Rethinking Food Governance
Mechanisms for connecting food policy

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Introduction

This Policy Brief looks at how food policy-making in England – and elsewhere – could be better connected, in ways that would lead to more coherent and effective policy.

With food increasingly understood to be 'an interconnected system of everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork'[1], governments are under pressure to approach food systems in a more holistic and coherent way. This is because policies targeting different parts of the food system are often made in isolation, with little attention paid to how they interact. Disconnected policy-making can lead to policies that duplicate, contradict or undermine each other.

Previous reports in the Rethinking Food Governance series have looked at who makes food policy in England[2], and at how it is currently connected and disconnected[3]. The final report[4], which this Brief summarises, examines the organisational arrangements, governance structures and practices currently used to connect food policy, and what measures could support a more connected approach.

Responsibilities for food-related policies are fragmented across many government departments. This is not peculiar to food; it is the most common organising arrangement for governments everywhere. Departments of state are organised around separate issues or functions, to allow specialisation, efficiency and accountability[5]. However, such arrangements are challenging for issues which cut across a number of departments. In these cases, arrangements may be made to coordinate the relevant departments or provide a 'safe space' beyond inter-departmental rivalries[6].

These coordinating arrangements have been a focus in the policy sciences for several decades[7]. The report uses the term 'mechanisms' to encompass a range of methods by which connections can be made, from the informal (such as personal contacts) to the purposefully introduced (such as new bodies or ministries).

The report draws on a desk review of policy connection mechanisms[8]; an empirical mapping of England's current national-level public food governance arrangements[9]; and data from 23 qualitative interviews with senior stakeholders from the civil service, civil society, the food industry and academia. Using this data, a typology was devised, based on:

- Examples currently or previously used in England;
- Examples from other countries;
- Examples from non-food policy areas which could be used in food;
- Proposals for as yet untested mechanisms, found to be consistently part of the conversation on how to 'do' food governance differently.

The typology is organised into a scale from 'softer' or more informal mechanisms to 'harder' or more formal ones, drawing on existing typologies from the policy sciences literature[10]. At the 'business as usual' end of this scale are the ways day-to-day policy-making can be connected on a communicative basis, through mechanisms such as 'clearance' and personal networks. Then comes a range of organisational tools which go a step further to embed cross-cutting work within the current structures of government, such as taskforces and advisory groups. Food Strategies and Plans also tend to fit this category. Further along the scale are more substantial mechanisms which alter the structures or processes of government, such as by

introducing legislative requirements, or by means of procedural mechanisms like budgeting, or by changing ministerial portfolios or re-designing the responsibilities of ministries themselves[11]. The mechanisms are summarised in Table 1 and presented in Figure 1.

It should be said that these categories, though grounded in the research findings, are not watertight: there is some overlap between functions. Another caveat is that mechanisms which have been in place previously, or which are being used in other countries, may not been evaluated for their effectiveness, or even written up in any detail. The typology presented is based on the best available evidence at the time the research was conducted (2019).

The report concludes that while structural or procedural arrangements can encourage and facilitate connected policy-making, they are not sufficient in themselves. Two additional 'enabling conditions' are necessary: political (and beyond it public) support; and capacity for connected policy-making.

Mechanisms are vulnerable to changes of government, changes in political priorities within governments, and external factors. Within governments, the support of powerful ministers, or leadership on policies from the top of government, can be decisive. Linked to political support is the importance of public acceptance, which helps give legislators a mandate for changes.

The second important condition for more connected policy-making depends on policy-making bodies' capacities for sharing information and identifying where connections are required. This 'coordinative culture', in which policy-makers at all levels have both the skills and the opportunities to think about food policies in a more holistic way, is in some ways a prerequisite of connected policy-making[12].

Table 1: Summary of mechanisms for connecting food policy

(Examples from national-level government in England unless otherwise stated)

Mechanism	Details	Examples
1. Day-to-day Connections	Connections between food policy activities made by individual civil servants in the course of day-to-day policy-making.	- Cross-government clearance: coordinating policy by notifying departments – via written correspondence – of any major new policy decisions. - Personal connections: refers to the interactions that take place between individual officials. - 'Central Government': responsible for making joint working between departments happen where it is needed.
2. Issue-Specific Projects and Supporting Groups	Mechanisms for coordinating different departments' input on a specific policy issue. Issue-specific projects are likely to be supported by a dedicated group/taskforce/committee.	- Childhood Obesity Plan (supported by the Childhood Obesity Plan Delivery Group) (current)
3. Cross-government Food-themed Groups	Committees, taskforces or groups – with civil service or ministerial membership across multiple departments – created to coordinate activities on food policy (not just single issues) across government.	- Food and Other Essential Supplies for the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force (2020-2021) - Food Policy Task Force (2010) (UK) - Government Cabinet Sub-Committee on Food (2010) (UK)
4. Multistakeholder Advisory Groups	Groups created to coordinate input from private-sector and / or civil society stakeholders, with officials from one or more departments, focused on food.	- Food Resilience Industry Forum (2020) - Food and Drink Sector Council (current) - Council of Food Policy Advisors (2008-10) - Food strand of UK Sustainable Development Commission (2000-2011)
5. Overarching Food Policy Projects/Strategies	Mechanisms which bring all (or several) aspects of policy related to food together in overarching cross-government or whole-of-government projects.	- National Food Strategy (current) - Food Matters/Food 2030 (2007-2010)
6. Food System Mapping, Monitoring and Reporting	Government-led initiatives to map and monitor the food system to provide baseline data to inform policy development and implementation.	- Australian National Food Plan (2013) 'State of the Food System' report - Food Matters: An Analysis of the Issues (2007) - Scottish Good Food Nation Bill proposals for reporting on food policy (current) - Independent Review for National Food Strategy proposals for reporting (2021)

7. Dedicated Units/ Agencies Within Government	Dedicated units of officials within government, focusing on food policy.	- DEFRA Food Policy Unit (2009-2016)
8. Parliamentary Committees	Collaborations between several parliamentary bodies which address aspects of the food system.	- Joint select committee on air quality - All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) e.g. APPG on Cancer (UK)
9. Dedicated Food Policy Bodies	Bodies (or a single body) to coordinate work on food, which may be located internally or at arms-length/independent from government. May be used to connect inside and outside government stakeholders working on food system issues.	- Scottish Food Commission (independent) - Various proposals for a national food policy body or watchdog
10. Legislative Approaches	Mechanisms to enshrine food policy goals and implementation in law.	- Being explored in Scotland with Good Food Nation Bill - Right to Food legislation (India) - Independent Review for National Food Strategy proposal for Good Food Bill (2021)
11. Procedural Mechanisms	Sets of procedural instruments, such as shared budgets or indicators, which incentivise joint working.	- No food-specific examples identified
12. Machinery of Government Changes	Redesign of ministerial portfolios or re-allocation of departmental responsibilities, to connect issues within a particular role or organisation. May include creation of 'Super Ministries' which combine multiple policy sectors under one departmental roof.	- DEFRA as a 'super ministry' covering agriculture and environment (created 2001) - Creation of DEFRA 'Minister of Food'

1 **Day-to-day Connections**

Connections between food policy activities made by individual civil servants in the course of day-to-day policy-making.

2 **Issue-Specific Projects and Supporting Groups**

Mechanisms for coordinating different departments' input on a specific policy issue. Issue-specific projects are likely to be supported by a dedicated group/taskforce/committee.

3 **Cross-government Food-themed Groups**

Committees, taskforces or groups – with civil service or ministerial membership across multiple departments – created to coordinate activities on food policy (not just single issues) across government.

4 **Multistakeholder Advisory Groups**

Groups created to coordinate input from private-sector and / or civil society stakeholders, with officials from one or more departments, focused on food.

5 **Overarching Food Policy Projects/Strategies**

Mechanisms which bring all (or several) aspects of policy related to food together in overarching cross-government or whole-of-government projects.

6 **Food System Mapping, Monitoring and Reporting**

Government-led initiatives to map and monitor the food system to provide baseline data to inform policy development and implementation.

7 **Dedicated Units/Agencies Within Government**

Dedicated units of officials within government, focusing on food policy.

8 **Parliamentary Committees**

Collaborations between several parliamentary bodies which address aspects of the food system.

9 **Dedicated Food Policy Bodies**

Bodies (or a single body) to coordinate work on food, which may be located internally or at arms-length/independent from government. May be used to connect inside and outside government stakeholders working on food system issues.

10 **Legislative Approaches**

Mechanisms to enshrine food policy goals and implementation in law.

11 **Procedural Mechanisms**

Sets of procedural instruments, such as shared budgets or indicators, which incentivise joint working.

12 **Machinery of Government Changes**

Redesign of ministerial portfolios or re-allocation of departmental responsibilities, to connect issues within a particular role or organisation. May include creation of 'Super Ministries' which combine multiple policy sectors under one departmental roof.

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With thanks to our funders

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Food Research Collaboration

This Policy Brief is based on the report *12 tools for connecting food policy*, by Kelly Parsons, published by the Food Research Collaboration in 2022. Full references can be found in that report.

12 tools for connecting food policy is the third report in the Rethinking Food Governance series, following *Who makes food policy in England?* and *How connected is national food policy in England?*. 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 regions or countries.

The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London. It facilitates joint working between academics and civil society organisations to improve the UK food system.

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