Who is making food policy in England

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In England, at the level of national government, policy that affects the food system is made by at least 16 departments and public bodies.

Central to these is the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the main policy-making department for farming, fisheries and the environment, which is supported by 33 agencies and public bodies. DEFRA is responsible for devising the policies that will replace the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy, the frameworks which the UK shared with the European Union (EU) until Brexit. A flagship DEFRA policy has been the National Food Strategy, initiated in 2019 and due to make its final report in 2021, to be followed by a government policy paper.

The Food Standards Agency (a non-ministerial department) is responsible for regulating the safety and hygiene of food and animal feed; for food surveillance (alerting businesses and consumers to food hazards); and for monitoring food crime. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has responsibilities for nutritional aspects of health, which include the government’s main policy to combat obesity, the Childhood Obesity Plan (which involves cross-working with other departments). DHSC also sets the nutritional standards for Public Sector Procurement of food and catering. Public Health England (PHE), an executive agency of DHSC, is responsible for providing scientific evidence, advice and professional expertise in support of the diet-related aspects of health policy. This includes technical advice to government on nutrients, public campaigns on healthy eating, and the Eatwell Guide, which sets out the government’s recommended healthy diet. In August 2020 it was announced that PHE was to be replaced by a new agency, the National Institute for Health Protection, but it was not made clear where diet-related public health responsibilities would reside after this change. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport plays a part in food policy through its regulation of advertising (including restrictions on promotion of certain foods, part of the Childhood Obesity Plan), and through its responsibility for digital infrastructure, increasingly important to food businesses and food consumers.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has a key role, with food the UK’s largest manufacturing sector and accounting for a significant number of businesses in production, retail and hospitality. BEIS is responsible for industrial strategy, for championing UK food-related research and innovation, and for climate change policy (where the food system is both a driver and a mitigator). BEIS also administers the National Minimum Wage (which affects many food sector workers) and oversees the work of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which regulates the major supermarkets’ treatment of their direct suppliers. As of September 2020, support to developing countries in the areas of food aid and agriculture is provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, into which the former Department for International Development has been merged. Food is pivotal to its work on meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. The Department for International Trade, formed in 2016 to prepare the UK for trading as an independent nation after Brexit, is likely to have a growing impact on food policy, with trade agreements potentially affecting domestic food standards, production practices, availability and prices.

The Department for Education is responsible for standards for food eaten in schools; for supporting schemes to boost nutrition (e.g. by providing free milk or fruit and veg for selected age groups); and for providing school meals to children in lower-income families via Free School Meal vouchers. Schools are also responsible for delivering food education as part of the National Curriculum.

The Home Office is responsible for migration, which affects the food system because large numbers of migrants work on farms, in food processing plants and in the hospitality sector. Some of this labour is regulated by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, a Home Office agency. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for social security payments, which affect both recipients’ ability to access enough food and also the quality of their diet. DWP also has responsibility for health and safety at food-related workplaces, through its agency the Health and Safety Executive. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is responsible for planning policy and urban regeneration, both of which can affect access to food shops and markets, and for liaising with Local Authorities in emergencies, when food supplies need to be protected. The Department for Transport looks after transport infrastructure of all kinds, on which food distribution depends. The Ministry of Justice underpins the food system by administering the rule of law, and is also responsible for prison catering.

Finally, the Cabinet Office has an overarching role in coordinating policy across government. Her Majesty’s Treasury also has a controlling role, in that it oversees government and departmental spending.

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1 As distinct from the three Devolved Administrations (DAs) of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, or the local level: Agriculture, fisheries, food safety and standards, and health are devolved competences in all three DAs, so governance may differ from England’s in these policy areas. Some food-related responsibilities are also devolved to Local Authorities in England.
About us

The Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London, is an interdisciplinary unit working to shape food systems that improve the health of people, society, the environment and the economy.

We engage with people across the food system to uncover how it really works in practice. We use these insights to educate, influence, and to inform effective, joined-up food policy.


Please cite this Brief as: