understand the process better and spot opportunities to lever improvements. It applies to England but could be replicated for other areas.

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