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BMJ INVESTIGATION

A third of UK government's nutrition advisers are still paid by food industry, including Coca Cola and Nestlé

Financial conflicts of interest remain rife in the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN), *BMJ* analysis reveals. Despite a new code of conduct banning links to the food industry, members with ties are allowed to remain in post. Public health experts say the conflicts should be removed "immediately," Sophie Borland reports

Sophie Borland *freelance journalist*

Nearly a third of the government's nutrition advisers still have "significant" ties to the food industry, including Coca Cola, Sainsbury's, and yoghurt manufacturer Danone, *The BMJ* can reveal.

Six of the 19 members of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) have conflicts of interest that the committee's own rules deem "significant" and should preclude them from being appointed.[1]

One was until recently a long serving senior member of the British Nutrition Foundation—a charity funded by firms including Coca Cola, Nestlé, and Cadbury's makers Mondelez (box 1). Another nutritionist on SACN has shares in Sainsbury's.

Four other advisers have received research funding from the meat, dairy, and nut industries, including one who has also taken a grant from Danone, the world's largest yoghurt maker.

A recent update to SACN's rules should prevent individuals with such interests being appointed members—but an introductory period allows current members to continue existing ties for up to two years.

Experts told *The BMJ*, however, that scientists with financial ties to the food industry should not be involved in influencing policy and called for the conflicts to be removed "immediately." Some said that at least some previous financial relationships should also rule out SACN membership even once lapsed.

Update to guidelines follows *BMJ* exposé

SACN is a powerful group of experts that provides nutrition advice to the government on issues including artificial sweeteners, ultraprocessed foods, and dietary guidelines for babies, young children, and people over 65. Its reports are used to inform national policy as well as NHS healthy eating recommendations.

Last September, the committee updated its code of practice to state, for the first time, that individuals could not become members if they had "significant" conflicts of interest, which included owning shares, receiving research grants, or sitting on advisory boards relating to the food industry.

This update came one year after an investigation by *The BMJ* in September 2024 revealed that more than half of SACN's advisers at the time had ties to the food industry.[2] Experts said that these links were undermining public health and damaging the committee's reputation, and *The BMJ*'s findings were highlighted in a major House of Lords report into diet and obesity.

Now, the updated code says that "individuals are only eligible to be SACN members if they do not hold significant interests in relation to the food, drink, diet, or supplement industry."

A spokesperson for the Department of Health and Social Care tells *The BMJ* that the committee's code of practice was updated to "minimise any perceived bias."

They explain that current SACN advisers must not take on any new interests that are "at odds" with the updated policy and can only be reappointed if they meet the updated policy. "All SACN members are due to meet the new interests policy within the next two years," the spokesperson adds. "In the meantime, existing members with any significant interests are excluded from relevant discussions."

Potentially serious conflicts not flagged

To investigate SACN's current ties to the food industry two years on from our initial findings—and one year on from the new code of conduct—*The BMJ* analysed SACN's latest register of interests, published in June 2026.[3]

This shows that six of the members declared "significant" conflicts of interest that the committee itself highlights with a note next to the declaration.

A further three were recorded by SACN as having "relevant" interests to the food industry, which are considered less serious. This includes receiving research funding from or undertaking consultancy work with smaller food firms.

In addition, *The BMJ* identified other potentially serious conflicts of interests not flagged by SACN. This includes one adviser who is a "distinguished fellow" of the American Society for Nutrition, an organisation funded by companies including Mondelez, Nestlé, and Pepsico. Five other members are on the UK's Nutrition Society, which receives sponsorship from Pepsico for conferences.

Altogether, we found that 11 of the 19 members have ties to the food industry as of June 2026.

Chris van Tulleken, a professor of infection and global health at University College London and author of the book *Ultra-Processed People*, says, “This is not an allegation that individual members are acting improperly or deliberately influencing SACN’s conclusions.”

But research shows that conflicts of interest do affect beliefs and behaviour, as well as eroding trust in decision making and advice.

“The problem is structural,” van Tulleken adds. “SACN’s authority depends on its independence, and these interests weaken public confidence and confer credibility on commercial actors that harm human health and scientific integrity.”

Rob Percival, head of policy at the Soil Association, a food and farming charity, tells *The BMJ* that the tightening of SACN’s policy is “very welcome” but that it needs to be applied robustly. “I would suggest that the conflicted members of SACN need to leave the committee immediately, and there needs to be open recruitment for non-conflicted members to stand in their place through an appropriate process,” he says.

“We should be asking very big questions if that isn’t happening and if they’re allowing these members to continue knowing that it contradicts their own policy.”

Van Tulleken agrees: “I’m impressed by the steps SACN has taken to reduce conflicts of interest, including classifying even unpaid roles with food industry funded organisations, such as the British Nutrition Foundation, as ‘significant interests.’ But it should go further.

“Members . . . should have no financial or formal relationships with companies whose commercial interests are affected by its advice, or organisations extensively funded by those companies.”

Kat Jenner, executive director at the Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of around 70 organisations working together to reduce obesity, tells *The BMJ*, “If your work [*The BMJ*’s September 2024 investigation] has led to a change in a code of conduct, that’s probably the first big thing that has happened in many years in nutrition. It is a really big step forward.”

Some ties remain significant after cutting

SACN’s updated rules allow members to stay on if they drop their significant conflicting interest, regardless of how long they had been working with the food industry beforehand or how much money they received.

But public health experts say that at least some, perhaps longstanding, financial ties should make SACN membership untenable even once severed.

“Once a scientist has received funding in relation to a product or is in a financial relationship with a manufacturer, they should not be involved in policy making or regulatory decisions that pertain to that product,” Percival argues.

“That should be quite a black and white line.”

Three members contacted *The BMJ* to tell us their significant conflicts of interest had recently ended (box 1). SACN chair Julie Lovegrove tells *The BMJ* that she “would not engage with such funding sources in the future to ensure compliance with SACN’s new code of practice.”

The BMJ has also discovered that one of the most conflicted members from our previous investigation—who worked for the world’s largest ice cream manufacturer—stepped down from SACN last year after 20 years. David Mela, a shareholder, consultant, and former employee at Unilever, which at the time owned Magnum and Ben and Jerry’s, retired from SACN in June 2025 having been on the committee since 2005.

The BMJ’s findings come as SACN is working on recommendations on nutrition and maternal health, vitamin D requirements, and infant feeding. At its June meeting it considered whether to make new recommendations on topics including ultraprocessed foods, artificial sweeteners, protein intake, and wholegrain foods, and agreed to keep these on its “watching brief.”[4]

Its most recent reports have covered dietary advice for pregnant women, the potential risks and benefits of soya milk and almond milk, and guidelines on feeding children under 5.

All SACN members named in this article were approached for comment; all those who replied referred us to the Department of Health and Social Care.

Box 1: Chair has three “significant” conflicts—details of SACN’s industry links

The BMJ found that three advisers have more than one significant conflict of interest, including SACN’s chair, Julie Lovegrove, who has three.

She has received research funding from Alpro, the soya milk brand, research funding from the Dutch and Danish dairy industries, and funding for a PhD student from a UK based dairy firm that provides hardship grants.

Lovegrove tells *The BMJ* that her research funding with Alpro and the Dutch and Danish Research Foundations ended in July 2025 and December 2024, respectively.

Kevin Whelan, from Kings College London, has four significant conflicts of interest, including being paid to give a speech at a conference sponsored by the probiotic firm Yakult. He has also received research funding from Danone, the International Dried Fruit and Nut Foundation, and the Almond Board of California. Whelan tells *The BMJ* that the research grants ended last year.

Mairead Kiely, from University College Cork, has two significant interests, including being paid by the Dutch Dairy Organisation to give a talk and receiving research funding from Meat Technology Ireland.

The advisers with one significant conflict of interest include Susan Lanham-New from the University of Surrey, who was a trustee on the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) until January 2026. The BNF is part funded by its members, which include Coca Cola, Greggs, Kelloggs, Mondelez, and Nestlé. Lanham-New had previously been a governor on the BNF since 2015. She tells *The BMJ* that her term with the BNF ended in January 2026.

Gill Fine, a public health nutritionist, holds shares in Sainsbury’s, while Lucilla Poston, from Kings College London, received research funding from the Almond Board of California.

Three other advisers have relevant interests including Jean Adams, from the University of Cambridge, who has received research funding from the Co-Op, the Cook ready meal firm, and Gousto, the meal kit provider. Robert Boyle, from Imperial College London, was paid to attend a conference sponsored by formula milk companies; Sian Robinson, from Newcastle University, has been involved in a research collaboration with Bridge2Food, a firm which works with agricultural food producers.

Susan Fairweather-Tait, from the University of East Anglia, is a distinguished fellow at the American Society for Nutrition, whose partners include Mondelez, Pepsico, and Coca Cola. Tammy Tong, from the Nuffield Department of Population Health at the University of Oxford, is a member of the UK’s Nutrition Society, whose conferences are sponsored by Pepsico. Neither of these two members’ interests are flagged by SACN as significant or relevant.

All SACN members named in this article were approached for comment; all those who replied referred us to the Department of Health and Social Care.

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ Group policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

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