

Changing Diets to Promote Health and Sustainability

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Policies to improve diets can deliver major public health benefits, contribute to net zero ambitions, and foster economic growth. The ways in which these policies are designed, co-ordinated and implemented is key to their success.

About the research

[The burden of poor diets](#) on public finances – through costs to the NHS, the social care and welfare systems – is estimated at £92bn annually. An extra £176bn in productivity is lost through the prevalence of diet-related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). Poor diets also carry high environmental impacts, the agri-food sector being a [major contributor to the UK's greenhouse gas emissions](#). The economic, environmental and public health implications of poor diets demand innovative, systemic and joined-up responses from policymakers.

To explore what these might look like in practice, we conducted an international review of dietary change initiatives. This research was undertaken within the [H3 Consortium](#), a major strategic research investment funded by UKRI's [Transforming UK Food Systems \(TUKFS\)](#) programme. Our study involved in-depth and longitudinal analysis of how and when efforts to change people's diets are successful. Here we draw out some of the key implications for policymakers.

Policy implications

- **The Government must continue to recognise that poor diets represent a major barrier to a healthy, sustainable and productive society.** This challenge requires ambitious policy responses that use a range of levers, target multiple actors, and are carefully sequenced. The [success of the smoking ban](#) in the UK illustrates how these responses can deliver meaningful change.
- **Policy initiatives should consider a wide context of dietary habits and avoid focusing on specific foods in isolation.** For example, framing fish and chips as a 'bad' food would miss its cultural significance as a meal people eat only occasionally (e.g. as a Friday night ritual).
- **Policymakers should consider what a 'good' diet is, scrutinising how dietary change is framed, by who, for who, and what evidence they draw on.** Effective policy will likely be place sensitive and developed in consultation with publics.
- **State-backed funding can accelerate the development and adoption of sustainable and healthier diets.** Governments can support innovative public procurement models (e.g. improving the provision of healthy and sustainable food in schools). They can also invest in high risk, high reward initiatives such as innovation for novel foods.
- **Policy implementation should be informed by evidence of 'what works' and evaluate success on the basis of lasting change.** This will inform the development of strategies for layering and sequencing successful policy interventions.

Key findings

Dietary change initiatives can reshape food systems in unintended ways: Our research shows that many consumer-facing initiatives may not be effective in delivering individual behaviour changes. For example, carbon labelling initiatives have had mixed success and many have been abandoned. However, their existence has had [unintended consequences](#) in terms of raising the agenda and securing commercial engagement. In some cases, this has led to [major efforts to decarbonise supply chains](#), in turn reducing the environmental impact of people's diets.

Issues and policy responses evolve over time: When concerns around food waste reduction first gained prominence, the issue was framed principally as a problem of household behaviour and individual responsibility. Now the issue is understood as a matter of [shared responsibility](#). A disparate set of food system actors coalesced around a set of shared understandings of the problem and what should be done about it. This was made possible because a [‘perfect storm’ of other issues – including austerity, food price inflation, and heightened concerns around food security and environmental sustainability](#). This demonstrates the importance of timing: well-timed policy can be key in catalysing action amongst actors.

The sequencing of interventions matter: The order in which different policies are implemented is important. The Soft Drink Industry Levy ([SDIL](#)) is [generally regarded as a successful approach](#) to dietary change. Whilst interventionist in nature, it gained legitimacy following the failure of the [Public Health Responsibility Deal](#), which relied on voluntary pledges from retailers and manufacturers. This demonstrates the importance of a long-term perspective in understanding how the ‘failure’ of some approaches can clear the way for more successful ones.

Improving diets requires a holistic understanding of people's eating practices: Our research suggests that dietary change initiatives are effective when they engage with the social context of food and the dynamics of people's eating practices. Policies that focus on reducing the consumption of specific ‘unhealthy’ or ‘bad’ foods rarely lead to lasting change. National dietary policies such as those found in Brazil, Chile and France, underscore the importance of thinking about culturally appropriate diets, people's lived experiences, and the food environments in which dietary habits are formed.

A range of organisations actively seek to set the agenda for dietary change: Our research demonstrates that the setting of dietary change agendas is a contested and intensely political process. While the risks of corporate influence are [well-documented](#), other strategic actors such as charities, community organisations and philanthropic foundations also seek to exert their influence. These actors draw on different forms of evidence, mobilise particular interests, and claim to represent other groups in doing so. This highlights the importance of transparency and ensuring that agendas are developed in consultation with citizens and publics.

Further information

See the paper this research is based on: Evans, D.M. and Beacham, J.D., 2025. Organising the subjects of responsible consumption: Analysing the locus of responsibility for transitions in the UK food sector (2007-2021). *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 57, 101022.

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