

Title: England's food policy coordination and the Covid-19 response.

Author Information

*Kelly Parsons. University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Herts AL10 0HB, UK.
K.parsons@herts.ac.uk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6473-210X>*

*David Barling. University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Herts AL10 0HB, UK.
D.barling@herts.ac.uk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5996-4942>*

Key Words: Policy Coordination; Covid-19; Food Policy; Food Governance; Food Systems

Running Page Title: England's food policy coordination and the Covid-19 response

Declarations

Funding This study was funded through Research England's Quality-related Research Strategic Priorities Fund at the University of Hertfordshire

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests None

Availability of data and material (data transparency) Not Applicable

Code availability Not Applicable

1 Introduction

2 The Covid-19 pandemic in the first wave in 2020 challenged the day-to-day working of the UK's food
3 supply, presenting policy demands on government not seen to such a degree since the Second
4 World War and its immediate aftermath. The public health demands of reducing virus transmission
5 came to the forefront of the UK Government's policy agenda, in turn catalysing wider economic,
6 business sector and employment dislocations, impacting the production, delivery and consumption
7 of food. The Government's response to the impacts upon the food supply provide insights into the
8 current state of England's food policy processes and operations. In particular, the actions of the
9 Government highlight its abilities to join up the governance of the food supply chain and to
10 coordinate its actions across the different departments and agencies of the state and between
11 national and local levels, and to work with private and third sector actors, in a period of crisis.
12 Furthermore, a study of these responses offers lessons for improving food policy coordination in the
13 longer term. Given the growing interest, as outlined below, in connecting the range of policy actors
14 and activities related to food, the food policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic offers a fruitful
15 case study for better understanding policy coordination.

16

17 This study starts by explaining the relevance of policy coordination to food policy. It then examines
18 the concept of policy coordination, and why it is an appropriate lens through which to analyse the
19 food policy and governance responses to the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis in England. It
20 describes the methods used to collect data and evidence of these policy actions. Next it presents the
21 findings from this case study of food policy and governance coordination activities involved in the
22 response to the impacts of this first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is followed by a discussion
23 which reflects on routine and more strategic, extended, aspects of coordination.

24

25 *Why is coordination relevant to food policy?*

26 The demands both for, and of, greater public policy coordination have attracted the attention of
27 scholars of public administration and policy more generally and in specific areas, notably
28 environmental policy, since the beginning of these disciplines (Metcalfe 1994; Scharpf 1994; Hogg
29 and Nordbeck 2012; Peters and Pierre, 2017; Hustedt and Seyfried 2016; Peters 2018). Identified
30 practical advantages of policy coordination include addressing: *duplication* (which wastes resources);
31 *contradictions*, whereby different organisations, often for sound reasons when considered in
32 isolation, implement programs that are directly contradictory; *displacement*, where decisions taken
33 by one actor without consultation create problems for other organisations; and *cross-cutting*
34 *problems* which cut-across the usual lines of departmental responsibilities (Peters 2018; Jacobs and
35 Nyamwanza 2020). Another important premise for successful policy design is that the success of any
36 one program will depend at least in part on other programs, for example education programs will
37 not work effectively if the students sitting the classes are hungry (Peters 2018).

38

39 Coordination around *food* issues more specifically, has also been the focus of episodic but growing
40 academic attention (Barling et al 2002; Lang et al 2009; Feindt and Flynn 2009; Candel and Pereira,
41 2017; Parsons et al 2018; Candel and Daugbjerg, 2019; Parsons 2021). Most recently, a 'systems'
42 turn in food studies has articulated the need for more 'systemic' and connected approaches to food
43 through the concepts of synergies, tensions and trade-offs, in particular those linked to the complex
44 and interconnected resource management challenge of the 'Water-Energy-Food Nexus' (Pahl Wostl

45 2019; Weitz et al 2017). Examples include where bio-fuel production presents risks to food security
46 (Weitz et al 2017); where agricultural production creates negative environmental impacts (DeBoe et
47 al 2020); or where economics interests are privileged over public health (de Lacy-Vawdon and
48 Livingstone 2020).

49 The policy system around food encompasses many different policy levers, many of which target
50 individual activities (such as farming) or outcomes (such as food safety). These can create
51 unintended consequences for other activities (for example natural resource management
52 programmes) or outcomes (for example environmental sustainability). There is growing consensus
53 that addressing the major social challenges related to food - such as obesity and climate change -
54 requires a wide range of policy levers, designed through the lens of an integrated food system, and
55 implemented in joined-up rather than piecemeal ways (GLOPAN 2020) with increased coordination
56 between different policy making communities (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, environment, public
57 health), so that various policies are aligned to strengthen each other, or at least do not counteract
58 each other (OECD 2021). A recent analysis of major food systems reports details how almost half of
59 all governance recommendations in such reports focus on 'addressing system issues through
60 synergistic crosscutting actions whilst managing trade-offs and avoiding conflicts between the
61 objectives of different system components and sectors' (Slater et al 2022 p2). The Sustainable
62 Development Goals have also elevated the need for 'unprecedented integration of siloed policy
63 portfolios' (Obersteiner et al 2016).

64

65 The coordination needs of food policymaking are threefold, in that there are three types of
66 fragmentation which are identified as problematic: horizontal, across the same level of government;
67 vertical; between levels of government; and between public-private-third sector activities. The
68 following section elaborates on these various coordination needs.

69 Policy relating to food is the responsibility of several government departments and agencies in
70 England, the most prominent being the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
71 (DEFRA); Food Standards Agency (FSA); Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and the Office
72 for Health Improvement and Disparities (formerly Public Health England (OHID)). There are many
73 other departments with a role in food policy: a mapping of national food policy actors and activities
74 in England identified at least 16 departments, along with other agencies and bodies, with a role in
75 policymaking relevant to food (Parsons 2020). Despite the numerous actors and activities involved in
76 food policy, there is no dedicated department, senior minister or overarching framework to ensure
77 these different elements work together. While DEFRA has food in its title, and is the primary point of
78 contact for many, there is scepticism over its suitability to steer policy across all food system
79 objectives, for example on nutrition (ibid). Connected policy working on food does take place during
80 normal circumstances across different departments or agencies of government (ibid). However,
81 because this tends to be focused on single issues, such as childhood obesity, and on softer
82 mechanisms such as personal connections amongst policy officials across different departments and
83 agencies and issue-specific working groups/task forces, it is not clear how well these can be adapted
84 to crisis situations which require coordination across wider parts of the food system.

85 Sporadic attempts have been made to address this fragmentation, and to improve oversight of food
86 policy, through various governance changes, including new institutional arrangements. These have
87 included new departments and agencies, mechanisms such as cross-government groups, and cross-

88 cutting food strategies drawing together activities around food. Institutional reforms around the
89 establishment of the FSA and DEFRA around 2000 led to ‘a joining up of some aspects of food policy,
90 albeit in an incremental and somewhat muddled manner’ (Barling et al 2002 p14). Almost a decade
91 later, connecting food policy returned to fashion with the 2008 Food Matters Report ‘Towards a
92 Food Strategy’, and subsequent Food 2030 Vision; both offering an ‘overarching statement of
93 government food policy’ (Cabinet Office, 2008; DEFRA, 2010), though they were abandoned due to a
94 change in government in 2010 (Parsons et al 2018). Another decade later, the idea of a National
95 Food Strategy was resurrected, with similar intentions for an ‘overarching strategy for government’
96 on food (National Food Strategy 2020). A National Food Strategy Independent Review (NFSIR) was
97 conducted, with Part One published in 2020, and Part Two in Summer 2021. The potential role of the
98 NFSIR in more effective policy coordination is returned to in the discussion.

99

100 Horizontal fragmentation receives most attention, but there is also a need for improved connections
101 between vertical *levels* of governance, including between England and the Devolved Administrations
102 (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) because there are different policy approaches to food
103 between Westminster and each of the devolved nations, and separate national food strategies being
104 developed by each country (Parsons 2021). Connections between national government and Local
105 Authorities (LAs) are also required, to address disconnections in policy activities, for example around
106 food safety, public procurement and obesity (Parsons 2021). Finally, food policies are also dispersed
107 and delivered across the public, private and third sectors (Lang et al 2009). The government relies on
108 food businesses to deliver many of the activities associated with the functioning of the food supply
109 chain (Feindt and Flynn 2009; Lang et al 2009). An example is Britain’s food hygiene and safety
110 policies, where government has delegated degrees of responsibility to the private sector (Flynn et al
111 2003; Lang et al 2009; Havinga et al 2015), though some control remains in the hands of local
112 authorities. The reliance of voluntary regulation of the food industry, and reluctance of government
113 to introduce mandatory policies to address diet-related health is another example (Adams 2021;
114 Caraher 2019).

115

116 While not as high profile as the private sector role, the third sector – food-related civil society
117 organisations (CSOs) – plays an important food policy and governance role, primarily in agenda
118 setting and delivery (Lang 2006; Durrant et al 2014). The arrangements between these three sectors
119 have long-raised questions about the inclusivity of food policy, and how ‘the dominant paradigm
120 offers a privileged place to certain private interests, notably the large corporate players in the food
121 system’ (Barling et al 2002 p7). Concerns have been raised regarding the industry representative
122 Food and Drink Sector Council’s influence over policymaking, for example, and its implications for
123 public health objectives (Caraher 2019).

124

125 *Conceptualising coordination*

126 A number of different terms are applied to the connecting of policy, including integration,
127 coordination, and coherence, with no hard and fast rule as to what phenomena each is associated
128 with (see: Metcalfe 1994; Meijers and Stead 2004; Six 2004; Hogl and Nordbeck 2012; Nilsson et al
129 2012; Tosun and Lang 2013; Hustedt and Seyfried 2016). In the food-specific policy literature, Candel
130 (2014) discusses calls for *coherence* and *coordination* on food security at multiple scales; and Candel
131 and Pereira (2017) discuss challenges around *integrated* food policy, including *coordination* of

132 relevant sectors and levels. Parsons (2019), drawing on Nilsson et al (2012), proposed a distinction
 133 between *integration* of the policy process, and *coherence* of policy content. Recognising that the
 134 term coordination has tended to be used to refer to connecting policy activities across government,
 135 we propose an additional distinction to navigate the different ideas encapsulated by the range of
 136 terms, namely:

- 137 • Coherence = about the content of policies
- 138 • Integration = about an explicit strategy to connect via process – e.g. a cross-cutting national
 139 food strategy or plan or a dedicated ‘food in all policies’ policy integration approach where
 140 food is strategically embedded in other policy sectors
- 141 • Coordination = about connecting as part of day-to-day operations of policymaking

142

143 This paper focuses on the latter, policy coordination (Hustedt and Seyfried 2016; Peters 2018;
 144 Christensen et al 2019). The aim is to clarify and solidify the discourse around food policy
 145 coordination through focusing on the *degree* of food policy coordination. Here, building on existing
 146 conceptualisations, we differentiate between the *routine* form as opposed to the *strategic* - or more
 147 *extensive* - form of coordination. Drawing on Scharpf (1973, cited in Hustedt and Seyfried 2016)
 148 Hustedt and Seyfried (2016) distinguish between negative and positive policy coordination, as two
 149 ideal types at the extremes of a coordination continuum. Negative coordination - where a formal
 150 responsible organisational unit initiates coordination based on its own ‘selective perception’ of a
 151 problem - represents the routine or ‘everyday form of mutual interaction across government’
 152 (p891). Positive coordination – whereby all relevant actors are involved based on a broader joint
 153 problem perception – occurs only on exceptional occasions. Peters’ (2018) uses the term strategic
 154 coordination to describe the prospective ‘coordination of programmes around the broad strategic
 155 goals of government’. Distinguishing routine and strategic coordination in *food* policymaking in
 156 Government highlights the differences between connecting up existing activities (the predominant
 157 focus of those working in government) and a more ambitious approach to connecting interventions
 158 to food system objectives around, health, sustainability and equity (Parsons 2021). These more
 159 normative strategic objectives may, or may not, overlap with the goals of government. We also
 160 associate the strategic end of the coordination spectrum with reconciliation of differing priorities
 161 and their political origins. This dimension is emphasised by a study from the Organisation of
 162 Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which notes ‘coordination mechanisms can only
 163 be effective if they go beyond information sharing’ and they need ‘a clear mandate to anticipate and
 164 resolve policy divergences and tensions arising from different sectoral interests’ (Fyson et al 2020).

165

166 *Strategic* coordination emphasises the need to *extend* policymaking connections beyond immediate
 167 objectives and actors related to a particular food system intervention (which may represent the
 168 lowest common denominator, or the ‘business as usual’ status quo), and prospectively connect to
 169 normative food system priorities around health, sustainability, equity associated with system
 170 transformation. Like its routine counterpart, strategic coordination can operate on a bilateral basis;
 171 for example, ensuring interventions around direct food assistance involving departments responsible
 172 for food and welfare, also extend to nutrition objectives and actors. In this sense, the extended
 173 strategic coordination falls short of an overarching integrative approach to policies. Our proposal is
 174 that both *routine* and more extensive *strategic* coordination are required to respond to the
 175 challenges related to food systems, in this case the governance and policy challenges emanating

176 from the Covid-19 19 pandemic. A focus on routine coordination alone means policy is failing to
177 address pressing societal issues. In turn, the application of this distinction provides empirical
178 evidence of how food policy coordination was conducted and the successes and gaps of these policy
179 responses.

180

181 *Methods*

182 This paper utilises a case study of the food policy response to Covid-19 in England, between
183 February-September 2020. The case study method is deemed appropriate for this endeavour, given
184 the aim to ‘illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were
185 implemented and with what result’ (Schramm 1971, cited in Yin 2015 p15). In bounding the case
186 (Yin 2015) decisions have been taken on what not to include in the research: the case is bounded at
187 the level of England – rather than the UK – because certain devolved responsibilities (e.g. health)
188 mean Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made their own distinct policy interventions. However,
189 because England itself does not have a devolved administration, and policy in some sectors is made
190 on a UK-wide basis, the government in England is routinely referred to as the UK government.

191

192 The method undertaken in this study is a policy analysis of the whole of the government’s food
193 policy response to Covid-19 (as opposed to an analysis of an individual policy or intervention as
194 characterises the majority of food policy analyses). Data to inform the analysis came from multiple
195 sources. Along with the limited available grey and academic literature, the primary sources were the
196 submissions to, and report of, the UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Environment, Food and
197 Rural Affairs Inquiry on Covid-19 and Food Supply, launched April 2020 and published July 2020
198 (EFRA 2020). The inquiry received 150 written submissions and took oral evidence from businesses
199 in the food supply chain, food aid organisations, charities, academics and DEFRA. Because the
200 submissions are made by a wide range of food policy actors, all answering a set of standard
201 questions, they offer an effective substitute to data sourced from qualitative methods such as
202 interviews. Due to the timing of the research, during the height of the pandemic when the relevant
203 participants would be under extreme time pressure, it was not deemed appropriate to employ a
204 research design based on interviews or other primary data collection methods. All of the oral and
205 written submissions were read and pertinent sections identified and organised into themes. Three
206 documents, in particular, provide the main source material: the submission by DEFRA (DEFRA 2020),
207 the First Report of the EFRA Committee itself (EFRA 2020a), and the official government response to
208 that report (EFRA 2020b), for information on the processes and structures used in the policy
209 response. Thematic analysis paid particular attention to identifying different actors involved in the
210 policy response, how they worked together, and where disconnections occurred. In addition, a new
211 data set was created, which documented issues and interventions across the supply chain and the
212 timeline of food-relevant developments (Parsons and Barling 2021). This covered a six-month time
213 period between 01 March 2020 (the start of the food policy response to the pandemic) and August
214 2020 (when the policy response become more sporadic). A timeline was created, initially populated
215 with formal policy announcements, taken from the Gov.uk website. Developments were also
216 identified through the Food Research Collaboration’s tracker tool (Food Research Collaboration
217 2020). Acknowledging the role of private and third sector actors in the policy response,
218 developments in these stakeholder groups were identified through searches of the news sections of
219 the websites of the main private sector trade associations, and two civil society groups which were
220 identified as playing the dominant role in tracking and responding to Covid-19 and food

221 developments. The private sector groups were: National Farmers' Union (National Farmers Union
222 n.d); British Retail Consortium (BRC n.d); Food and Drink Federation (FDF n.d). The third sector
223 groups were: Food Foundation (Food Foundation n.d) and Sustain (Sustain n.d.). Searches on the
224 news centres of these organisations were conducted for the relevant time period, and items
225 relevant to the Covid-19 food policy response were downloaded and details added to the issues and
226 interventions summary and the timeline. The sources described thus far were complemented with
227 additional documentary data, including media reports where they provided details on a particular
228 food policy issue or intervention which was not covered by official government or other stakeholder
229 documents. For each development, the key responsible organisation was noted.

230

231 Results

232 The findings of the study are divided as follows. First, overarching non-food policy interventions
233 impacting the food system are outlined. Next, evidence of coordination in the response, as
234 evidenced from analysis of public documents, is provided, including examples of cross-government
235 working, and collaboration across the public, private and third sectors. Finally, governance
236 arrangements utilised in the food policy response are detailed.

237 *The Food Policy Response: Issues and Interventions*

238 A series of interventions to contain the spread of the virus impacted across the entire food chain,
239 including closure of businesses (including hospitality and workplaces more broadly), schools and
240 other education settings. These had significant economic consequences, leading to a broad range of
241 supports, including: a Job Retention Scheme for furloughing of staff, business interruption loans,
242 grants and relief on business rates (DEFRA 2020).

243 Along with economic supports, overarching food-related interventions included assigning key worker
244 status (that is, those whose work is considered critical to the Covid-19 response) to those working in
245 food chain - those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery as well as
246 those essential to the provision of other key goods (for example hygienic supplies and veterinary
247 medicines) (DEFRA 2020), and the relaxation of regulations to allow collaboration across the supply
248 chain and within different sectors such as retail.

249 In addition, there were issues specific to particular segments of the supply chain, with interventions
250 to address these associated with a wide range of government departments, for example: remote
251 inspections of farms and other food businesses (FSA); initiatives to ensure agricultural labour supply
252 (DEFRA); relaxation of regulations on labelling (FSA), driver/delivery hours (DfT - Department for
253 Transport); relaxation of competition rules (DEFRA; BEIS – Department for Business, Energy and
254 Industrial Strategy); retailer-led restrictions on food purchasing; guidance for food businesses on
255 Covid-19 (PHE (now OHID); DEFRA); relaxation of planning rules to allow pubs and restaurants to
256 operate as hot food takeaways (MHCLG – Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government);
257 the Eat Out to Help Out discount scheme to encourage a return to hospitality (HMT – Her Majesty's
258 Treasury); a voucher scheme replacing free school meals (DfE – Department for Education); and
259 several food assistance interventions to the vulnerable, who were either shielding or could not
260 otherwise access food (DEFRA) (see Parsons and Barling 2021 for more details).

261 The next section of findings addresses the 'how'; the processes and structures which facilitated
262 these interventions.

263 *Reorganisation of Government priorities and resources*

264 The crisis response involved a reorganisation of government priorities and redeployment of
265 resources. The lion's share was done by DEFRA - it set up temporary structures to manage the Covid-
266 19 response, including an Emergency Operations Centre and set of policy and sector cells to
267 coordinate work on specific issues (involving around 440 staff) (DEFRA 2020). In addition, 500 core
268 DEFRA staff were assigned to spend more than 20% of their time working on Covid-19, and
269 approximately 100 staff loaned to other departments. DEFRA worked on the direct food assistance
270 response with MHCLG, which established an outbound call centre to contact individuals not reached
271 by letter/text, involving up to 200,000 calls a day (DEFRA 2020). DEFRA re-prioritised projects and
272 paused or slowed work, including on preparation for COP26 and the Spending Review (DEFRA 2020).
273 The NFSIR was delayed, and the team redeployed to work on three urgent issues: ensuring
274 mainstream food supplies; getting food to the clinically shielded and other vulnerable groups; and
275 getting help to those people whose finances would be so severely affected by the lockdown that
276 they might struggle to feed themselves. As stated in the Part One of the NFSIR, the Part One report
277 was re-framed to focus on immediate priorities around food insecurity and trade (National Food
278 Strategy 2020).

279 A number of governance bodies - Table 2 - were utilised in the response, many involving multiple
280 government departments, and aimed at connecting government with the private sector. The main
281 focus of these group was ensuring continuity of food supply to shops, along with supply to
282 (medically or economically) vulnerable populations. Although the distinction was not always made
283 clear, several bodies existed prior to the pandemic such as F4, and the Food Chain Emergency Liaison
284 Group, whereas others were created especially, such the Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded
285 Vulnerable People.

286 Table 1: Food bodies created/utilised in the Covid-19 response

	Mechanism/Body	Details	Membership
Created in response to pandemic	Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded Vulnerable People ¹ (Lucyallen.com n.d)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established April 2020 Chaired by DEFRA Minister Victoria Prentice Work divided into two groups: 1.) non-shielded (not clinically vulnerable but difficulty accessing food due to disability or self-isolation) and 2.) economically vulnerable (unable to afford food and other essential supplies) 	'Departments across government including: DEFRA Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Department for Work and Pensions Ministers from Devolved Administrations'
	Food Delivery Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose: understand and support food delivery company provision to vulnerable people and key workers, and ensure companies had information to operate effectively 	Not specified
	Food Vulnerability Stakeholder Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established in direct response to Covid-19 Weekly forum for DEFRA to 'disseminate information, gain insight in real time, stress test policy concepts and share best practise' and allow 'bilateral conversations and delivery at pace'. Instrumental in development of further measures on non-shielded vulnerable 	Attended by 'some 100 individuals with representation from across Whitehall, Local Authorities, numerous Charities, and groups that represent disabled people'
	Food Resilience Industry Forum (FRIF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established at start of pandemic Forum - initially meeting daily, later twice weekly - to update DEFRA's key food supply chain stakeholders on Government messaging and listen to main concerns of stakeholders Looked at end-to-end supply chain for food to identify 'immediate vulnerabilities from across the food chain', to be 'shared with teams from across DEFRA and in other departments for resolution'. Chaired by David Kennedy, Director General for Food, Farming and Biosecurity and facilitated by Chris Tyas, (DEFRA contractor with food industry background). Paused end of summer but met again in September 2020 to discuss using forum in winter 	DEFRA Cabinet Office Department for Education Her Majesty's Treasury NO.10 Public Health England (Agency) (Now Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) Food Standards Agency Food Standards Scotland Northern Ireland /Welsh Governments Food Industry Representatives And Individual Companies (See Defra 2020 For A Full List).
	Retailer Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Met weekly throughout pandemic Purpose: 'provide effective two-way communication between food retail sector and Government' 	Not specified
	Food and Drink Manufacturers Forum (EFRA 2020b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forum to discuss sector's concerns and recovery after initial phase of pandemic 	DEFRA Manufacturing Sector
	Existing	Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanism to exchange information on threats to supply chain

¹ <https://www.lucyallen.com/news/government-providing-food-and-essential-supplies-those-need>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Covid-19 meeting March 2020 	Public Health England (Agency) (Now Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) Food Standards Agency Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Devolved Administrations Major Food Industry Representatives*
	F4+3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven largest food and drink trade associations and industry bodies, covering whole food chain • Usually Ministerial attendance • Provides detailed information from each sector • Sub-groups with officials on access to labour and comms 	F4: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food and Drink Federation • British Retailers Consortium • National Farmers Union • UK Hospitality +3: Association of Convenience Stores Federation of Wholesale Distributors Institute of Grocery Distribution
	UK Agricultural Market Monitoring Group (Defra 2020b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitors UK agricultural markets including price, supply, trade and recent developments, enabling forewarning of atypical market movements • During Coronavirus outbreak the group 'provided a forum for DEFRA and devolved administrations to share latest market and stakeholder information' 	DEFRA Devolved Administrations
* Association Independent of Meat Suppliers; National Association of British and Irish Millers; Association Convenience Stores; UK Hospitality; British Poultry; British Retail Consortium; Chilled Food Association; Dairy UK; Food and Drink Federation; Fresh Produce Consortium; Provision Trade Federation; Federation of Wholesale Distributors; Cold Chain Federation; British Soft Drinks Association; Beer and Pub Association; National Farmers Union; Packaging Federation; International Meat Trade Association; Compass Group; British Game Alliance; Agricultural Industries Confederation.			

287 Source: Authors from DEFRA 2020 unless otherwise referenced (e.g. EFRA 2020b; Lucyllen.com (n.d.);

288 Beyond these bodies, the response involved significant coordination of activities. There were
 289 interventions from a large number of departments. As noted in the trade body UK Hospitality's
 290 evidence to EFRA (EFRA 2021a):

291 *'This is a complicated ecosystem, which is highly interrelated and full of moving parts. You*
 292 *impact one piece and other pieces will come together. A big learning that has come out of*
 293 *this... is how complex the supply chain is, how important it is and how so much of*
 294 *Government policy impacts upon it'.*

295 This necessitated the food industry working with multiple departments, including those which might
 296 not be considered core 'food' ministries, as UK Hospitality explained in relation to the catering
 297 sector:

298 *'We are also working really closely with the same teams in DCMS and the BEIS Department,*
 299 *DCMS looking after the tourism side of hospitality and BEIS looking after the high street*
 300 *hospitality' (EFRA 2021a).'*

301

302 It also involved coordination between departments - primarily DEFRA and one or more others - on
 303 many individual issues. Table 3 provides examples of where multiple departments worked together
 304 on particular interventions.

305 Table 3: Examples of horizontal coordination on Covid-19 and food

<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Departments Involved</i>
Relaxation of Competition Law	DEFRA Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Relaxation of Driver Hours	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Department for Transport
Relaxation of Delivery Hours Restrictions	DEFRA Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Business Support	DEFRA Her Majesty's Treasury 'And Others'
Discussions with "food-to-go" (which include takeaways) and delivery companies to support their reopening and continued operations	DEFRA Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Devolved Administrations
Financial Support for Fishing Businesses	Her Majesty's Treasury DEFRA
Engagement with hospitality sector, including sharing latest Government advice and its implications for the sector.	DEFRA Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Ensuring broader welfare system responds to overall food affordability challenges	DEFRA Department for Education Department of Work and Pensions Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
£16m funding for food charities	Department for Culture, Media and Sport DEFRA
Advice for seasonal agricultural workers coming to England, and their employers	DEFRA Department of Health and Social Care
£63 m fund to Local Authorities	DEFRA Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Department of Work and Pensions

Coordinating and supporting function alongside other government departments to support local authorities and third sector action on the ground	DEFRA Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Local Government Association
Clarification of guidance on National Minimum Wage legislation and Harvest Casuals Scheme	DEFRA Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
Identification and removal of regulatory barriers to alcoholic drink companies producing hand sanitiser	DEFRA Health And Safety Executive (Department Of Work And Pensions)
Attendance at DEFRA stakeholder meetings by OGDs to provide information and answer questions from stakeholders	DEFRA Department for Transport Department of Health and Social Care Public Health England (Agency) (Now Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) Food Standards Agency Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) Department for International Trade
Transmission pathways in and around food processing plants	DEFRA Public Health England (Agency) (Now Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) Health And Safety Executive (Department of Work And Pensions) Joint Biosecurity Centre (DHSC) Department of Health and Social Care Food Standards Agency
'Bounce back' plan of trade measures for the agriculture, food and drink industry	DEFRA Department for International Trade

306 Source: Authors (from DEFRA 2020 and Parsons and Barling 2021)

307 Far less detail is available on vertical coordination; between local and national government, or
308 Westminster and the devolved administrations, during the pandemic response. This situation echoes
309 that in the literature, where more focus is given to horizontal. There is anecdotal evidence of some
310 disconnections between national and local level, for example around national and local involvement
311 in direct food assistance. Another example is tension between the national central voucher scheme
312 for school meal replacement in relation to local provision by school caterers, where there was
313 confusion over how the national scheme and local provision worked together.

314

315 In comparison, close collaboration between the public and private sectors is notable (Table 4),
316 though there is less evidence of collaboration between government and civil society actors, and a
317 general sense that the government lagged behind the civil society response on the ground on food
318 access. In March, civil society groups called on government to secure food supplies, responding to
319 news that the over-70s may soon need to self-isolate (Sustain 2020), and highlighted the need for
320 government intervention, stating 'HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions must act
321 immediately, to enable low-income households have the financial resilience to be able to self-
322 isolate, and to relieve avoidable overwhelming pressure on local authorities and frontline charities'
323 (Sustain 2020b). The delay in the government's own response to food insecurity on the ground, and
324 balance of responsibility between government and civil society more broadly, are examined in the
325 discussion.

326 Table 4: Examples of Public-Private-Third sector collaboration on Covid-19 and Food

<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Governance Actors Involved</i>
Marketing campaigns to drive consumption of milk, through £1m 'milk your moments' campaign focused on tea, coffee and milky drinks (AHDB n.d.)	DEFRA Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board Scottish Government Welsh Government Northern Ireland Executive Dairy UK
Food packages	DEFRA Wholesalers and Other Food Suppliers Local Authorities
Enabling vulnerable to access food through volunteer shopping for them, food deliveries from local retailers, wholesalers and food businesses	DEFRA Local authorities Retailers Food businesses Charities
Developing safe ways for vulnerable people to pay for food and essential items	DEFRA Retailers
£16 million funding pot to help front-line services distribute food to vulnerable people	DEFRA Waste Resources Action Plan Food Industry
PickforBritain Website	DEFRA Food Industry

327 Source: Authors from Parsons and Barling (2021)

328 Discussion

329 The case study findings illustrate the breadth of actors which constituted the food policy response to
330 the pandemic, and the high level of coordination which took place around it, with DEFRA at the
331 heart. Yet, there were instances of disconnection and delay, leading the EFRA inquiry to recommend
332 'government should ensure that improved co-ordination mechanisms are in place between
333 government departments, public bodies and with the devolved administrations to ensure that in any
334 future disruption, guidance can be developed, cleared and issued more rapidly' (EFRA 2020).

335 The discussion analyses some of the key challenges and opportunities from the evidence, under the
336 headings 'routine' and 'strategic' coordination.

337 *Routine Coordination*

338 A key coordination lesson was the degree of policy preparedness for the crisis, which resulted in a
339 reactive and emergency-style response. This was despite significant government preparation for a
340 range of scenarios as part of plans for leaving the EU, and food being one of 13 Critical National
341 Infrastructure sectors in the UK. While the nature, scope and scale of the pandemic came as a shock
342 to many, it is possible that some delays in response, and confusion over responsibilities, could have
343 been avoided with a stronger food plan in place.

344 Certain responses were reactive, following pressure from private and civil society sectors, raising
345 questions about timeliness and preparedness, particularly around emergency food aid. The findings
346 suggest an initial primary focus on food supply to supermarkets. For example, the first Food Chain
347 Emergency Liaison Group meeting took place on 6 March. This can be contrasted with the response
348 on access to food for the vulnerable (medical or economic) where, with the supply chain alone
349 unable to meet demand, the third sector safety net proved crucial (Noonan-Gunning et al 2021).

350 Government intervention, such as on food parcels or free school meal replacement, lagged behind
351 requirements on the ground, leaving civil society to fill the gap in emergency food aid, resulting in
352 calls for further government intervention such as a state-led 'National Food Service' (Independent
353 2020b). Though access to food by the vulnerable was raised multiple times by civil society groups in
354 advance of lockdown, the 'Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded Vulnerable People was not
355 established until early April.

356 Food supply was a more prominent focus, but here too there were delays and gaps in the response.
357 Government intervention to close food service businesses led to dislocation of dedicated supplies to
358 these outlets, and severe disruption to domestic livestock and dairy producers supplying them (EFRA
359 2020a). A costly time lag before some degree of transfer to other supply chains, indicated better
360 prepared emergency planning systems - that work in tandem with the realities of supply chains'
361 access to consumption markets - should be in place where food supply shocks occur.

362

363 Lack of anticipation of retail demand for food, despite signals from other countries further ahead in
364 the pandemic, was problematic. The EFRA inquiry concluded multiple impacts could have been
365 better predicted: consumers buying more food in anticipation of a lockdown; the need to self-isolate
366 due to Covid-19 symptoms; school closures; and changed working patterns resulting in more meals
367 eaten at home. Government and retailers were criticised for failing to develop an effective joint
368 communications plan in anticipation of increased consumer demand. Similarly, the government was
369 criticised for both failing to connect with consumers, and failing to recognise, or understand, the
370 food supply chain sufficiently, when it encouraged people to shop online without acknowledging the
371 limited capacity of retailers to cater for that demand - creating unnecessary public distress, despite
372 prior knowledge that online accounted for a small proportion of the market (EFRA 2020).

373 Delays also occurred around food business safety, including personal protective equipment (PPE),
374 and guidance on social distancing in the workplace (only published in April), with 'guidance on
375 measures that businesses should take to protect workers... not issued quickly enough' (EFRA 2020).
376 Various private sector actors, including processors, manufacturers, retailers as well as trade unions,
377 developed and implemented Covid-19-secure working practices in lieu of satisfactory government
378 guidance.

379 The findings illustrate high levels of bilateral working between departments, with DEFRA reliant on
380 other departments to make changes in the system, offering lessons for cross-cutting working on
381 food. While delays caused by fragmented responsibilities are rarely identified in public documents,
382 anecdotal evidence suggests disconnection hindered the response. An example is delays related to
383 school meal vouchers, where 'the national voucher scheme for free school meals would certainly
384 have benefitted from a faster and more joined-up approach between the DfE and DEFRA' (EFRA
385 2020). As such, the pandemic confirmed the need to better connect certain policy activities already
386 identified in pre-Covid-19 research, for example regarding the potential for better coordination of
387 policy around food provision initiatives, such as school meals, school milk and fruit and vegetables
388 schemes, where responsibilities cross multiple departments and levels of government (Parsons
389 2021). Similarly, hunger had already been identified as falling between the cracks of food policy
390 remits (Parsons 2021). This was magnified during the pandemic, where the response involved
391 multiple departments, levels and outside government actors. Along with this coordination 'underlap'

392 on food insecurity, characterised by unclear responsibilities, were several more *strategic*
393 coordination issues (discussed below).

394 Evidence about vertical connections is weak, and rarely features in discussions of cross-government
395 working. An exception is research by Noonan-Gunning et al on the experiences of public health
396 nutrition practitioners of the pandemic, which identified how lack of a coherent overarching strategy
397 created a ‘postcode lottery’ (local or regional variation due to funding allocation). There are also
398 suggestions in evidence to the EFRA committee that vertical coordination failures hampered the
399 policy response, for instance that national government ‘should better recognise the importance and
400 success of community-led responses to the provision of free school meal substitutes’, and ‘schools
401 should be encouraged to continue catering directly for their pupils without being put in a financially
402 worse situation than those using the national voucher scheme’ (EFRA 2020). Disconnects around
403 data sharing between national government and local councils and around food parcels were also
404 flagged (EFRA 2021a; Noonan-Gunning et al 2021).

405
406 There is even less evidence on coordination between England and the Devolved Administrations;
407 there are some publicly-stated examples of cross-government working, or at least communication
408 (see Table 1), but with little detail, and it is not clear how the governance arrangements impacted
409 the response, or where coordination might have been needed.

410
411 The findings highlight a high degree of government coordination with – at least parts of – the private
412 sector. The number of public-private sector food bodies, and frequency of their meetings, speaks to
413 close collaboration. This is confirmed by the Food and Drink Federation peak body, which describes
414 its ‘extraordinarily good dialogue with Government’ and the support it received ‘in terms of
415 interaction and willingness to go and solve problems, particularly to unblock supply chains, from
416 DEFRA’ as ‘really extraordinary’ (EFRA 2021a)

417
418 An overarching theme emerging from the case study is government reliance on the private sector
419 (food supply) and third sector (food insecurity) for delivery. Much activity to address food insecurity
420 is by charities, with high reliance on volunteer staff (Power et al 2020 citing Loopstra 2019; Noonan-
421 Gunning et al 2021). There are estimated to be 28,000 volunteers working at Trussell Trust
422 foodbanks alone (Trussell Trust 2021 in Noonan-Gunning et al 2021). The pandemic has led the
423 appropriateness of this sharing of responsibilities for direct food assistance to be called into
424 question, as well as highlighting the ‘postcode lottery’ nature of the food policy response at local
425 level, which depended on available local funding and community organisations (Noonan-Gunning et
426 al 2021).

427 Government’s heavy reliance on the private sector for delivery on food supply, and for liaising with
428 consumers, was also evident. DEFRA itself acknowledges that ‘the expertise, capability and levers to
429 plan for, and respond to, food supply disruption lie predominantly with the industry’ (EFRA 2020b).
430 The government was criticised for failing to provide reassurances to the public in the early phase of
431 the pandemic, including on how to shop safely, and that there was enough food and essential
432 supplies (EFRA 2020a). The government’s counter was that evidence ‘shows that industry voices are
433 often best placed to provide the expert commentary needed to demonstrate the resilience of the
434 supply chain and to reassure the public that if we all shop considerately there is enough to go
435 around’ (EFRA 2020b). Calls for government rationing in response to widespread empty shelves

436 (Independent 2020a) were pushed back heavily by DEFRA (DEFRA 2020b). Though a decision was
437 later taken to make a direct appeal to consumers as part of the televised national press conference.

438 Public sector coordination with the food industry is also not homogenous, with suggestion that a
439 focus on supermarkets happens at the expense of rest of the food supply system. This came through
440 strongly in the evidence from the Food Federation of Wholesale Distributors (FWD) peak trade body
441 (EFRA 2021a):

442 *‘the number one priority of Government policy is the supermarket shelf. There are*
443 *consequences for that. That means that the diversity of supply and the number of smaller*
444 *and medium enterprise operators up and down the country... are at risk as a result’.*

445
446 An intervention around replacement of school meals, and the switch to a centralised voucher system
447 (redeemable in supermarkets), suggests a retail bias. The head of the FWD described government as
448 having ‘handed wholesale trade directly to the supermarkets’ with ‘wholesale ignored and
449 overlooked again, while supermarkets make record profits’ (FWD 2021). Government’s immediate
450 reliance on larger retailers to participate in the scheme was also criticised: discounters and
451 convenience stores were excluded for technical reasons, even when they were able to offer
452 workable voucher schemes which would have helped more children (EFRA 2020a).

453 This speaks to a wider issue beyond Covid-19 around the types of stakeholders involved in
454 policymaking - clearly illustrated by memberships of the main groups utilised to support the
455 response to the pandemic; dominated by large food companies and their representatives, with
456 fewer opportunities for independent or local businesses to input.

457 *Strategic Coordination*

458 Strategic coordination failures are less about disconnects and delays on existing activities, and more
459 about a failure to consider the wider food system, including the consequences of particular policy
460 responses for other objectives. While recognising the unprecedented and emergency nature of the
461 food policy response, examining it through the lens of *routine* and *strategic* coordination suggests a
462 holistic overview of the food system, and consideration of multiple goals across that system -
463 economic, health, environmental and social - is warranted, but missing when the focus is on routine
464 coordination only. The following are selected examples of where strategic coordination could have
465 been utilised.

466 Food insecurity has been one of the most high-profile issues of the pandemic. Along with the routine
467 coordination ‘underlap’ - whereby responsibilities for this policy problem were unclear - the case
468 study suggests opportunities for more strategic extensive coordination were missed. One example is
469 the reliance on food waste/surplus as the supply source for direct food assistance. Leaving aside
470 moral arguments around the suitability of this supply, its unstable nature was highlighted by
471 disruptions in availability at the start of the pandemic. Another red flag is nutritional adequacy of
472 supply dominated by less fresh, more ambient produce. Another is the link between food safety and
473 food insecurity, with evidence suggesting that food insecure people are more likely to eat food past
474 use-by date, keep leftovers longer, and to have food poisoning (Brightharbour 2020; Thompson et al
475 2020). This latter example notwithstanding, safety was the overriding public health concern; but at
476 the expense of nutrition. Failure to prioritise food-related public health manifested in several ways,
477 from direct food assistance parcels being nutritionally-poor initially, though these issues were

478 subsequently addressed (EFRA 2020), to the marketing of red meat and dairy due to over-supply),
479 and the incoherence of the *Eat Out to Help Out* scheme, which lowered the cost of meals, including
480 at fast food outlets. These actions took place in the absence of explicit messaging around healthy
481 eating, although there was some advice given in Scotland, and on eating and Covid-19 recovery from
482 the NHS (NHS Inform.Scot n.d; NHS UK n.d.). By comparison, the USDA ChooseMyPlate website gave
483 specific advice on preparing healthy low-costs meals during the pandemic (USDA n.d), while Israel
484 took a multi-pronged approach: nutrition guidelines for sufferers; commercials about how to eat
485 more healthily; teaching healthy nutrition to children/students via zoom and special meal plans for
486 hospitals (Thibault et al 2020). Failure to connect Covid-19 to the issue of nutrition led to various
487 calls for a prioritisation of public health in the UK, including from academics and the Faculty of Public
488 Health (Lang et al 2020; Faculty of Public Health 2020), and campaign group Action on Sugar called
489 for an independent food watchdog to advise and monitor examples of commercial interests which
490 undermine diet-related health (Action on Sugar 2020).

491 On the environmental side, there were multiple impacts of interventions. These included an increase
492 in single use packaging; a decline in waste recycling and increase in incineration and landfilling;
493 increased disinfection routines with hazardous chemical substances in household and outdoor
494 environments; and increased ecological risk to natural ecosystems due to the use of disinfectants
495 (Silva et al 2020).

496 The pandemic elevated public and political recognition of the vital role of the labour force in the
497 food supply as 'key workers' in the economy, as evidenced by the assignment of critical worker
498 status, and DEFRA's 'Food Heroes' campaign. Yet it presented an incoherence with the low paid, and
499 often precarious, part-time and seasonal nature of such work; with several instances of decent
500 worker livelihoods being challenged by efforts to facilitate food supply, including around worker
501 safety - in particular in meat plants - and in the growth of precarious livelihoods linked to burgeoning
502 online delivery platforms. Precarity was also thrown into relief by agricultural labour supply issues –
503 both reliance on seasonal workers from Eastern Europe, and challenges recruiting domestic workers.
504 Another paradoxical example was the incidence of food poverty in food sector workers during the
505 pandemic, such as catering staff (Camden New Journal 2020); and fishers (the Guardian 2020).
506 Similar paradoxes were noted prior to the pandemic around food insecurity in the farming
507 community (Farmers Guardian 2019). More broadly, the economic impact of Covid-19 on
508 employment status, and thus household income and food and nutrition security, is described as
509 'unequivocal' (Geysler, 2021 in Noonan-Gunning et al 2021)

510
511 Along with wider social and environmental goals appearing disconnected from the policy response,
512 the case study suggests strategic coordination is required to consider the food supply *as a whole*
513 (rather than individual segments or actors). An example is the dominance of conventional supply
514 chains, and in particular the large food companies, at the expense of the diverse range of food
515 businesses which contribute supply. This manifested in multiple ways, including: a failure to
516 prioritise street markets as a source of low-cost healthy food; poor data reporting on the growth of
517 short supply chain sales, such as vegetable box schemes; and potentially negative consequences of
518 the relaxation of competition law to allow collaboration and consultation with a small number of
519 stakeholders, at the expense of other supply chain actors (FWD 2020; ACS 2020; EFRA 2020). Data
520 gaps may be in part responsible for this imbalance, as discussed below. A strategic approach to

521 connecting policy issues across the system is likely to require additional coordination capacity than
522 currently exists within food governance arrangements, as discussed next.

523 *Implications for Coordination Mechanisms*

524 Government cannot plan for every potential shock to the food system, but the case study findings
525 suggest clarifying responsibilities, and having recourse to some kind of dedicated cross-cutting food
526 plan or other coordination structure could have improved the effectiveness of its response (beyond
527 routine coordination). Dedicated food coordination mechanisms have been used in England in the
528 past, including a cross-government Cabinet Sub-Committee on Food, a Food Policy Task Force of
529 officials, an independent Council of Food Policy Advisors, and a dedicated food policy unit within
530 DEFRA (Parsons et al 2018).

531 More information is needed to ascertain how effectively the existing framework performed, and
532 there are questions about how permanent various bodies set up to support the Covid-19 response
533 are, and whether these could be leveraged for greater coordination on food-related policy more
534 broadly. Available public evidence suggests new bodies were temporary: the National Food Strategy
535 Part One recommended the Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded Vulnerable People be continued for
536 another 12 months, with a 'remit to look at measurement and cross government working'
537 (National Food Strategy 2020). In response to a parliamentary question in February 2021, a DEFRA
538 minister said 'the Food to the Vulnerable Ministerial Taskforce was set up in spring 2020 to respond
539 to some of the initial challenges of Covid-19, for a limited time and with a defined remit' but that
540 'since then, ministers across departments have continued to meet to discuss the steps needed to
541 mitigate the impacts of food insecurity' including a 'newly established Cost of Living roundtable,
542 where food vulnerability is discussed alongside other aspects of poverty' (UK Parliament 2021). In
543 September, a Child Food Poverty Taskforce was created, spearheaded by the footballer Marcus
544 Rashford, with supporters from the private and third sectors (BBC 2020).

545 Food insecurity issues magnified by Covid-19 will likely lead to renewed focus on the need for
546 legislative mechanisms to enshrine government responsibility on food provision, linked to the Right
547 to Food. The EFRA Inquiry recommended consultation on this, plus the appointment of a minister for
548 food security, 'empowered to collect robust data on food insecurity and draw together policy across
549 departments on food supply, nutrition and welfare in order to deliver sustainable change' (EFRA
550 2020). The NFSIR Part Two recommended new legislation in the form of a 'Good Food Bill', although
551 it shied away from specific reference to the Right to Food. The Bill would underpin a long-term
552 statutory target to improve diet-related health, as a compliment to existing statutory targets for
553 carbon reduction and other proposed environmental targets. The proposal includes a requirement for
554 Government to prepare five-yearly action plans on progress; commit government to establish a
555 Reference Diet; oblige public organisations to attend to procurement standards (National Food
556 Strategy 2021).

557 Interestingly, though the NFSIR Part One recommended the Ministerial TaskForce be retained to
558 support cross-government working, and Part Two highlights several requirements for coordination,
559 including the need to align trade policy with agriculture policy and to ensure policy interventions are
560 coherent with the government's dietary guidelines; policy coordination does not explicitly feature in
561 its governance proposals (Parsons and Barling 2021b). The recommendations include more robust
562 monitoring of the food system and related policy activities, to enable government to be held to

563 account for progress; and expanded remit for the Food Standards Agency to cover healthy and
564 sustainable food advice and measures. However, the role of the expanded FSA appears to be
565 predominantly monitoring, rather than facilitating cross-cutting work. This is despite almost half of
566 the governance recommendations of major food systems reports focusing on the need to address
567 system issues through synergistic crosscutting actions whilst managing trade-offs and avoiding
568 conflicts between the objectives of different system components and sectors (Slater et al 2022).
569 While the *development* of the NFSIR was highly participatory, there was no proposal for a formal
570 *ongoing* participation mechanism (Parsons and Barling 2021b). The type of governance mechanisms
571 - and dedicated capacity - required may differ depending on whether the aim is routine or strategic
572 coordination. For example, strategic coordination may necessitate broader groups with a
573 membership beyond the food industry, so that health, environmental and social objectives are not
574 overlooked. A dedicated food body - ideally located outside specific sectoral departments, such as
575 centrally, or independent/arms length - may be required to support government to make a
576 strategically robust and coherent policy response. This response has multiple requirements if it is to
577 avoid the kinds of policy failures associated with an approach dominated by routine coordination.
578 One is brokering policy trade-offs such as political trade-off between worker safety and economic
579 production, and aligning policies, for example trade, aid and climate policies in relation to agri-food,
580 as recommended by the Trade and Agriculture Commission (2021). Another is recognising the
581 broader implications of Covid-19 related food system changes, for example for example the legacy
582 public health implications of changes in eating practices catalysed by the pandemic, such as
583 increased snacking and reduced physical activity (Boons et al 2021; Robinson et al 2021), and the rise
584 of online food outlet access, particularly given that access to such outlets is socioeconomically
585 patterned (Keeble et al 2021). Another is enabling departments to capitalise on synergies from
586 policy interventions which are part of recovery. Examples include linking job creation objectives with
587 support for short supply chains, improving and production and dietary diversity to enhance
588 resilience; and leveraging changes to eating practices resulting from the increased use of local food
589 environments due to changes in working and shopping patterns, to shape local food retail to
590 maximise the potential health and environmental benefits (Cummins et al 2020; Boons et al 2021).
591

592 Another consideration highlighted by the case study is how availability of data impacts coordination.
593 This includes gaps in monitoring of food insecurity, and supply from alternative food networks, and
594 government's dependency on large food industry players to understand the food supply. Tensions
595 over data sharing between local authorities 'new' to providing food assistance and third sector
596 organisations were also reported (Noonan-Gunning et al 2021). Along with the hampering of day-to-
597 day operations, the availability of data may itself shape coordination efforts, creating or reinforcing a
598 path dependency, leading to a stronger focus on areas of good data availability in policy
599 development and response. Improving public health while also improving the environment will
600 require data sharing and cross-departmental working (Caraher 2019). The NFSIR's proposal for a
601 National Food System Data Programme, to collect evidence on land and post-farm-gate activities
602 and health and environmental impacts, responds to this need (National Food Strategy 2021).

603

604 While more effective coordination is the direction of travel, any new arrangements must also take
605 account of the valuable function which policy specialisation plays in governance arrangements.
606 Firstly, because governments create specialist ministries to bring together experts in the field and to

607 focus on specific policy problems (Peters 2018). Secondly because separation of interests and
608 activities can actually be an important way of addressing tensions between different, competing,
609 food-related objectives. A pertinent example is the FSA—an independent non-ministerial
610 government department with responsibility for protecting public health and the interests of
611 consumers in relation to food —which was established following the BSE crisis, and in response to
612 eroded confidence in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Parsons et al 2018).

613 Conclusion

614 The pandemic offers a critical opportunity to examine national food policymaking approaches. This
615 case study has described the government’s food policy response to Covid-19 in England, with a
616 particular focus on which actors took part, and how they collaborated.

617 There are limitations to the research design which should be borne in mind; including that the use of
618 a single case study reduces the generalisability of findings to other country contexts, and that there
619 was a strong reliance on submissions to, and reports from, the EFRA Select Committee. Triangulation
620 of the documentary data - through elite interviews or other qualitative methods – would have
621 strengthened the findings further, though this was not deemed a feasible research design given that
622 the actors involved were busy dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

623 Despite these acknowledged limitations, the findings and analysis presented offer a contribution to
624 evidence building on national food policy responses to this pandemic and, in turn, future major
625 disruptions to the food supply. In particular, on how governance arrangements helped or hindered
626 the food policy response to Covid-19. The findings demonstrate how the food policy response to
627 Covid-19 required an impressive level of cross-government working. This offers the opportunity for a
628 more systemic approach for future food policy. It also highlights the primary role for DEFRA working
629 with multiple other departments and outside actors to deliver policy responses and outcomes.
630 However, it does raise questions about whether DEFRA is the most appropriate base for
631 coordination. How did this impact the coordination effort? How did it affect the selection of the
632 issues to target, and which actors got involved? For example, was the failure to sufficiently prioritise
633 the public health of food consumers a consequence of this not being part of DEFRA’s core remit?.
634 Nor was it in the immediate interests of the food industry stakeholders involved in the task forces
635 and committees.

636 Distinguishing between *routine* and more *strategic* coordination on food policy allows such
637 influences to be brought to light. The distinction can also inform discussions on the types of
638 coordination mechanisms which might be selected. Routine coordination may be supported through
639 cross-cutting taskforces etc, while strategic coordination may require an independent body, which
640 can take a broader and more impartial overview.

641 The case study findings demonstrate how routine coordination is necessary and could be polished,
642 but also risks being a lowest common denominator. There is danger that responses remain short-
643 term and reactive, targeting immediate problems at the expense of a wider more holistic strategy,
644 that addresses the deeper causes of the food-related challenges that were magnified during this
645 period of extreme stress. The case study illustrates how strategic coordination with societal goals
646 will be required in order to support transformation towards healthy sustainable food systems (rather
647 than maintaining the status quo). For example, there is an opportunity to more strategically

648 coordinate food policy interventions with nutritional objectives - specifically national dietary
649 guidelines. This is pertinent to the need to ensure social welfare payments and provision are
650 compatible with nutrition guidelines, enabling access to the components of a healthy diet. The case
651 study also presents opportunities to strengthen food policy coherence through collaboration in
652 supply chains, potentially opening the door for sustainability objectives to be more of a food-sector-
653 wide focus going forward. Another opportunity is around livelihoods of those working in the food
654 chain, including a revised approach to fairness, sustainability and collaboration in the food supply.
655 Finally, building on the need to better link different segments of the chain (for example catering and
656 retail) raises additional opportunities to link farmers with the food insecure, or innovative
657 approaches to direct food provision, through linking up catering – such as school kitchens – to
658 vulnerable populations. -ends-

659 Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declared that they have no conflict of interest

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