



National Audit Office



REPORT

Government's role in ensuring food security

A briefing for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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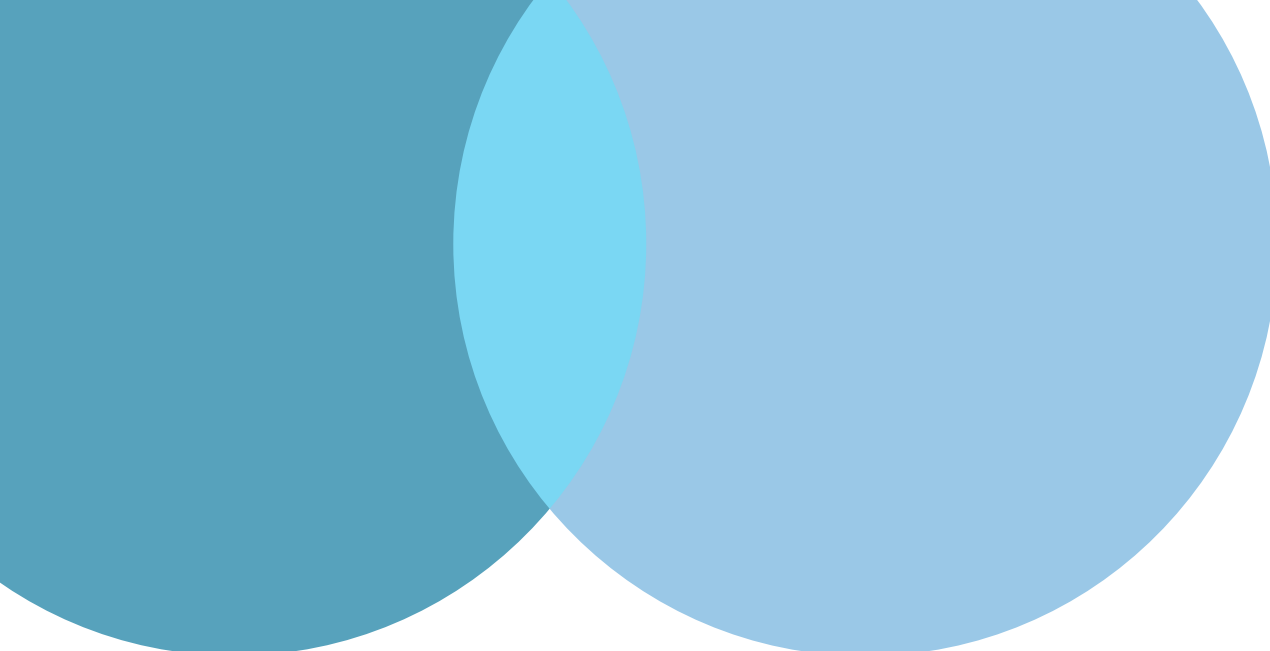
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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

23 November 2022



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About this briefing

1 This briefing is designed to support the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's (the Committee's) inquiry into food security. The Committee's inquiry follows its 2020 and 2021 inquiries on food security, which were focused on issues related to supply of food during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee's current inquiry looks more broadly at the steps government can take to support food security, including the role of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) in fulfilling its lead responsibility for food policy.¹

2 In this briefing we have not attempted to produce our own assessment of the food security risks the UK faces as other contributors to the inquiry are better placed to do that. Rather, the briefing aims to support the Committee's inquiry by setting out some facts about Defra's role in ensuring food security. The material is based on analysis of a range of publicly available information including Defra's annual reports and accounts, and government strategies. We have supplemented this through interviews with, and documents received from, Defra. Appendix One sets out more detail on our approach. We have not attempted to assess the effectiveness of the government's approach, or the value for money of public spending on measures to support food security. On some pages we have included areas arising from the facts set out, which the Committee might like to consider.

What is food security?

The government's definition of food security

3 The government's *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*, published in December 2021, described food security as a complex issue with many dimensions. The government structured the report and defined food security in terms of five issues:

- **Global food availability** refers to the security and stability of the international food supply system, on which the UK relies for nearly half of its food.
- **UK food supply sources** refers to the UK's principal sources of food at home and overseas, including the UK's domestic production, and trends in agricultural productivity; fisheries; and food manufacturing.

¹ The full terms of reference of the Committee's inquiry can be found at <https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/2699/>

- **Supply chain resilience** refers to the physical, human and economic infrastructure underlying the supply chain. It describes the sophisticated infrastructure of just-in-time supply chains, their strengths and potential vulnerabilities.
- **Food security at household level** refers to whether households can reliably afford and access sufficient healthy and nutritious food.
- **Food safety and consumer confidence** refers to the perceived and actual safety and authenticity of food in the UK.

What is government trying to achieve?

Defra's strategic objectives

4 Defra is responsible for developing and delivering food and agriculture policy in England.² One of Defra's four priority outcomes set out in its Outcome Delivery Plan 2021-22 relates to food security:

“Increase the sustainability, productivity and resilience of the agriculture, fishing, food and drink sectors, enhance biosecurity at the border and raise animal welfare standards.”

The Government food strategy

5 In June 2019, the government appointed Henry Dimbleby to lead a major review of the UK food system. In July 2020, the review team published the subsequent report – Part One of the *National Food Strategy*.³ Part One of the report focused on recommendations to support the UK through the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of the transition period marking the UK's exit from the European Union (EU). The review team published the full report – *National Food Strategy, Independent Review, The Plan* in July 2021.⁴ This report looked in detail at the food system, including the impact of the food industry on health and the environment, and made a series of recommendations for government.

2 Food supply and agriculture-related policy is devolved to the administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Responsibility for food safety and tackling food-related crime lies with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Food Standards Scotland is responsible for food safety and food crime in Scotland.

3 Part One of the *National Food Strategy* is available at: www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/part-one/

4 *National Food Strategy, Independent Review, The Plan*, July 2021. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-food-strategy-for-england.

6 Defra published the *Government food strategy* in June 2022 in response to the independent review.⁵ The government strategy's stated longer-term ambition is "for a prosperous agri-food sector, and that healthier and more sustainable diets can be achieved by all". The strategy objectives are to deliver:

- "a prosperous agri-food and seafood sector that ensures a secure food supply in an unpredictable world and contributes to the levelling-up agenda through good-quality jobs around the country;
- "a sustainable, nature positive, affordable food system that provides choice and access to high-quality products that support healthier and home-grown diets for all; and
- "trade that provides export opportunities and consumer choice through imports, without compromising our regulatory standards for food, whether produced domestically or imported".

Areas to consider

How has government prioritised its activities and efforts to achieve the ambitions set out in its food strategy?

When and how will the government address all the recommendations of the independent review?

What are the key departmental roles and responsibilities?

7 Given that food production and distribution is largely carried out by industries such as agriculture, fisheries, hospitality and retail, the main levers that Defra has for ensuring a secure supply of food to the population are policy and regulatory levers. Defra is the lead government department for food supply, one of 13 Critical National Infrastructure sectors. As **Figure 1** shows, however, a range of other departments and central and local government bodies contribute to food security.

⁵ Department for Food, Environment & Rural Affairs, *Government food strategy*, CP 698, June 2022. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-food-strategy

Figure 1

Responsibility for the main policy areas relating to food in England

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) leads on food-related policy on behalf of government, but other public bodies have responsibilities with regard to the supply of food, and food security

Department or public body	Policy responsibilities relating to food security
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs	Food policy, agriculture, fishing, food and drink sectors, animal welfare, biosecurity, chemicals, food security in the context of national security and resilience and environment. Lead government department for food supply as a Critical National Infrastructure sector.
Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board	Supports the agriculture, horticulture, livestock and dairy sectors, providing market information to improve supply chain transparency and stimulating demand in the UK and export markets.
Rural Payments Agency	Support for the farming and food sectors via payments through several schemes, and one of the delivery partners of the Agricultural Transition Plan.
Animal and Plant Health Agency	Safeguards animal and plant health and manages outbreaks of animal and plant disease.
Department of Health & Social Care	Obesity and healthy eating including public health, diet and nutrition, labelling, anti-microbial resistance, meeting nutritional and hydration needs within social care, and public sector food provision, for example, within hospitals.
Food Standards Agency	Lead government department responsible for food safety and standards. Tackling food crime in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales including food safety, food hygiene, feed safety and animal welfare enforcement. Tackling food crime and food safety in the context of national security.
UK Health Security Agency	Protection of public health in England including surveillance of infectious gastrointestinal disease, including disease caused by pathogens that pose a food safety risk in the UK.
Department for Education	Public sector food provision, via funding for schools, including free school meals and school breakfast clubs.
Ministry of Justice	Public sector food provision within prisons and for residents of Approved Premises.
Ministry of Defence	Public sector food provision for the armed forces.
Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy	Climate change, agricultural technology, the chemicals sector, science, research and innovation, industrial strategy, national minimum wage, the Groceries Code Adjudicator and competition.
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	Provides support to overseas countries facing food security risks, anticipates future shocks, builds resilience in long-running crises and tackles underlying drivers of crises including instability and food insecurity, including through work on sustainable agriculture and the promotion of climate-resilient, sustainable food systems.
Local authorities	Improving the health of the local population and responsible for public health services. Food safety and food standards including tackling food crime, food hygiene, feed safety and animal welfare/disease control enforcement. Infectious disease control. Private water supply standards. Local public sector food provision.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of cross-government documents

8 The *Government food strategy* recognises that the policy levers that influence the food system are dispersed across government. Defra's intention is to: join up within government to collectively drive progress; work closely with the devolved authorities; and champion a collaborative approach by working in partnership with industry and civil society.

Areas to consider

Are departmental roles and responsibilities clear and well understood?

How effectively can Defra influence other departments to give food security and resilience of the country's food system the attention it needs?

What does government spend on food security?

9 Defra has no specific food security budget. Rather, Defra contributes to the UK's food security through its wider spending on agriculture and food policies. In 2021-22, for example, Defra spent £2.29 billion on the Future Farming and Countryside Programme. This programme is the mechanism by which the government subsidises farmers following the UK's exit from the EU. In June 2019 the National Audit Office (NAO) published *Early review of the new farming programme*, looking at Defra's early progress in implementing the programme, and in September 2021 *The Environmental Land Management scheme*, looking at the scheme which will account for most of the government's expenditure on agriculture from 2024.⁶

10 There are several other departments and public bodies that contribute to supporting the food system and food security. While not a comprehensive list, examples include:

- **Food Standards Agency:** £148.2 million in total operating expenditure in 2020-21.
- **Department for Education:** £783 million funding for schools for free school meals, plus £475 million for the free school meals voucher scheme in 2020-21.
- **Department of Health & Social Care:** £617.8 million spent by the NHS on inpatient food services and £73.6 million on the Healthy Start – Welfare Foods payments in 2020-21.

Areas to consider

Is it clear enough how much the government spends on food security?

How does the government know it is getting value for money for what it spends on food security?

⁶ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Early review of the new farming programme*, Session 2017-2019, HC 2221, National Audit Office, June 2019, and Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Environmental Land Management scheme*, Session 2021-22, HC 664, National Audit Office, September 2021.

How does government organise itself and coordinate?

11 Defra's Food, Farming and Biosecurity Director General (DG) Group leads on the main policy areas related to food security and reports to Defra's executive committee. The Agri-food chain directorate sits within this Group and takes the lead on food security-related policy. The directorate is broken down into divisions, all of which contribute to food security through, for example, producing evidence and analysis and carrying out international engagement. The Food strategy and coordination and Food resilience and supply chains divisions have a particular focus on food security.

12 In recent years Defra's approach to food security has been tested by a range of external events that have increased risks to food security, including the need to manage risks to food supply during the transition period of the UK's departure from the EU and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of staff in the Agri-food chain directorate has increased slightly from 295 full-time equivalents in October 2019 to 332 full-time equivalents in June 2022. In practice, all these staff contribute to food security in some way, although the number of full-time equivalents with food security recorded formally in their job role reduced from 22 in October 2019 to 11 in June 2022.

13 Much of Defra's work in relation to food security involves coordination with other parts of government, including the Cabinet Office and the Food Standards Agency to coordinate preparedness for managing risks to food supply. The Department also coordinates with industry and research organisations to learn about issues facing the food production industry and communicating government policy. **Figure 2** overleaf sets out some of the main forums.

Figure 2

Main government and industry forums that consider food security matters

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), government and industry lead forums relating to food strategy and food security

Forum	Lead	Description
Food Resilience Industry Forum	Defra	Set up as part of the emergency response to COVID-19 to collect real-time intelligence and disseminate key messages from Defra to industry. This forum remains in place to be convened in the event of further potential food security emergencies.
Food Data Transparency Partnership	Cross-government and industry	Launched alongside the National Food Strategy to bring together the UK government, devolved governments, and representatives from across the whole food supply chain and civil society.
F4 Group (British Retail Consortium, Food and Drink Federation, National Farmers Union and UK Hospitality)	Industry	Used to test assumptions and early policy ideas, particularly about food supply resilience issues. It has sub-groups which support the food system: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borders/Logistics Sub-Group to aid in understanding resilience issues relating to borders. • Access to Labour Sub-Group to discuss wider workforce issues with key trade associations, provide updates on access to labour workstreams and to gather intelligence on labour shortages.
Retailer Forum	Defra	Forum for food retailers to receive updates on emerging Defra-policies and issues affecting the sector and to discuss the impact of global events on the sector.
Public Sector Food Working Group (PSFWG)	Cross-government	Defra has oversight of public sector food across government but other government departments are responsible for food supply to their institutions (schools, hospitals, prisons). PSFWG is called if cross-cutting supply issues deem it necessary.
Food Supply Resilience Planning Group (formerly the Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group)	Defra	Focuses on planning for medium- to longer-term risks to the food supply as a Critical National Infrastructure sector and ensuring government and industry are better prepared for future threats to food supply.
Food and Drink Sector Council	Industry	Discuss strategic policy issues around growth, innovation, productivity, and delivery of key policies in the food strategy supported by working groups, for example, the Net Zero Working Group to coordinate and collaborate across the food supply chain on net zero ambitions to increase efficiencies and take a whole-system approach.
Fertiliser Group	Government and industry	Taskforce which brings together, for example, government, the National Farmers Union, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and devolved administrations to discuss potential mitigations to the challenges which global supply pressures are causing.
The global food security programme	Cross-government	This UK Research and Innovation-led programme coordinates agri-food research activities across major public sector funders in the agri-food, environmental and health space to tackle the challenges impacting on food security and resilience, the environment, diet and health.

Notes

- 1 This is not an exhaustive list of forums which relate to food security. Other sector-focused stakeholder groups exist relating to a variety of agriculture and livestock types.
- 2 Continuation of the Food Supply Resilience Planning Group is under review.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Agri-food chain Directorate stakeholder landscape

Areas to consider

Is food security adequately resourced in Defra?

Are the various coordinating mechanisms effective?

Is Defra doing enough to join up across government and with industry to ensure effective action on food security?

How does government measure, monitor and report on the UK's food security position?

14 In 2009, updated in 2010, Defra published a *UK Food Security Assessment*. In January 2010 the government published an accompanying strategy for a sustainable and secure food system for 2030 – *Food 2030*. Ten years later, in November 2020 the Agriculture Act 2020 (the Act) received Royal assent. The main focus of the Act was to establish the legislation underpinning the changes to how farmers are subsidised following the UK's departure from the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy. Section 19 of the Act, however, included a new requirement on the government in relation to food security. The Act states that:

“The Secretary of State must, on or before the relevant day and at least once every three years thereafter, prepare and lay before Parliament a report containing an analysis of statistical data relating to food security in the United Kingdom.”

In December 2021, the government published the *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*, the first comprehensive review of the UK's food security to be published since the *UK Food Security Assessment* in 2009.

15 The independent review of the food system recommended that the government should report annually on the UK's food security, with broad consultation, bringing in organisations responsible for nutrition, cybersecurity, infrastructure, climate change and the environment.⁷ Defra has committed to publishing a report to monitor progress against the *Government food strategy* goals, alongside the next UK food security report and, after that, at a frequency that allows trends to emerge. In producing its reports, Defra intends to draw on independent analysis from the Climate Change Committee (CCC), Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the Office for Environment Protection (OEP), and recommendations from the Office for Statistics Regulation as part of its reporting.

⁷ See footnote 4.

16 Defra tracks and analyses a wide range of official data sources, including from other government departments, such as statistics on domestic production, overseas trade and inflation indices. Most of the statistics are combined in the *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*. If specific events or concerns are deemed critical, Defra told us that it will also increase monitoring and reporting and develop measures, generally by applying a product focus to existing data – for example, shortages of carbon dioxide and impact on the food and drink sector in 2021. It shares these data with ministers, the Defra permanent secretary, policy teams and senior leaders across the department.

Areas to consider

What was the impact of the 10-year gap in publishing a food security report?

Will the government report on food security every year as recommended in the independent review?

How is Defra intending to measure achievement of the *Government food strategy*?

What are the main risks to food security and what is government doing to manage them?

Systemic risks and challenges

17 There is a wide range of risks and challenges that relate to food security in the UK. Defra has limited powers to manage some of these risks directly. **Figure 3** sets out some of the main risks set out in Defra's *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021* and some examples of what government is doing in response.

Figure 3

Key risks to food security and actions being taken by the government

There is a wide range of risks to food security that must be managed by the government

Risk	Detail about the risk	Actions being taken by the government
Climate variability and change and other environmental pressures	The likelihood of crop yield reductions is expected to increase due to more frequent adverse weather conditions such as droughts, floods and hurricanes. Climate change will also likely alter or increase the risks of plant diseases and pests.	Through the net zero strategy, the government has committed to reducing agricultural greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating climate change.
Biodiversity loss	Caused by agricultural land expansion and intensified production. More than 75% of the leading types of global food crops rely to some extent on animal pollination for yields and/or quality.	The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) expects to publish a land use framework in 2023 to meet net zero and biodiversity targets.

Figure 3 *continued*

Key risks to food security and actions being taken by the government

Risk	Detail about the risk	Actions being taken by the government
Overexploitation of natural capital resources including fish stocks and water resources	While most of the fish stocks that the UK relies on are considered sustainable, global fish stocks are overexploited. Around one-third of all stocks are being fished at unsustainable levels.	Defra use the Agriculture Act (2020), Fisheries Act (2020) and Environment Act (2021) as frameworks to incentivise farmers and food producers to adopt more sustainable practices.
Restrictions and barriers to trade	Global markets and trade play an important role in managing disruptions to food supply.	The government is seeking to support more UK food and drink businesses to take advantage of new market access and free trade agreements, post-European Union (EU) exit.
Dependence upon other critical sectors	Food security is dependent on other critical sectors including energy, transportation, borders, labour, key inputs (chemicals, fertilisers, animal feed, seeds, additives and ingredients) and data communications.	The government has, for example, committed to make available 40,000 seasonal worker visas in 2022, and has commissioned an independent review to assess and ensure the quality and quantity of the food sector workforce. In January 2021 the government implemented the Expedited Return Scheme, under which empty lorries would be prioritised through traffic in Kent in the event of significant delays or signs of food supply disruption.
Availability and suitability of land for particular forms of production	Climate change poses a threat to high-quality arable farmland and competition for land use is increasing.	Defra plans to reform agricultural and land management, replacing the EU Common Agricultural Policy with targeted schemes to support farmers and land managers, for example to maintain and enhance the environment. It also expects to publish a land use framework in 2023.
Threat of cyber-attacks on UK businesses including those in the agri-food sector	The UK food supply chain has not been subject to significant attack. The risk of cyber-attack to UK businesses is significant and continues to grow.	No notable actions taken with respect to cyber threats to the agri-food sector.
Affordability and access to sufficient healthy and nutritious food	Households' ability to afford food is linked to overall pressures on the household budget. Price increases in essential expenditure such as fuel and power can reduce the available food budget.	To support those struggling to afford food and help them eat healthily government provides the Healthy Start Scheme, breakfast clubs and the Holiday Activities and Food Programme. In May 2022, the Chancellor announced a £15 billion cost of living support package. This was in addition to the previously announced £22 billion support.
Food safety, labelling and consumer confidence	Risks to consumers include foodborne diseases, food allergic reactions or intolerances, food crime such as misrepresentation or adulteration and risks from mislabelling.	Government is launching a Food Data Transparency Partnership to promote transparency regarding the effects of products, and help consumers make more sustainable, ethical and healthier food choices, and incentivise industry to produce healthier and more ethical and sustainable food.

Notes

- 1 This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all risks to food security or government actions.
- 2 The risk information in this figure is based on the *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*, December 2021. The report is an analysis of statistical data on food security in the UK which aims to provide policymakers across the UK nations with the information and analysis they need to maintain the UK's food security.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of the *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021* and the *Government food strategy*

Defra's response to food security challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic

18 A major event which presented substantial risks to food security was the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, during the early phases of the pandemic there were shortages of some products on supermarket shelves due to increased consumer demand. The government responded by using some of the policy levers available to it to enable industry to improve the availability of and access to food. **Figure 4** sets out some of the actions taken by the government.

Figure 4

Examples of the government's responses to increased food security risks during the COVID-19 pandemic

The government response to food security risks during the pandemic included using various policy levers

Legislation (Coronavirus Act 2020) introduced to support data sharing between industry and government and help inform a cross-government response.

The Food Resilience Industry Forum was set up at the start of the pandemic to support logistical and technical operations of food supply across the UK food supply chain.

Relaxing of regulations on delivery and driver hours to allow for more deliveries to and from stores.

Relaxing of UK Competition Law to enable retailers and suppliers to better prepare and respond to potential disruptions, as well as openly discuss stock levels, item limits and store hours.

The Pick for Britain campaign aimed to enhance collaboration with industry to ensure sufficient seasonal labour for domestic food production.

Adding essential food items to Category 1 (CAT 1) goods list during the COVID-19 response - to allow, for example, prioritisation on commercial freight.

An increase in direct spending (£212 million) on food provision to provide support and emergency aid to those clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19.

Notes

- 1 This is not an exhaustive list of responses.
- 2 A CAT 1 good is one which is critical to preservation of human or animal welfare and/or national security for the United Kingdom.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of published material

Areas to consider

What learning has Defra taken from responding to food supply issues during the pandemic?

How is Defra managing the current risks to food security in terms of contingency planning?

Appendix One

Our approach

1 This briefing aims to support the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's (the Committee's) inquiry into food security and set out the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' (Defra's) and wider government's roles in addressing food security. The facts set out in the briefing are based on fieldwork undertaken between September 2022 and November 2022. Evidence is in the form of publicly available information and documents and interviews with Defra staff.

Document review

2 We have reviewed a range of documents to assist with setting out how Defra and government are addressing food security, including their roles and responsibilities, spending, monitoring, and setting out risks to food security. This included a review of:

- departments' annual reports and accounts;
- departmental documents, for example Defra's Agri-food chain Directorate stakeholder landscape and its *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*;
- government strategy documents, for example, the *Government food strategy*; and
- the Agriculture Act 2020.

Interviews

3 We held two online interviews with officials from Defra, selected to participate because of their roles and relevance to food security. Interviews were focused on understanding food security with respect to the following areas:

- governance, roles and responsibilities, with a focus on how Defra organises itself and coordinates across wider government and industry to ensure food security;
- spending within Defra and across government on food security; and
- monitoring in relation to the *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021*, food security risks and the *Government food strategy*.

4 We organised interview notes in a word document to facilitate analysis and review. This helped us to inform further lines of enquiry that were followed up with Defra, fill in gaps in our understanding of the topic and report on Defra's approach to food security and information it uses.

5 The interviews did not extend beyond Defra and therefore may not represent the views of wider government about food security.

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