Throughout the 20th century, average life expectancy has been increasing. This is primarily due to a change in disease patterns; as infectious diseases have declined, and chronic diseases have become the nation’s main killers. A number of factors are recognised to influence the risk of chronic disease, including diet and lifestyle. Therefore dietary guidelines have been developed to help people follow a diet that can maximise their health and longevity. These guidelines complement more detailed Dietary Reference Values, which were first established in 1950. Since then these values have stayed much the same, and today are used to assess the nutritional adequacy of the diet using data from dietary surveys, such as the National Diet and Nutrition Survey. The National Food Survey is another important source of information about what the population are eating. This survey has collected data on food purchased for consumption in the home since 1940, and therefore can provide invaluable information on trends in estimated food, energy and nutrient intake for the general population. Figures estimated from the National Food Survey suggest that since the 1970s, total energy intake has been falling in line with falling levels of energy expenditure. Nevertheless, this decline in energy expenditure has left individuals prone to gaining weight, yet the dietary guidelines in use today still focus on the need to monitor intake of fat and saturates. On the face of it, the British diet has been remarkably stable over the past 60 years. However, what has been evident is a shift towards a lower fat diet with lower fat meats such as poultry overtaking beef, pork and lamb as the most popular meats and semi-skimmed milk dominating the milk category since its introduction in the 1980s.

There are a number of factors that have affected the trends in food consumption, some of which can be attributed to specific events, for example the drought in 1975/76 caused in a shortage of potatoes, resulting in a high market price, which in turn led to a decline in potato consumption. It is beyond the scope of this Briefing Paper to explain all of the variations and changes in food intake over the past 60 years. However, this paper does provide an overview of the factors (namely, government policies, advances and innovations of the food industry and consumer led changes) which have influenced food availability and access since the 1940s. For example, a significant policy that has had influence is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which was devised by 6 nations of the European Economic Community in response to the effects of war, in particular world food shortages. Many of the original objectives of CAP had been met by the time the UK joined in 1973. However, through various reforms
the policy has continued and has had a significant impact on food supply, food prices and the environment. More recent government policies regarding food availability have focused on improving the nutrient profile of foods, and promoting a healthy balanced diet.

The food and farming industry’s compliance with CAP has strongly influenced the way in which foods have been produced and the direction of the agricultural industry. For example, intensification has been essential to meet the required productivity, and has relied upon the use of inorganic fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. However, some producers have opted to organically produce food stuffs, which has been supported by some consumers and become somewhat of a niche market.

Since their popularisation in the 1960s the buying power of supermarkets, and fast turnover of foods, has meant it became possible to stock a larger variety of produce from across the world, at more affordable prices. The increasing floor space opened a door for manufacturers and retailers to showcase a widening range of products, and gave the consumer an opportunity to compare products and select their preferred choice. The wide variety of food products available since the 1960s has been the result of new food technologies, and more recently new ingredients and novel foods. These advances have been coupled with an increase in the ownership of domestic appliances including fridges (1960s), freezers (1970s), microwave ovens (1980/90s).

Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the proportion of women who worked, therefore convenience became a driving factor for consumer purchasing. These social trends were reflected in the increased popularity of eating out. Convenience has remained an important determinant of consumer purchasing choice and advances in food technology and manufacture has meant that today it is possible to cook a meal in minutes. Advances in food science and technology have also enabled health-promoting products, so-called functional foods, to be produced, and for many health conscious individuals these have proved very popular. For some consumers, the health benefits of a food have been a driver for food purchasing habits, and advertisers have taken advantage of this for decades. In particular, the association between food and health was becoming well recognised during the 1980s. This was fuelled by the publication of dietary guidelines and research reports, such as those advocating the importance of a diet low in saturates. Over the past twenty years other ethical concerns surrounding food manufacture have been high on the agenda of food companies and consumers alike.

R Foster & J Lunn