

Regulatory Tools for Healthy and Sustainable Diets: Opportunities and Challenges

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Cranfield, October 2025

UKRI TUKFS Programme

Project:

Realigning UK Food
Production and Trade
for Transition to
Healthy and
Sustainable Diets

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*Regulatory Tools For A
Healthy And Sustainable
Diet* (University Of
Reading 2025)

<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/121707/>



Regulatory Tools for a Healthy and Sustainable Diet

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Overview

Central Role of Law

Law (mandatory regulation) is crucial for transforming the UK food system towards healthier, sustainable diets. Voluntary regulation has mostly not worked.

Targeted Regulatory Tools

Health and sustainability goals require different regulations targeting food environment and production methods respectively.

Incentives, Penalties, and Sermons

Combining incentivizing and penalizing approaches encourages compliance with food system goals and standards. Sermonizing also has a role.

Just Transition Importance

Regulatory approaches must consider socio-economic impacts on farmers, food workers, and consumers for fairness.



Research Methodology

Integrative Review Approach

The methodology synthesizes diverse academic and grey literature for a comprehensive understanding.

Focus on Law and Regulation

Research centers on legislative frameworks underpinning regulatory tools like emissions trading, permitting, and labelling.

Geographical and Political Context

Primary focus is England with insights from UK and global contexts.

Granular Problem Analysis

Detailed analysis of various food system **problem** issues and their **causes** to select effective regulatory interventions/**solutions** for those problems.



Types of Regulatory Instruments (taxonomy)

INSTRUMENT TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Targets	Binding or non-binding concrete goals for health and sustainability	Food waste reduction targets, GHG reduction targets
Command-and-Control	Mandatory rules enforced by law	Environmental permits, product standards, bans
Economic Instruments	Financial incentives or disincentives	Taxes, subsidies, emissions trading schemes
Informational Instruments	Tools to correct information asymmetries	Labelling, education, reporting
Voluntary Instruments	Industry-led initiatives	Reformulation agreements, sustainability pledges

Examples of Tools



Sugar Tax

The sugar tax (SDIL) encouraged beverage reformulation, reducing sugar content and improving public health outcomes.

Deposit Return Schemes

Deposit return schemes help reduce packaging waste and promote recycling through consumer incentives.

Nutrient Neutrality Policies

Policies controlling agricultural pollution use planning regulations to maintain nutrient neutrality.

Public Procurement Standards

Government procurement standards promote sustainable and healthy food choices across public institutions.

Policy Recommendations



Health and Sustainability Targets

- Set more health and sustainability targets and make them mandatory
- Corporate targets needs to standardized using science-based methods
- GHG reduction targets for the agriculture sector and for the livestock sector within this

Command and Control and Economic Instruments

- Environmental permitting should be extended to dairy and intensive beef farms
- Carbon pricing for agriculture should be introduced
- Subsidies for farming transitions away from ruminant livestock

Informational Instruments

- Mandate front-of-pack labelling
- Ban mascot labels
- Require mandatory reporting on food waste and HFSS sales

OPPORTUNITIES

The Government's 10 priority outcomes for delivering a healthier, affordable, sustainable and resilient food system

- Healthier and more affordable food

1. Improved food environment supporting healthier and environmentally sustainable food sales
2. Access for all to safe, affordable, healthy, convenient and appealing food options

- Good growth

3. Conditions for the food sector to grow sustainably, including investment in innovation and productivity, and fairer more transparent supply chains
4. Food sector attracts talent and develops skilled workforce in every region

- Sustainable and resilient supply

5. Food supply is environmentally sustainable with high animal welfare, and reduced waste
6. Trade supports environmentally sustainable growth, upholds British standards and expands export opportunities
7. Resilient domestic production for a secure supply of healthier food
8. Preparedness for supply chain shocks and disruption including from chronic risks

- Vibrant food cultures

9. Celebrated and valued UK, regional and local food cultures
10. People more connected to their local food systems, with confidence, knowledge and skills to cook and eat healthily

CHALLENGES

How to change behaviours (consumers and producers)



Figure 2: Drivers of behavioural change



Challenges

Implementation Challenges

Over-reliance on voluntary approaches and weak, underfunded enforcement of mandatory standards hinder regulatory effectiveness in food systems.

Tendencies towards techno-optimism (law and incentivizing tech innovation e.g. subsidies)

Political Sensitivities

Political resistance around reducing meat and dairy consumption complicates policy adoption

Cost of living and food inflation crisis and use of price incentives (but remember the sugar tax!)

Just transition concerns

Some groups will be unevenly impacted by the HSD transition

Law and its Limits

It's not about individual consumer choice, it's about structural food environments

“You don't change culture directly. You re-architect the environment that creates it. This means redesigning the choice architecture (access, convenience), the information architecture (trusted data), and the incentive architecture (cost, rewards)” (Dr Nader Lohrasbi)

But “You can't tax people into wanting vegetables ... The real work isn't policy. It's culinary. It's cultural” (Mike Lee). I.e. food cultures matter too.

Conclusion

Mix of Regulatory Tools

Effective food system transformation requires clear targets (state and corporate) combined with a mix of informational, economic, and command-and-control instruments.

Policy Coherence

Synergies and trade-offs between policies must be assessed to ensure coherent and effective regulatory strategies.

Law's Central Role

Legal frameworks are crucial to driving food system transformation and supporting a just transition in this system (e.g. via fair trading laws).

