

Paper 14.1 Developing a cross-government systems thinking approach to better understand the food system

Summary

The FSA is keen to take a systems thinking approach and identify opportunities for collaboration with other Government departments to contribute to the food strategy and future work in the food system. This paper sets out how we intend to achieve this. Members are asked to consider the following questions:

1. What should we consider when thinking about development of a food systems tool to enable us to explore policy and regulatory options?
2. To help us focus some of our evidence gathering and analysis, please consider if there are any relevant examples in your respective area where a policy initiative has had unintended consequences? Do you understand why that was the case, and to what extent could those consequences have been foreseen?

Background

- The FSA is keen to take a systems thinking approach and identify opportunities for collaboration with other Government departments to contribute to the food strategy and future work in the food system.
- The FSA Chair, CEO and CSA attended a meeting convened by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Chris Whitty in January with DHSC and Defra representatives, to create clarity on how each of the organisations work together and agree tasks and responsibilities in meeting the shared goal of tackling obesity and diet-related health.
- We set out key areas where we could build our existing evidence and expertise in line with the health mission, including our role in FDTP.

- Following this meeting, FSA Defra and DHSC have been asked to work together to consider a joint approach to changing the food system, and to explore economic impacts of various interventions aimed at improving outcomes in the food system, including deprivation/place-based approaches, childhood/school-based interventions and fiscal interventions.
- Defra are leading on development of the food strategy and an outcomes framework across the different pillars of the strategy (health, sustainability, growth, security). This framework is being developed collaboratively across government, and FSA have been asked to contribute.

Our Approach

We have convened an AU Systems Working Group with members from Social Science, Economics, Operational Research and Strategic Insights.

The purpose of the working group is to:

- work closely with FSA Strategy colleagues to ensure that the FSA is seen as a key player and exerts influence with other government departments;
- improve systems thinking and work together on a food systems approach to assess intended and unintended impacts of possible regulatory interventions aimed at delivering a prosocial food system optimised for safety, nutrition, sustainability and UK profitability, across market dynamics, consumer behaviour and system-wider outcomes.
- We are joining up with Defra and DHSC to influence development of the food strategy and enable future collaboration, particularly in relation to the ask of the Chief Medical Officer referred to above.
- We also hope that over time this will support the development of innovative, dynamic food systems tools to allow for quicker exploration of policy and regulatory options.

What have we done so far?

- We met with Defra analysts on 4th March 2025 to discuss systems thinking approaches and current tools used at FSA and Defra, and to identify opportunities for collaboration.
- We are meeting with Deputy Directors at FSA, Defra and DHSC to implement a plan to work collaboratively on a cross-government systems approach.
- Defra have shared a draft outcomes framework for our review. We have collated comments and feedback as a working group along with our Strategy colleagues and shared with Defra.

- We have also contributed to various briefings to inform meetings with FSA senior officials and other government departments (e.g. a small ministerial group meeting on children's diets, a meeting with Defra Minister Zeichner).
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