

# 5 Policy coherence

Jeremy Farr, Jessica Bogard and Kelly Parsons

## 1 POLICY COHERENCE IN AUSTRALIA



### Food safety

Current focus of policy coordination

### Broader policy coordination

exists but is patchy

## 2 CHALLENGES

- **The food system** and its interactions are poorly recognised
- **Sectoral mandates** diminish policy recognition of the food system
- **International goal setting and reporting** do not drive food policy coherence in Australia

## 3 OPPORTUNITIES

- **An overarching food system strategy** will strengthen accountability for diverse goals
- **Regular food system reporting** can support coherence mechanisms
- **Draw policy coherence experience** from management of other complex systems



## KEY POINTS

- Food policy in Australia is currently fragmented across portfolios and tiers of government.
- Policy coherence has potential to reconcile goals and reinforce action across the food system.
- Mechanisms for coordinating food policy exist, but sectoral perspectives continue to dominate.
- The value of pursuing policy coherence lies in the benefits it brings to Australia's food system, in concert with international processes and pressures.



*Food policy in Australia is fragmented across portfolios and tiers of government.*

### 5.1 The state of food policy coherence

Food policy in Australia is currently fragmented across portfolios as diverse as agriculture, environment, industry, social services, health, transport and urban planning, and there are no formal mechanisms for recognising the food system or managing its policy interactions. Responsibility for components of food policy is distributed across federal, state and local government. Governments in Australia have not yet adopted the kind of integrated portfolios for food policy that countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom have.

Within the Australian Government, responsibility for food policy has become dispersed among 11 different portfolios (Figure 8). The agriculture portfolio focuses on production, exports and the profitability of farm businesses, and factors that affect these such as biosecurity

and food safety. Environment focuses on the natural resources such land, water and biological diversity that affect the productivity of agriculture. This portfolio is also interested in the environmental impacts of the food system, including waste, greenhouse gases and the impacts of land management on biological diversity. Responsibility for food manufacturing sits in an industry department, while the social services and health portfolios focus on the equity and health implications of food availability and access. Transport and urban planning are critical to supply chains and the location of retail outlets (see Insight 2, Retail environment). Other public sector institutions, such as the ACCC and Treasury, play important roles in policy allied to food, such as fair trading and competition policy. Critical components of the



## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR FOOD RELATED POLICY

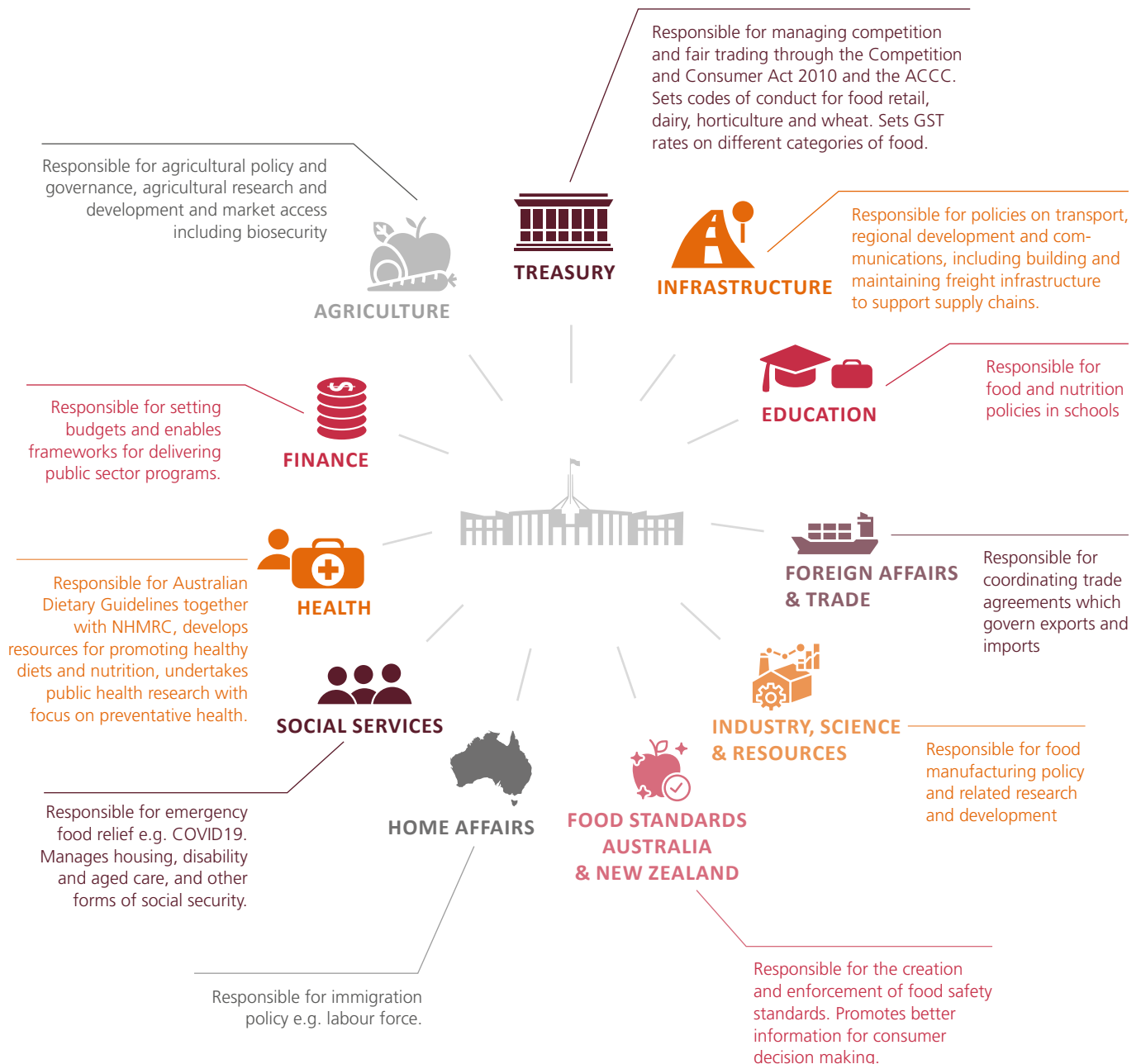


Figure 8: Responsibility for policy across Australian Government departments.

Adapted from: Naudiyal et al. (2021, 2022)



food system, such as the design and management of food retail environments, are as yet unallocated to any public agency (see Insight 1, Nutrition).

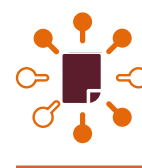
Policy coordination mechanisms already exist but are patchy across the food system. A National Food Plan released in May 2013 was not adopted due to a change of government in September 2013 (Carey et al., 2016). A parliamentary inquiry in November 2023 recommended a national food strategy overseen by a national food council and federal ministerial portfolio. A well-established system of meetings for food ministers from Australia (federal and state) and New Zealand helps to achieve policy coherence for food safety in Australia and New Zealand (see Insight 3, Food safety). Food supply chains are considered part of emergency management responses. Ephemeral and informal coordination mechanisms wax and wane between policy colleagues working on shared issues across diverse portfolios.

## 5.2 Issues and challenges

Food policy coherence is about the degree to which policies across the food system reinforce or contradict each other in meeting societal goals (Parsons and Hawke, 2019). The degree of coherence required will depend on what these goals are and how they change over time. Improvements will often involve trade-offs due to limits on the resources available to pursue coherence. It is not uncommon for departments to have conflicting perspectives and goals regarding food system outcomes (Sharpe et al., 2020; Thow et al., 2018). For example, an agriculture portfolio may work towards high food prices to benefit farmers

while a social services portfolio may work towards lower food prices to benefit vulnerable people. A focus on production and trade goals means that food safety is valued more than nutrition in trade policy (Baker et al. 2019). The impact of these types of conflicts can range from negligible effects to major barriers for meeting policy objectives (Monticone et al., 2023).

Policy coherence is more than coordination. Coordination is useful for sharing information about the complicated interactions within portfolios. Policy coherence is about anticipating and managing the surprising ‘emergent’ interactions across the food system. These can have deeply uncertain and often unforeseen consequences that can only be anticipated by viewing the food system more holistically. Examples include the trajectory of farming in Australia, the role of scale economies in supermarkets and food environments, and the impacts food environments have on nutrition and health both in Australia and in overseas export markets (see Insights 1 and 2, Nutrition and Retail environment).



*Policy coherence helps to anticipate and manage ‘emergent’ interactions across the food system.*



## 5.3 Opportunities to improve policy coherence

There is a growing recognition by policy advisers that they can no longer address emerging food system issues such as the affordability dimensions of food security through past sectoral lenses. Future agencies tasked explicitly with coordinating food policy could build on the informal alliances that are forming across policy agencies to provide more holistic food system advice. Regular reporting on food system issues could be a first step towards consolidating informal coordination mechanisms into efficient and fit-for-purpose food policy institutions (Lim-Camacho and Nelson, 2024).

The coherence of food policy in Australia is low because the food system and its interactions are poorly recognised, and responsibility has not yet been clearly allocated for managing them. Policy coherence is not a goal in itself. Sufficient policy coherence is needed to meet food system goals, and the appropriate level is inevitably traded off against the staff and other resources available in policy agencies. An issue is that resources are unlikely to be allocated to food policy coherence as long as government departments are given strong sectoral mandates that diminish recognition of the food system and its interactions. This can mean that policy advisors feel obliged to resist the idea of food systems as an inappropriate and unresourced expansion of their responsibilities.

Australians know how to manage systems as complex as the food system, and policy advisers in government departments have a highly developed hierarchy of mechanisms for achieving appropriate levels of policy coherence (Table 2). As outlined in the overview of this report, these mechanisms are routinely applied to manage similarly complex systems and in

situations where sectoral interests need to be subordinated to meet wider societal goals.

Food policy coherence in Australia has not been effectively motivated by pressures to conform to international reporting processes such as the UN SDGs. When seen as legitimate and relevant, international strategies of this kind can help to motivate shared agendas and set clear priorities (Parsons, 2022). A Senate Inquiry in 2019 showed there was cross-party support for the values and aims of the SDGs but disagreement over the extent to which the pursuit of them should be resourced. The SDGs are sometimes interpreted as a developing-country construct, not relevant to Australia's industrialised farming systems. When combined, these factors mean the SDGs have not served to coordinate policy as intended by the UN (Pawar et al., 2020). This suggests that recognition of the unique benefits to Australia's food system is a necessary first step towards food policy coherence.



Table 2: Mechanisms for connecting food policy in Australia (adapted from Parsons, 2022)

Mechanism	Details	Examples
<b>Day-to-day connections</b>	Connections between food policy activities made by individual public servants during day-to-day policymaking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual connections between government departmental officials.</li> <li>Interdepartmental committees.</li> </ul>
<b>Issue-specific projects and supporting groups</b>	Mechanisms for coordinating different departments' input on a specific policy issue. Issue-specific projects are likely to be supported by a dedicated group/taskforce/committee.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Australian Food Pact is an initiative to reduce food waste across the supply chain shared by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and the Department of Industry, Science and Resources.</li> <li>National Coordination Group – includes providing food relief.</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-government food-themed groups</b>	Committees, taskforces or groups – with public service or ministerial membership across multiple departments – created to coordinate activities on food policy (not just single issues) across government.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Food Policy Working Group, 2010–11.</li> <li>National Food Security Strategy (proposal) in Inquiry into food security in Australia. The House Standing Committee on Agriculture, 2022–25.</li> </ul>
<b>Multi-stakeholder advisory groups</b>	Groups created to coordinate input from private sector and/or civil society stakeholders, with officials from one or more departments, focused on food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several groups coordinate with FSANZ on a range of issues linked to different aspects of food safety.</li> <li>Australian Dietary Guidelines – National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.</li> <li>Inquiry into food security in Australia uses a multi-stakeholder approach through submissions and consultation, 2022–25.</li> </ul>
<b>Overarching food policy projects/strategies</b>	Mechanisms that bring all (or several) aspects of policy related to food together in overarching cross-government or whole-of-government projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The National Food Plan. 2010–11.</li> <li>National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities (in development), 2023–25.</li> </ul>
<b>Food system mapping, monitoring and reporting</b>	Government-led initiatives to map and monitor the food system to provide baseline data to inform policy development and implementation.	Towards a state of the food system report for Australia (this report).



Table 2 (continued)

<b>Dedicated units/ agencies within government</b>	Dedicated units of officials within government, focusing on food policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ FSANZ focuses narrowly on food safety regulations.</li> <li>○ The Department of Health and Aged Care oversees initiatives such as the health star rating system.</li> <li>○ No dedicated units focusing on coordinating different aspects of food policy.</li> </ul>
<b>Parliamentary committees</b>	Collaborations between several parliamentary bodies which address aspects of the food system.	Agricultural Standing Committee released the report, Australian Food Story: Feeding the Nation and Beyond (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). This included proposals for a national food security strategy, food production, consumption and export, climate change and biosecurity, inputs and the supply chain.
<b>Dedicated food policy bodies</b>	Bodies (or a single body) to coordinate work on food, which may be located internally or at arms-length/independent from government. May be used to connect inside and outside government stakeholders working on food system issues.	There is no body currently working with a remit to cover multiple areas of the food system or food issues.
<b>Legislative approaches</b>	Mechanisms to enshrine food policy goals and implementation in law.	There is currently no overarching food system legislation.
<b>Procedural mechanisms</b>	Sets of procedural instruments, such as shared budgets or indicators, which incentivise joint working.	Currently none, as above.
<b>Machinery of government changes</b>	Redesign of ministerial portfolios or reallocation of departmental responsibilities to connect issues within a particular role or organisation. May include creation of 'super ministries', which combine multiple policy sectors under one departmental roof.	Proposal for Minister for Food proposed by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. National Food Security Strategy (proposal) in Inquiry into food security in Australia. The House Standing Committee on Agriculture, 2022–25.