

# **Environmental Audit Committee inquiry: environmental change and food security**

## **Sustainable Food Places written evidence submission**

### **Executive Summary**

Sustainable Food Places (SFP) is a growing network of 85 local food partnerships across the UK driving innovation and best practice in all aspects of healthy and sustainable food. Through these cross-sector food partnerships, local authorities and other public bodies are working with third sector, businesses and academic organisations to transform their local food system. Our aim is to tackle critical issues including access to healthy food, the climate and nature emergencies, and to create jobs, businesses and bring prosperity to local areas through the development of the good food sector.

Key points in our submission:

- With an annual procurement spend of over £69 billion, and as owners of up to 1.3 million acres of land, action on food and farming by local authorities has great potential to reduce emissions while growing the local good food economy and local supply chains. However, few local authorities are acting.
- A food plan and a properly resourced food partnership can help deliver resilient food systems in every local authority. These local networks are essential to creating relationships and confidence and reduce risk. Cross-sector food partnerships bring together public agencies, community organisations and businesses to create lasting change in the food system. Food partnerships, supported by the SFP programme, can play a role in supporting cross cutting action to help achieve food security & sustainable production.
- The community growing sector can increase resilience to food shortages as demonstrated by community gardens during the pandemic and now in a cost of living crisis. However, many community gardens struggle with lack of recognition and support in local planning and competition for space with housing developments.
- Under a review of the National Planning Policy Framework, national development management policies could help Government achieve a more resilient supply chain by safeguarding food growing and production infrastructure.
- Localised supply chains and local food SMEs responded nimbly to the pandemic and supported the emergency food response. These are the very businesses which help ensure long term resilience in the food supply chain and which the government is seeking to support via the introduction of Government buying standards which specify a percentage of local or sustainable production in public procurement. However, they are under threat and need urgent investment in local food infrastructure and enterprises and stabilisation of energy prices.
- Even in the event of the UK becoming more self-sufficient in food, that will not directly resolve food insecurity for a large number of people. Many people on low incomes are 'priced out of food' – safety nets such as an expanded Healthy Start scheme, School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme and Free School Meals for more children are necessary to ensure those on low incomes have access to healthy food.

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# Climate change and food security: projected effect, risks, and mitigation

## How self-sufficient is the UK in producing food? What practices could the UK adopt to become more self-sufficient while reducing the emissions associated with agriculture?

Local action on food and farming, led by local authorities and food partnerships is an important area of action to reduce emissions associated with agriculture and food. However, there is no national target for the contribution of food and farming in achieving Net Zero, and there is no clear directive for what the contribution of local areas should be.

Food for the Planet is a Sustainable Food Places campaign led by Sustain that tries to fill this gap.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to support councils and food partnerships to cut the climate and nature footprints of food locally. The campaign includes the interactive Every Mouthful Counts toolkit, which allows councils publicly to benchmark actions they take to cut food-related climate emissions. It includes action on:

- land use, farming and planning
- food use, waste and resource efficiency
- procurement and sustainable diets
- supporting sustainable food businesses

In a recent Sustain report<sup>2</sup>, we studied how UK councils are tackling the climate and nature emergency through food. With an annual procurement spend of over £69 billion, and as owners of up to 1.3 million acres of land, UK councils have an enormous opportunity to reduce emissions from the food system, support farmers, and help citizens eat better diets. We studied actions around governance, farming and food growing, food waste and procurement. We found that councils scored on average just 32 per cent of available points. For 59 per cent of councils, no significant or meaningful actions to address the climate impact of food were found.

The report provides evidence of councils' ability to act, with pioneering authorities including Brighton and Hove, Bristol, Cardiff, Central Bedfordshire, Cheshire West and Chester, Clackmannanshire, Devon, Dorset, Ealing, East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Glasgow, Greenwich, Middlesbrough, Monmouthshire, Somerset, Surrey, Telford and Wrekin, Tower Hamlets and the Vale of Glamorgan taking action including buying healthy and sustainable food for schools; meals in the community ('Meals on Wheels'); social services catering; staff catering and events. Food purchasing includes in the region of three million meals daily in more than 23,000 state schools, with an annual turnover of over £360 million UK-wide. Leading councils have set up localised purchasing systems and encouraged more climate-friendly diets through public communication. Other councils were found to be increasing allotment and community food growing provision, transitioning council-owned farms to agroecological practices and tackling the causes of food waste.

Another significant finding was that councils with food partnerships in place scored on average 11 per cent more than those without. In our interviews with high performing councils, collaborative working through partnerships was frequently mentioned as key to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foodfortheplanet.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/every-mouthful-counts-2022/>

developing and implementing an effective local food strategy. Councils that collaborate across the public, private and third sector and take a whole-system approach to food have enacted much more ambitious policies on food and climate than those without a food partnership.

## **UK preparedness: Government and market**

### **How effective would the market be at securing the UK's food supply in a situation of major food insecurity world wide? To what extent could Government intervention be needed?**

A lot can be learned from the covid pandemic in terms of securing the UK's food supply. At the start of the covid pandemic, when statutory authorities were still developing mechanisms to cope with the scale of the food emergency, many food partnerships provided a key source of leadership, drawing upon their insight into multiple aspects of the food system and experience of collaboration between public, private and third sector agencies. This generated a much more effective and coordinated response to the food emergency.<sup>3</sup>

Being 'response ready' to food insecurity shocks is not the only reason why Government should support a food partnership and plan in every local area.

The Government's Food Strategy fell short of proposing a Food Bill. At a local level, it did recognise the importance and value of food partnerships. Under section 2.2, 'Encouraging healthier and more sustainable dietary choices', the Government Food Strategy includes:

*"Local Food Partnerships have already brought together councils and partners from the public sector, voluntary and community groups, and businesses to reduce diet-related ill health and inequality, while supporting a prosperous local food economy. We will learn from their approaches..."*

Implementation of the recommendations on extending the network of food partnerships can be part of the solution, with rural and county level food partnerships in particular already playing a key role in building resilience of food producers and businesses, for example through networking and provision of training and support.

A food plan and a properly resourced food partnership can help deliver resilient food systems in every local authority. These local networks are essential to creating relationships and confidence and reduce risk. Cross-sector food partnerships bring together public agencies, community organisations and businesses to create lasting change in the food system.

Food partnerships, supported by the SFP programme, can play a role in supporting cross cutting action to help achieve food security & sustainable production by:

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<sup>3</sup> The value of local food partnerships: Covid and beyond: <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9228014>

- Networking farmers & food producers with each other & with new markets, and leading innovation on food economy projects
- Supporting rollout of workforce/ skills programmes around sustainable food production skills
- Supporting and promotion of local sustainable farmers and producers, helping consumers better understand where the food they buy comes from and its production impact
- Locally led food waste reduction projects (such as community composting) and redistribution of edible surplus food
- Levelling up – food partnerships already play a key role in local economy projects & enabling Levelling Up and other growth funding bids
- Play a strategic role, providing a forum for consultation and collaboration on food plans and policy as well as a delivery role facilitating the sharing of data, insight and best practise and delivering education and transformational projects.

The SFP programme is available to work with Government and follow up on this recommendation and ensure there's a food partnership in every local area in England, and place based food plans that reflect the priorities of the Government Food Strategy and future policy. The Welsh Government recently announced £3 million funding to support the development of cross-sector food partnerships in Wales, in response to the cost of living crisis.<sup>4</sup> We suggest this approach is emulated in England to ensure full coverage and a food partnership in every local area.

### **Could the UK's land be better used to secure our domestic food supply? What role could community or urban food growing play in increasing the UK's resilience to food shortages caused by environmental change?**

The Good to Grow Network<sup>5</sup> is an online platform to support community food growing in the UK, run by Sustain. There are 35 places registered on the network mapping their community growing spaces: a total 4,863 community gardens are mapped via this platform.

Every year, the Good to Grow network saves an estimated 973,478kg of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent emissions on average per year, from the food grown across our network's community gardens, compared to the carbon footprint from buying the same produce from a supermarket.

There is huge potential in the community growing sector. However, many community gardens struggle with lack of recognition and support in local planning and competition for space with housing developments.

Currently only 1% of urban green spaces in the UK, like the community gardens in the Good to Grow Network, are used for food production. A new report published by Lancaster University has found that if we made better use of these spaces, the UK could grow a whopping eight times more fruit and vegetables.<sup>6</sup> This extra production could provide 38% of the fruit and vegetables currently eaten in the UK, reducing the need for imports. This would make our food supply more secure, more resilient, and would improve access to fresh fruit and vegetables for people living in and around cities.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/food\\_partnership\\_support\\_in\\_wales\\_jul22-/](https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/food_partnership_support_in_wales_jul22-/)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.goodtogrowuk.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ac4730>

Another study by Sheffield University found that growing fruit and vegetables in just 10% of Sheffield's urban green spaces 'could provide 15 per cent of the local population with their "five a day"'. However, this still remains a largely unfulfilled potential.<sup>7</sup>

We can learn a great deal from the response of community food growers to the pandemic and now to the cost of living crisis and how they helped and are helping to increase the resilience to food shortages caused by the pandemic or difficulties in accessing food by those on low incomes.

We must recognise that for an increasing number of people food shortages are already a reality as they are being 'priced out' of healthy and nutritious food due to high energy and food price inflation. Over one third of people say they can't afford to eat a healthy, balanced diet<sup>8</sup>, and around half of food insecure households are cutting back on purchases of fruit and vegetables<sup>9</sup>.

To meet shortages in surplus food and improve quality and sustainability of emergency food, Cambridge are looking the community food growing sector for answers. The most notable project is CoFarm, a farm set up during the pandemic which donates nearly all their produce to emergency food response going through hubs weekly. It is run mostly by volunteers which dedicated 10,000 volunteer hours last year alone. They have donated 8 tons of food last year. 'Grow a Row' type initiatives, where allotments, community groups and others grow extra and donate to food projects results in another 1.5 tons of produce. Finally, the Co-Veg field, a donated piece of land from a local farm contributed another 0,5 tons of produce. Lots of beneficiaries appreciate fresh produce, with the only issue being recognizing unusual vegetables grown through these projects.

Below are other examples of response from members of our SFP network. In January 2020, Sustainable Food Places awarded 13 places Veg Cities<sup>10</sup> campaign grant funding to support increasing production and consumption of vegetables. Due to Covid, many adapted campaign plans rather than redeploying their capacity entirely to respond to the food emergency. Their examples illustrate how the community growing sector can respond to plug food shortages and ensure access to healthy food for everyone.

- Brighton and Hove Food Partnership surveyed their network of community gardens to find out what support they needed and whether they were opening during lockdown. A strong network meant they shared advice on how to stay safely open and as a result most stayed open. Many also expressed the desire to increase the amount of veg grown to donate to community projects. Access to seeds and inputs was identified as a key issue and as a result BHFP ordered over 1,500 seedlings to give to the gardens so that they could 'Grow an Extra Row' for the Real Junk Food Project's new pay as you feel café in central Brighton. The seedlings are being grown locally by CSA scheme, Fork and Dig It, as they aim to increase their scale of production following an increased interest in locally sourced veg. They also grew fruit and veg growing hampers for local residents to start growing at home. Preston Park Demo Garden, Saunders Park Edible Garden and Stanford Community Garden have all been involved in growing veg for community food projects, including The Bevy and Brighton Table Tennis Club food hub.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sustainable-food/news/urban-land-could-grow-fruit-and-veg-15-percent-population>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/consumer-insights-tracker-monthly-bulletin-october-2022>

<sup>9</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.vegcities.org/>

- Cardiff supported people to grow food at home, resulting in a team of 70 volunteers across 16 projects distributing around 14,000 plants, seeds and growing kits to over 3,000 households and more than 100 people joining online growing classes. Thousands of people took part in the first Good Food Cardiff Autumn Festival in 2020, a programme of physically-distanced and virtual events about growing, cooking and sharing food to tackle two major issues which have been exacerbated by Covid-19 - food insecurity and isolation.
- In Aberdeen, growing packs were delivered to households alongside materials for gardening activities for children as part of the holiday 'Food and Fun' programme.
- Similarly, the Keep Growing initiative in Tower Hamlets supplied 700 people in the borough starter packs with everything needed to start growing vegetables at home and five tonnes of soil to key points around the borough for participants to use. This was followed with Growers' Question Time sessions on zoom and cooking webinars in the Autumn.
- Growing vegetables to donate to community projects became a focus for many organisations in County Durham. One example is the Auckland Project; they manage a historic visitor attraction in Bishop Auckland and repurposed their large walled garden from producing for their restaurant to grow vegetables which were distributed to local community food projects. Between July and December 2020, they distributed over 8 tonnes of veg.

### **What role should the Government take in ensuring that land is available to secure the UK's food supply in the context of a changing climate?**

Under a review of the National Planning Policy Framework, national development management policies would help Government achieve a more resilient supply chain by safeguarding food growing and production infrastructure:

1. Rural and peri-urban land should be safeguarded for food growing.
  - The best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land should be protected
  - Development which undermines the viability of an agricultural or horticultural land holding should not be permitted.
  - Land on the periphery of urban areas which is most suitable for market gardening should be identified and safeguarded in local plans.
2. All major new residential development should provide amenity space for communal and/or private food growing.
3. Green infrastructure networks should include a variety of food productive landscapes, such as allotments, market gardens, community orchards and communal food gardens.

## **Securing a sustainable food supply**

### **Does the Government's Food Strategy put the UK on a path to a secure and sustainable food supply?**

The Government's food strategy has very little mention of supply chains or any interventions or policies to tackle the problems of fragility and consolidation. We do not have confidence that the food strategy will lead to a more resilient, sustainable and fair supply chain for British farmers or consumers. More broadly, there is no

strategy or policy to build resilience, sustainability and fairness into the UK's food supply chain.

Rural and county food partnerships in particular are expressing concern at the large number of smaller local food producers and those in the supply chain (e.g. fruit and veg box schemes, processors, mills and abattoirs) going out of business as a result of the energy cost pressures (reported in meetings on 15th September 2022 and 16 November 2022). These are predominantly businesses which are focussed on localised, and more sustainable production - the very businesses which help ensure long term resilience in the food supply chain and which the government is seeking to support via the introduction of Government buying standards which specify a percentage of local or sustainable production in public procurement. Without urgent support there is a very real chance that, by the time these standards are introduced, there will be a shortage of suppliers or supply chain infrastructure to meet these standards. Government must act now to protect these vital, sustainable supply chains, for now and the future, if we are to protect jobs and meet our climate and nature protection targets.

It's notable how localised supply chains responded nimbly to the pandemic and supported the emergency food response through working with the council, local food banks, community food responses, supplying produce or meals, and special deliveries for those shielding or vulnerable. In a survey<sup>11</sup> of local food SMEs during the pandemic, they adapted by:

- Adding or increasing their delivery service
- Moving some or all of their enterprises online
- Providing new or different products or services, including meal delivery services, online classes, and/or diverting produce from hospitality to households
- Accessing new supply chains, like selling directly to the public or focussing on local small producers. Some producers built new 'sheds' and other structures on their land so the public could buy from onsite
- Collaborating with other enterprises or services, including other food enterprises but also building associations and resident associations to increase access to food

However, a more recent survey<sup>12</sup> of local food SMEs showed that the surge in demand many enterprises experienced during the pandemic is drying out. Coupled with high energy prices and inflation, lack of local food infrastructure and high rents, this is creating a perfect storm. Most of the enterprises we surveyed are experiencing reduced sales, difficulty in recruiting staff and volunteers, and are also changing ingredients, inputs and menus to cope with increases in operating costs. A smaller number are changing opening and closing times and reducing the number of days operating. Many are already reducing donations or other support they provide to their local communities.

The worst of the storm is still to come, however. In the next six months to one year, the majority expect to reduce the number of staff and volunteers, which will have a knock-on impact on local employment and training opportunities.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/good-food-enterprises-one-year-on/>

<sup>12</sup> Survey of 89 local food SMEs undertaken in October 2022 by Sustain and Sustainable Food Places. <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/dec22-cost-of-living-and-sustainable-food-enterprises/>

This matters deeply because many of these enterprises are operating at high standards. Almost one in three are certified organic, one in four follow agroecological values and a smaller proportion source British or local (within a certain radius), don't use pesticides, or participate in quality assurance schemes such as Fairtrade or LEAF Marque.

Most enterprises surveyed are not receiving any emergency support from Government (national or local), funders or other organisations. Some feel that Government policy should do more to support SMEs in the food sector – justifiable given that SMEs account for 78% of businesses, 26% of employment and 17% of turnover and 1 in 7 workers is employed in the agri-food sector in the UK).<sup>13</sup>

Only one in four of the enterprises we surveyed said that the government's Energy Bill Relief Scheme is helpful or very helpful. This is perhaps because the majority are small farmers and fruit and veg box producers with small energy bills compared to enterprises such as bakeries and others in the hospitality industry. The Real Bread Campaign continues to call on the Prime Minister for confirmation and details of support beyond the initial six months of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme. This campaign is also calling for grants over the long to medium-term to assist with energy reduction, efficiency and de-carbonisation are essential to help bakeries stay in business.<sup>14</sup>

The national Government interventions that would make the most difference to local food enterprises in our survey (ranked by number of responses) are:

- More investment in local food infrastructure and enterprises through Levelling Up funding
- Further reduction in energy prices (beyond the initial six months of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme)
- An emergency fund for SMEs and local food organisations
- Large scale investment in renewable energy
- Reduction in VAT
- Raising the small business rates relief threshold.

Some have pointed out that the long-term solution is raising the minimum wage, benefits and pensions to reduce the number of people living in poverty and enable everyone sufficient income to buy good food. Others have mentioned the unfair competition created by large retailers and the need to create a level playing field, for example through the creation of a national marketing campaign encouraging people to buy from local businesses. Finally, several mentioned that small horticulture enterprises should be eligible for agricultural financial support.

In our concentrated food system (almost 95 per cent of groceries are sold through the top nine retailers in the UK, leaving only 5 per cent of the market for alternatives)<sup>15</sup>, the future of local sustainable food enterprises matters. They helped maintain the UK's food supply and supported communities during the Covid-19 pandemic and can help increase the diversity and resilience of our food supply. For every pound of turnover, local food businesses create

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/sep22-letter-to-pm-please-help-save-uk-small-bakeries/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/en/grocery-market-share/great-britain>



roughly three times as many jobs as a supermarket.<sup>16</sup> For every £1 spent in a veg box or farmers' market there is £3.70 in economic, social and environmental returns.<sup>17</sup>

### **Is there research and development the Government could be funding to provide food security solutions?**

Even in the event of the UK becoming more self-sufficient in food, that will not directly resolve food insecurity for a large number of people. One in four (25.8%) households with children has experienced food insecurity in September 2022.<sup>18</sup>

Government should invest in R&D on the areas identified in Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy to improve access to healthy food for those on lower incomes:

- Increasing the value of Healthy Start vouchers in line with inflation, increasing the eligibility threshold to families and to those on No Recourse To Public Funds so more families are able to benefit, extend eligibility for children up to the age of 5 to bridge to eligibility to free school meals and adopting automatic enrolment for the scheme to ensure anyone that is eligible automatically receives their pre-paid cards.
- Expanding coverage and eligibility for free school meals, ideally to make it Universal, school breakfast clubs, the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme (FSVS) to all children in primary school or holiday activities and food programme could all direct support to families with children most in need of support.

Government should move away from relying on the community and voluntary sector to provide emergency food and aid and model the impact of properly calculated support and benefits needed to cover the cost of living. As illustrated for example by the Poverty in Northampton report<sup>19</sup>, current levels of benefits are not sufficient to enable full participation in community life and endanger health. The plight of those on No Recourse to Public Funds was particularly acute.

Government should be encouraging businesses from across the economy to pay the Real Living Wage and having a strategy to introduce the Living Wage as the national minimum wage norm based on research on the impact and difference this would make in our society. Government can also play a convening role to encourage retailers to offer a healthy basket guarantee, to ensure that those on the lowest income can afford a healthy weekly shop, rather than having to rely on highly processed unhealthy produce which is often cheapest.

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/From\\_field\\_to\\_fork\\_\\_\\_The\\_value\\_of\\_Englands\\_local\\_food\\_webs\\_interactive.pdf](https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/From_field_to_fork___The_value_of_Englands_local_food_webs_interactive.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nefconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Farmer-focused-routes-to-markets-an-evaluation-of-growing-communities-April-2021.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Food Foundation Household Food Insecurity Tracking September 2022  
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.northamptonhopecentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/9322-Poverty-report-FINAL-PRINT.pdf>