



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

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Abstract

The impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response of government and non-government actors, from February–September 2020, offers critical insights into the current state of England's food policy processes and operations, and in particular the coordination of national food policy approaches. This study aims to clarify and solidify the discourse around food policy coordination by differentiating between *routine* coordination of the activities of government, and *strategic* coordination of such policy activities with higher-level strategic goals, such as those associated with a healthy and sustainable food system. This framework is applied to the case study based on documentary analysis. In detailing the evidence of coordination in the response, including examples of cross-government working, and collaboration across the public, private and third sectors, the findings illustrate the breadth of actors which constituted the policy and governance response. These included public policymakers in national and local governments, and from a range of different government departments; private sector food businesses; and third sector organisations. There was a high level of routine coordination, but also instances of disconnection and delay. A lack of strategic coordination provides an explanatory device for several instances of disconnection and incoherence, including interventions which failed to prioritise nutrition-related health, and the working conditions of those employed in the food sector. The routine-strategic distinction can be deployed to inform discussions on the types of policy coordination mechanisms, such as cross-cutting taskforces or bodies, which might be instituted to support connected working on food.

Keywords Policy Coordination · Covid-19 · Food Policy · Food Governance · Food Systems

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic in the first wave in 2020 challenged the day-to-day working of the UK's food supply, presenting policy demands on government not seen to such a degree since the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. The public health demands of reducing virus transmission came to the forefront of the UK Government's policy agenda, in turn catalysing wider economic, business sector and employment dislocations, impacting the production, delivery and consumption of food. The Government's response to the impacts upon the food supply provide insights into the current state of England's food policy processes and operations.

In particular, the actions of the Government highlight its abilities to join up the governance of the food supply chain and to coordinate its actions across the different departments and agencies of the state and between national and local levels, and to work with private and third sector actors, in a period of crisis. Furthermore, a study of these responses offers lessons for improving food policy coordination in the longer term. Given the growing interest, as outlined below, in connecting the range of policy actors and activities related to food, the food policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic offers a fruitful case study for better understanding policy coordination.

This study starts by explaining the relevance of policy coordination to food policy. It then examines the concept of policy coordination, and why it is an appropriate lens through which to analyse the food policy and governance responses to the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis in England. It describes the methods used to collect data and evidence of these policy actions. Next it presents the findings from this case study of food policy and governance

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coordination activities involved in the response to the impacts of this first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is followed by a discussion which reflects on routine and more strategic, extended, aspects of coordination.

1.1 Why is coordination relevant to food policy?

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

Coordination around *food* issues more specifically, has also been the focus of episodic but growing academic attention (Barling et al., 2002; Lang et al., 2009; Feindt & Flynn, 2009; Candel & Pereira, 2017; Parsons et al., 2018; Candel & Daugbjerg, 2020; Parsons, 2021). Most recently, a ‘systems’ turn in food studies has articulated the need for more ‘systemic’ and connected approaches to food through the concepts of synergies, tensions and trade-offs, in particular those linked to the complex and interconnected resource management challenge of the ‘Water-Energy-Food Nexus’ (Pahl Wostl, 2019; Weitz et al., 2017). Examples include where bio-fuel production presents risks to food security (Weitz et al., 2017); where agricultural production creates negative environmental impacts (DeBoe et al., 2020); or where economics interests are privileged over public health (de Lacy-Vawdon & Livingstone, 2020).

The policy system around food encompasses many different policy levers, many of which target individual activities (such as farming) or outcomes (such as food safety). These can create unintended consequences for other activities (for example natural resource management programmes) or outcomes (for example environmental sustainability). There is growing consensus that addressing the major social challenges related to food—such as obesity and climate change—requires a wide range of policy levers, designed through the lens of an integrated food system, and implemented in joined-up rather than

piecemeal ways (GLOPAN, 2020) with increased coordination between different policy making communities (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, environment, public health), so that various policies are aligned to strengthen each other, or at least do not counteract each other (OECD, 2021). A recent analysis of major food systems reports details how almost half of all governance recommendations in such reports focus on ‘addressing system issues through synergistic crosscutting actions whilst managing trade-offs and avoiding conflicts between the objectives of different system components and sectors’ (Slater et al., 2022, p. 2). The Sustainable Development Goals have also elevated the need for ‘unprecedented integration of siloed policy portfolios’ (Obersteiner et al., 2016).

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

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

Sporadic attempts have been made to address this fragmentation, and to improve oversight of food policy, through various governance changes, including new institutional arrangements. These have included new departments and agencies, mechanisms such as cross-government groups, and cross-cutting food strategies drawing together activities around food. Institutional reforms around the establishment of the FSA and DEFRA

around 2000 led to ‘a joining up of some aspects of food policy, albeit in an incremental and somewhat muddled manner’ (Barling et al., 2002, p. 14). Almost a decade later, connecting food policy returned to fashion with the 2008 Food Matters Report ‘Towards a Food Strategy’, and subsequent Food 2030 Vision; both offering an ‘overarching statement of government food policy’ (Cabinet DEFRA, 2010; Office, 2008), though they were abandoned due to a change in government in 2010 (Parsons et al., 2018). Another decade later, the idea of a National Food Strategy was resurrected, with similar intentions for an ‘overarching strategy for government’ on food (National Food Strategy, 2020). A National Food Strategy Independent Review (NFSIR) was conducted, with Part One published in 2020, and Part Two in Summer 2021. The potential role of the NFSIR in more effective policy coordination is returned to in the discussion.

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

While not as high profile as the private sector role, the third sector – food-related civil society organisations (CSOs) – plays an important food policy and governance role, primarily in agenda setting and delivery (Lang, 2006; Durrant, 2014). The arrangements between these three sectors have long-raised questions about the inclusivity of food policy, and how ‘the dominant paradigm offers a privileged place to certain private interests, notably the large corporate players in the food system’ (Barling et al., 2002, p. 7). Concerns have been raised regarding the industry representative Food and Drink Sector Council’s influence over policymaking, for example, and its implications for public health objectives (Caraher, 2019).

1.2 Conceptualising coordination

A number of different terms are applied to the connecting of policy, including integration, coordination, and coherence, with no hard and fast rule as to what phenomena each is associated with (see: Metcalfe, 1994; Meijers & Stead, 2004; Six, 2004; Hogl & Nordbeck, 2012; Nilsson et al., 2012; Tosun & Lang, 2013; Hustedt & Seyfried, 2016). In the food-specific policy literature, Candel (2014) discusses calls for *coherence* and *coordination* on food security at multiple scales; and Candel and Pereira (2017) discuss challenges around *integrated* food policy, including *coordination* of relevant sectors and levels. Parsons (2019), drawing on Nilsson et al (2012), proposed a distinction between *integration* of the policy process, and *coherence* of policy content. Recognising that the term coordination has tended to be used to refer to connecting policy activities across government, we propose an additional distinction to navigate the different ideas encapsulated by the range of terms, namely:

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

This paper focuses on the latter, policy coordination (Hustedt & Seyfried, 2016; Peters, 2018; Christensen et al., 2019). The aim is to clarify and solidify the discourse around food policy coordination through focusing on the *degree* of food policy coordination. Here, building on existing conceptualisations, we differentiate between the *routine* form as opposed to the *strategic*–or more *extensive*–form of coordination. Drawing on Scharpf (1973, cited in Hustedt & Seyfried, 2016) Hustedt and Seyfried (2016) distinguish between negative and positive policy coordination, as two ideal types at the extremes of a coordination continuum. Negative coordination—where a formal responsible organisational unit initiates coordination based on its own ‘selective perception’ of a problem—represents the routine or ‘everyday form of mutual interaction across government’ (p. 891). Positive coordination – whereby all relevant actors are involved based on a broader joint problem perception – occurs only on exceptional occasions. Peters’ (2018) uses the term strategic coordination to describe the prospective ‘coordination of programmes around the broad strategic goals of government’. Distinguishing routine and strategic coordination in *food* policymaking in Government highlights the differences between connecting up existing activities (the predominant focus of those working in government) and a more ambitious approach to connecting interventions to food system objectives around,

health, sustainability and equity (Parsons, 2021). These more normative strategic objectives may, or may not, overlap with the goals of government. We also associate the strategic end of the coordination spectrum with reconciliation of differing priorities and their political origins. This dimension is emphasised by a study from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which notes ‘coordination mechanisms can only be effective if they go beyond information sharing’ and they need ‘a clear mandate to anticipate and resolve policy divergences and tensions arising from different sectoral interests’ (Fyson et al., 2020).

Strategic coordination emphasises the need to *extend* policymaking connections beyond immediate objectives and actors related to a particular food system intervention (which may represent the lowest common denominator, or the ‘business as usual’ status quo), and prospectively connect to normative food system priorities around health, sustainability, equity associated with system transformation. Like its routine counterpart, strategic coordination can operate on a bilateral basis; for example, ensuring interventions around direct food assistance involving departments responsible for food and welfare also extend to nutrition objectives and actors. In this sense, the extended strategic coordination falls short of an overarching integrative approach to policies. Our proposal is that both *routine* and more extensive *strategic* coordination are required to respond to the challenges related to food systems, in this case the governance and policy challenges emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic. A focus on routine coordination alone means policy is failing to address pressing societal issues. In turn, the application of this distinction provides empirical evidence of how food policy coordination was conducted and the successes and gaps of these policy responses.

1.3 Methods

This paper utilises a case study of the food policy response to Covid-19 in England, between February–September 2020. The case study method is deemed appropriate for this endeavour, given the aim to ‘illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result’ (Schramm, 1971, cited in Yin, 2015, p. 15). In bounding the case (Yin, 2015) decisions have been taken on what not to include in the research: the case is bounded at the level of England – rather than the UK – because certain devolved responsibilities (e.g. health) mean Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made their own distinct policy interventions. However, because England itself does not have a devolved administration, and policy in some sectors is made on a UK-wide basis, the government in England is routinely referred to as the UK government.

The method undertaken in this study is a policy analysis of the whole of the government’s food policy response to

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

sources described thus far were complemented with additional documentary data, including media reports where they provided details on a particular food policy issue or intervention which was not covered by official government or other stakeholder documents. For each development, the key responsible organisation was noted.

2 Results

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

2.1 The food policy response: issues and interventions

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

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

In addition, there were issues specific to particular segments of the supply chain, with interventions to address these associated with a wide range of government departments, for example: remote inspections of farms and other food businesses (FSA); initiatives to ensure agricultural labour supply (DEFRA); relaxation of regulations on labelling (FSA), driver/delivery hours (DfT—Department for Transport); relaxation of competition rules (DEFRA; BEIS—Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy); retailer-led restrictions on food purchasing; guidance for food businesses on Covid-19 (PHE (now OHID); DEFRA); relaxation of planning rules to allow pubs and restaurants

to operate as hot food takeaways (MHCLG—Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government); the Eat Out to Help Out discount scheme to encourage a return to hospitality (HMT—Her Majesty's Treasury); a voucher scheme replacing free school meals (DfE—Department for Education); and several food assistance interventions to the vulnerable, who were either shielding or could not otherwise access food (DEFRA) (see Parsons and Barling (2021a) for more details).

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

2.2 Reorganisation of government priorities and resources

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

A number of governance bodies—Table 1—were utilised in the response, many involving multiple government departments, and aimed at connecting government with the private sector. The main focus of these group was ensuring continuity of food supply to shops, along with supply to (medically or economically) vulnerable populations. Although the distinction was not always made clear, several bodies existed prior to the pandemic, such as F4 and the Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group, whereas others were created especially, such as the Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded Vulnerable People.

Beyond these bodies, the response involved significant coordination of activities. There were interventions from a

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) Purpose: understand and support food delivery company provision to vulnerable people and key workers, and ensure companies had information to operate effectively 	<p>‘Departments across government including: DEFRA Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Department for Work and Pensions Ministers from Devolved Administrations’</p> <p>Not specified</p>
	Food Delivery Forum	<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 Vulnerability Stakeholder Group	<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 Met weekly throughout pandemic Purpose: ‘provide effective two-way communication between food retail sector and Government’ Forum to discuss sector’s concerns and recovery after initial phase of pandemic 	<p>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 (2020a) For A Full List)</p> <p>Not specified</p>
	Retailer Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forum to discuss sector’s concerns and recovery after initial phase of pandemic 	DEFRA Manufacturing Sector
	Food and Drink Manufacturers Forum (EFRA, 2020b)		

Table 1 (continued)

	Mechanism/Body	Details	Membership
Existing	Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanism to exchange information on threats to supply chain • First Covid-19 meeting March 2020 	DEFRA 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

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

*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; International Meat Trade Association; Compass Group; British Game Alliance; Agricultural Industries Confederation

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

large number of departments. As noted in the trade body UK Hospitality's evidence to EFRA (EFRA, 2021):

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

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

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

It also involved coordination between departments—primarily DEFRA and one or more others—on many individual issues. Table 2 provides examples of where multiple departments worked together on particular interventions.

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

In comparison, close collaboration between the public and private sectors is notable (Table 3), though there is less evidence of collaboration between government and civil society actors, and a general sense that the government lagged behind the civil society response on the ground on food access. In March, civil society groups called on government to secure food supplies, responding to news that the over-70s may soon need to self-isolate (Sustain, 2020a), and highlighted the need for government intervention, stating 'HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions must act immediately, to enable low-income households have the financial resilience to be able to self-isolate, and to relieve avoidable overwhelming pressure on local authorities and frontline charities' (Sustain, 2020b). The delay in the government's own response to food insecurity on the ground, and balance of responsibility between government and civil society more broadly, are examined in the discussion.

3 Discussion

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

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

3.1 Routine coordination

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

Certain responses were reactive, following pressure from private and civil society sectors, raising questions about timeliness and preparedness, particularly around emergency food aid. The findings suggest an initial primary focus on food supply to supermarkets. For example, the first Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group meeting took place on 6 March. This can be contrasted with the response on access to food for the vulnerable (medical or economic) where, with the supply chain alone unable to meet demand, the third sector safety net proved crucial (Noonan-Gunning et al., 2021). Government intervention, such as on food parcels or free school meal replacement, lagged behind requirements on the ground, leaving civil society to fill the gap in emergency food aid, resulting in calls for further government intervention such as a state-led 'National Food Service' (Independent, 2020b). Though access to food by the vulnerable was raised multiple times by civil society groups in advance of lockdown, the 'Ministerial Task Force Non-Shielded Vulnerable People' was not established until early April.

Food supply was a more prominent focus, but here too there were delays and gaps in the response. Government intervention to close food service businesses led to dislocation of dedicated supplies to these outlets, and severe

Table 2 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
£16 m 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

Source: Authors (from DEFRA, 2020a; Parsons & Barling, 2021a)

Table 3 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 £1 m ‘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

Source: Authors from Parsons and Barling (2021a, b)

disruption to domestic livestock and dairy producers supplying them (EFRA, 2020a). A costly time lag before some degree of transfer to other supply chains, indicated better prepared emergency planning systems—that work in tandem with the realities of supply chains’ access to consumption markets—should be in place where food supply shocks occur.

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

Delays also occurred around food business safety, including personal protective equipment (PPE), and guidance on social distancing in the workplace (only published in April), with ‘guidance on measures that businesses should take to protect workers... not issued quickly enough’ (EFRA,

2020a). Various private sector actors, including processors, manufacturers, retailers as well as trade unions, developed and implemented Covid-19-secure working practices in lieu of satisfactory government guidance.

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

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

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

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

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

Government's heavy reliance on the private sector for delivery on food supply, and for liaising with consumers, was also evident. DEFRA itself acknowledges that 'the expertise, capability and levers to plan for, and respond to, food supply disruption lie predominantly with the

industry' (EFRA, 2020b). The government was criticised for failing to provide reassurances to the public in the early phase of the pandemic, including on how to shop safely, and that there was enough food and essential supplies (EFRA, 2020a). The government's counter was that evidence 'shows that industry voices are often best placed to provide the expert commentary needed to demonstrate the resilience of the supply chain and to reassure the public that if we all shop considerately there is enough to go around' (EFRA, 2020b). Calls for government rationing in response to widespread empty shelves (Independent, 2020a) were pushed back heavily by DEFRA (DEFRA, 2020b). Though a decision was later taken to make a direct appeal to consumers as part of the televised national press conference.

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

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

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

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

3.2 Strategic coordination

Strategic coordination failures are less about disconnects and delays on existing activities, and more about a failure to consider the wider food system, including the consequences of particular policy responses for other objectives. While recognising the unprecedented and emergency nature of

the food policy response, examining it through the lens of *routine* and *strategic* coordination suggests a holistic overview of the food system, and consideration of multiple goals across that system—economic, health, environmental and social—is warranted, but missing when the focus is on routine coordination only. The following are selected examples of where strategic coordination could have been utilised.

Food insecurity has been one of the most high-profile issues of the pandemic. Along with the routine coordination ‘underlap’—whereby responsibilities for this policy problem were unclear—the case study suggests opportunities for more strategic extensive coordination were missed. One example is the reliance on food waste/surplus as the supply source for direct food assistance. Leaving aside moral arguments around the suitability of this supply, its unstable nature was highlighted by disruptions in availability at the start of the pandemic. Another red flag is nutritional adequacy of supply dominated by less fresh, more ambient produce. Another is the link between food safety and food insecurity, with evidence suggesting that food insecure people are more likely to eat food past use-by date, keep leftovers longer, and to have food poisoning (Brightharbour, 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). This latter example notwithstanding, safety was the overriding public health concern; but at the expense of nutrition. Failure to prioritise food-related public health manifested in several ways, from direct food assistance parcels being nutritionally-poor initially, though these issues were subsequently addressed (EFRA, 2020a), to the marketing of red meat and dairy (due to over-supply), and the incoherence of the *Eat Out to Help Out* scheme, which lowered the cost of meals, including at fast food outlets. These actions took place in the absence of explicit messaging around healthy eating, although there was some advice given in Scotland, and on eating and Covid-19 *recovery* from the NHS (NHS Inform.Scot, n.d; NHS UK, n.d.). By comparison, the USDA ChooseMyPlate website gave specific advice on preparing healthy low-costs meals during the pandemic (USDA, n.d), while Israel took a multi-pronged approach: nutrition guidelines for sufferers; commercials about how to eat more healthily; teaching healthy nutrition to children/students via zoom and special meal plans for hospitals (Thibault et al., 2020). Failure to connect Covid-19 to the issue of nutrition led to various calls for a prioritisation of public health in the UK, including from academics and the Faculty of Public Health (Faculty of Public Health, 2020; Lang et al., 2020), and campaign group Action on Sugar called for an independent food watchdog to advise and monitor examples of commercial interests which undermine diet-related health (Action on Sugar, 2020).

On the environmental side, there were multiple impacts of interventions. These included an increase in single use packaging; a decline in waste recycling and increase in incineration and landfilling; increased disinfection routines with

hazardous chemical substances in household and outdoor environments; and increased ecological risk to natural ecosystems due to the use of disinfectants (Silva et al., 2020).

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

Along with wider social and environmental goals appearing disconnected from the policy response, the case study suggests strategic coordination is required to consider the food supply *as a whole* (rather than individual segments or actors). An example is the dominance of conventional supply chains, and in particular the large food companies, at the expense of the diverse range of food businesses which contribute supply. This manifested in multiple ways, including: a failure to prioritise street markets as a source of low-cost healthy food; poor data reporting on the growth of short supply chain sales, such as vegetable box schemes; and potentially negative consequences of the relaxation of competition law to allow collaboration and consultation with a small number of stakeholders, at the expense of other supply chain actors (FWD, 2021; ACS, 2020; EFRA, 2020a, 2020b). Data gaps may be in part responsible for this imbalance, as discussed below. A strategic approach to connecting policy issues across the system is likely to require additional coordination capacity than currently exists within food governance arrangements, as discussed next.

3.3 Implications for coordination mechanisms

Government cannot plan for every potential shock to the food system, but the case study findings suggest clarifying responsibilities, and having recourse to some kind of dedicated cross-cutting food plan or other coordination structure

could have improved the effectiveness of its response (beyond routine coordination). Dedicated food coordination mechanisms have been used in England in the past, including a cross-government Cabinet Sub-Committee on Food, a Food Policy Task Force of officials, an independent Council of Food Policy Advisors, and a dedicated food policy unit within DEFRA (Parsons et al., 2018).

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

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

Interestingly, though the NFSIR Part One recommended the Ministerial TaskForce be retained to support cross-government working, and Part Two highlights several requirements for coordination, including the need to align

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

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

While more effective coordination is the direction of travel, any new arrangements must also take account of the valuable function which policy specialisation plays in governance arrangements. Firstly, because governments create specialist ministries to bring together experts in the field and to focus on specific policy problems (Peters, 2018). Secondly because separation of interests and activities can actually be an important way of addressing tensions between different, competing, food-related objectives. A pertinent example is the FSA—an independent non-ministerial government department with responsibility for protecting public health and the interests of consumers in relation to food—which was established following the BSE crisis, and in response to eroded confidence in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Parsons et al., 2018).

4 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

The case study findings demonstrate how routine coordination is necessary and could be polished, but also risks being a lowest common denominator. There is danger that responses remain short-term and reactive, targeting immediate problems at the expense of a wider more holistic strategy that addresses the deeper causes of the food-related challenges that were magnified during this period of extreme stress. The case study illustrates how strategic coordination with societal goals will be required in order to support transformation towards healthy sustainable food systems (rather than maintaining the status quo). For example, there is an opportunity to more strategically coordinate food policy interventions with nutritional objectives—specifically national dietary guidelines. This is pertinent to the need to ensure social welfare payments and provision are compatible with nutrition guidelines, enabling access to the components of a healthy diet. The case study also presents opportunities to strengthen food policy coherence through collaboration in supply chains, potentially opening the door for sustainability objectives to be more of a food-sector-wide focus going forward. Another opportunity is around livelihoods of those working in the food chain, including a revised approach to fairness, sustainability and collaboration in the food supply. Finally, building on the need to better link different segments

of the chain (for example catering and retail) raises additional opportunities to link farmers with the food insecure, or innovative approaches to direct food provision, through linking up catering – such as school kitchens – to vulnerable populations.

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