Note of Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) Food-Themed Meeting held on 13th May 2025

Please note this event was held prior to the publication of the Food Strategy. This Note is intended to record key issues and themes that emerged at a collaborative food-themed meeting in May 2025. It is not intended to be a set of detailed minutes. It includes information on evidence, sources and networks provided by participants after the meeting. The note has been led by SSEG members.

1. Introduction

On 13th May 2025, Defra's Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) held a joint one-day meeting with the Food Standards Authority's (FSA's) Advisory Committee for Social Sciences (ACSS) and members of the British Academy's Public Policy Team. The purpose was to bring together experts on social science and food to coincide with Defra's high priority work on a new Food Strategy. The meeting emphasised food systems and place-sensitive policymaking, the latter being a concept that made strong connections across different parts of the meeting. Due to the cross-cutting nature of food and related systems, we took a collaborative approach to organising this meeting, inviting colleagues from across the social sciences to make an input.

Over fifty people attended the meeting, either in person or online, including individuals from:

- Defra SSEG (members and secretariat)
- Defra Food Strategy Policy Team
- Defra Systems, Innovation and Futures Team (SIFT)
- Defra Economic Sub-group secretariat
- British Academy Public Policy Team
- FSA ACSS (members and secretariat)
- FSA Analysis and Policy Teams
- Department of Health and Social Care analyst

The agenda was designed to set the context of current food policy direction and ambition in Defra through the Food Strategy and to consider the nature and challenges of food systems and place-sensitive approaches to food policy. The meeting was conducted under Chatham House rules.

Agenda:
- Defra Food Strategy, Presenters:
  - Presenters: Defra Food Strategy policy
- Overview of Applied Systems Research with a focus on Food Systems
  - Presenters: Defra Systems, Innovation and Futures Team (SIFT)
- Workshop: Place sensitivity – how could we apply it in the food policy context?

　　　o　Presenters: British Academy Public Policy Team
- Using a Systems Approach to Better Understand Policy and Regulatory Changes: National Level Regulation
　　　o　Presenters: ACSS members and FSA analysts

What follows summarises key issues and themes that emerged from the presentations and discussions throughout the day.

2. Issues and themes

2.1. The food system

The complexity and interconnectedness of 'the food system' were acknowledged, and the challenges of drawing boundaries around the system discussed. Several participants emphasised that what makes the system complex is not just its many components but the fact that multiple systems, logics and interests overlap within it, and sometimes conflict. Further, systemic interconnections mean that interventions in one part of the system (such as regulation or procurement) can have effects elsewhere, often unpredictably.[1]

The need for more coherent cross-departmental working within government was recognised and surfaced frequently during discussion. Relevant departments include, for example, Health, Local Government, Transport, Treasury, and Work and Pensions.[2] However, there was a shared sense that achieving genuine coherence remains a practical and cultural challenge rather than a purely operational one. Contributors argued that a coherent policy would demand more than 'working together'; instead, meaningful progress would require alignment on the nature of 'the food system', policy objectives, language, metrics, and decision-making processes.

Significant aspects of food and related policies are devolved, though it is recognised that the systems of all four nations within the UK are connected and interdependent. While the Food Strategy needs to consider the food system of the UK as a whole, the priorities and policies being developed in the Strategy are for England only. Food systems also have important regional (e.g. European) and international dimensions.

Food production, biodiversity and climate change were seen as critical, interconnected components of the food system. System transformations that are compatible with the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and improved carbon storage were considered to have substantial potential benefits in addition to improvements in human health.

The group discussed ambiguities around systemic approaches and the challenge of 'changing the food system'. What would 'system change' look like and how would we know when it was happening? Would it entail, for example, facilitating a shift from a 'junk food cycle' to a 'good food cycle'? Might it involve a more specific set of indicators? Such questions relate to a fundamental, recurrent issue: what is 'good food'? This is not simply a matter of language and semantics but rather a question of

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who sets the agenda for system transformation, on what basis and with what evidence.

Many contributors pointed to unresolved real-world tensions, for example over appropriate metrics, institutional ownership, and competing visions of a 'good' or 'better' food system. The significance of there being a range of different actors, with differential power, was widely acknowledged and, once again, it was stressed that resolving tensions between competing visions of a better system was not just a matter of design. A case was made for understanding, mapping and engaging with different actors and interests, in order to clarify how the food system is actually constituted and to identify effective strategies for transformation.

Questions were raised not only about what needs to change but also about the time horizon over which transformation could take place. Some contributors pointed to the difficulty of reconciling long-term change with short-term political or commercial incentives. In considering such questions, it is important to take account of the dynamic nature of the system: for example, it might well be changing currently as a result of past policies, and evolution is likely even without policy action. (In a sense, a 'better food system' is a moving target). Attention was drawn to an extensive body of research on 'sustainability transitions', which offers empirical and theoretical insights into multi-actor, multi-level systemic change.[3]

The importance of food cultures was emphasised, and the point made that the consumption side of the food system needs a place-sensitive focus (see section 2.2) Participants thought it unhelpful to focus on specific foods in abstraction from the wider context of dietary habits and eating practices. One example mentioned was that presenting fish and chips as 'bad food' would miss its cultural significance for some as a Friday night ritual and/or the fact that many people enjoy this meal only occasionally.

2.2. Levers/instruments

A range of policy instruments was discussed at the meeting, including:

- Regulation
- Information/persuasion (which research suggests are not notably successful in isolation[4]).
- Fiscal measures (such as a 'sugar tax', for which there is some evidence of effect[5]).
- Public procurement (considered by the group to have significant potential).[6,7]
- Engagement of diverse publics and stakeholders in system change.

History suggests that a mix of policy instruments and approaches, provided that different components pull in the same direction, is likely to be most effective in bringing about change. It is also important to think about timing and sequencing. For example, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL, 'sugar tax') gained legitimacy in a

context in which voluntary action (such as the Public Health Responsibility Deal) had failed to bring about meaningful change.

There was clear agreement in the meeting on the need to expand the focus from an emphasis on individual behaviour ('methodological individualism') to include the structures within which individual choices are made. Such structures include the wider environment, which might or might not encourage healthy and sustainable food options.[8] An expansive view of the food system would require consideration of instruments such as planning and transport policies, which could help facilitate active travel and access to nutritious food.

Reflecting on these points, participants agreed that there is a need to know more about what has worked well in different contexts and environments, and why.

2.3. Framing

The concept of framing is well developed in the social sciences, and it recurred in different contexts throughout the meeting. The framing of problems and potential policy solutions involves the construction of (often competing) narratives or 'storylines', influencing who gets involved in policy formation and which issues are deemed to be within scope. There is ample evidence that framing, and 'changing the frame', have been of considerable significance in the evolution of public policy.

Participants identified a number of ways in which framing is significant in the context of food policy. They considered how framings affect conceptualisations of 'the food system' itself, exploring, for example, whether thinking in terms of 'food as a market commodity', or 'food as a public good' (with links to health and well-being, and other areas of public policy), or even 'food as commons' would shape different policy approaches.[9] Similarly, framing affects the delineation of system boundaries, influencing who gets involved in strategic thinking and the extent of co-operation and co-ordination required among different departments.

Different framings of 'food security' were also identified. Often presented in terms of dependence on imports, security of supply, and the potential to increase (UK) self-sufficiency, food security can also be seen through the lens of lived experience, bringing into scope issues such as access to nutritious food (including affordability) and the need for food banks.[10] In a related point, it was noted that health inequalities and food poverty are often framed as a matter of people being 'disconnected' from food, leading in turn to calls to provide knowledge and practical skills that would enable them to cook and eat well.[11] It was suggested, however, that the effectiveness of such interventions warrants further scrutiny.

The group agreed that the framing of regulation also mattered, for example whether regulation is routinely referred to as a 'burden' or accepted as an essential component of a 'good food system' in a modern democracy. Further, it was observed that modernising regulatory systems, even when the genuine intent is to make more efficient and effective use of available technologies, might nevertheless be framed by

some actors as 'de-regulation' (another example of the importance of language and narrative).

Finally, the underlying framework for decisions and choices (not always explicit) was also identified as making a difference – for example, whether the underpinning is one of preference Utilitarianism (reflected in an emphasis on costs and benefits) or one grounded in concepts of rights, needs and obligations.

2.4. Place sensitivity

There was great interest among those attending the meeting in the concept of place-sensitive policymaking, which provided a strong connection across the many issues discussed during the day. Participants saw place-sensitivity as a way of linking policy ambition to on-the-ground realities and it was suggested that the concept could provide a helpful, strategic orientation for future governance. Discussion highlighted the need for a deeper examination of the dynamics of place and place-sensitivity in relation to food systems and policies.

The British Academy (BA)'s ongoing work on place-sensitivity in the context of national systems challenges is highly relevant in this context.[12] In this work, the concept of place-sensitivity is not intended to replace or re-define the more familiar idea of certain policies and actions being 'place-based' but has a different focus. In a forthcoming report on this work, the BA defines place-sensitivity as:

> "… an approach to national and local policymaking that better aligns policy with the needs of people in places. It does this by drawing on four features: different types of knowledge, the language and narratives of places, public participation and multi-level partnerships. Combining these four features, national government can more consistently enable effective place-based policymaking and local government can take advantage of that enabling environment."

The view that the 'consumption' part of the food system, in particular, needed to be place sensitive was noted. But food production is also relevant in this context, for example in relation to allotments, community gardens, school projects, foraging groups and other initiatives.

Echoing the centrality of public participation in place-sensitive policymaking, the wider point was frequently made that diverse publics and stakeholders need to be engaged in discussions of all aspects of the food system. Carefully planned and well-conducted engagement and participation were seen as key processes for realising meaningful transformation.[13]

3. Important threads running through discussions during the day

- 'Growth' and 'sustainable growth' (contribution of food system)

- Knowledges about food
- Boundaries of the food system (and competing and alternative food systems)
- 'Inherent change' (cultural and social trends relating to food, innovation) and implications for policy
- How food system transformation could be place-sensitive
- Regulation and 'better regulation' (lagging behind system change)
- Importance of framings of food, the food system, food security, food policy, and regulation.
- In parallel to place-sensitivity, time-sensitivity and food futures (together with theories and methods for bringing these ideas into discussion)
- Meaningful engagement of diverse publics and stakeholders.

Endnotes

[1] Reflections included the observation that in food strategy design and implementation, complexity is not a neutral function of system configuration but is political, institutional, and situated, shaped by space/place, positionality, and the perspectives of different actors.

[2] Kelly Parsons identifies 16 government departments involved in some way in food policy in England, see: *Who Makes Food Policy in England? A map of Government Actors and Activities.*

[3] The Sustainability Transitions Research Network represents researchers working in this area. See here for a useful contemporary introduction (Geels et al. *Advanced Introduction to Sustainability Transitions*, Edward Elgar, 2024).

[4] One systematic review of drivers and barriers to adoption of sustainable healthy diets found that education and awareness raising are important but need to be accompanied by enabling factors such as easier and cheaper access to healthy foods and relevant government regulation. See Principato et al. (2025):
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1462901124003095
On provision of information, Rosenblatt et al (2018) found negative graphic warnings on unhealthy food to be more effective in driving healthier diets than negative text warnings or positive messages on healthier food:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195666317315957?via%3Dihub

[5] Rogers et al (2024) found a reduction in free sugar consumption in both children and adults one year after the introduction of the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL, the 'sugar tax'):
https://jech.bmj.com/content/jech/78/9/578.full.pdf   See also Institute for Government:
https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/sugar-tax

[6] An ongoing project at Coventry University examines how to improve opportunities for food buyers in schools, hospitals, and other public sector organisations to include sustainable, locally sourced food in their menus. < https://www.coventry.ac.uk/news/2024/coventry-universitys-research-aims-to-create-a-more-sustainable-uk-food-system-through-public-sector-food-procurement>

[7] A target in the *Food Products (Market Regulation and Public Procurement)* Bill, going through Parliament at the time of writing, seeks to ensure that at least 50 per cent of food supplied to the public sector is either produced by British farmers or certified to 'higher environmental standards'
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0203/240203.pdf

[8] Interesting projects include the ERC-funded *Sharecity's* Sustainable Food Sharing work<https://sharecity.ie/research/food-sharing-futures/> and the EU 'Cultivate Project' <https://cultivate-project.eu>

[9] See, for example, Vivero-Pol, 2019: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.05.015

[10] See, for example, UKRI-funded projects on food inequalities:
https://www.ukri.org/news/projects-spanning-the-uk-to-tackle-food-inequality-unveiled/

See also Tak et al. (2023) on media framings of the previous UK food strategy. This study found that 'British media's alignment with free market economic thinking has implications for food systems reform, as it deters government from acting and relies on the invisible hand of the market to fix the system': https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/bfj-04-2023-0338/full/pdf

[11] So, for example, we see calls for the school curriculum to cover 'where food comes from' and for community-based initiatives such as cookery classes.

[12] In particular, the BA's projects *Where We Live Now* (complete) and *Where We Live Next* (ongoing), with their emphasis on place-sensitivity (presented and discussed in a special Workshop at the meeting): https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/where-we-live-next/

[13] See Defra Social Science Expert Group *Review of Public Engagement* (2022): Review of public engagement - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)