

*This briefing is informed by the report [‘Civil Food Resilience in practice: capacity-building for resilience across the Sustainable Food Places network’](#) and focuses on the role of national government in enabling communities to prepare for food system shocks and emergencies.*

## In brief

The UK is not prepared for the food supply shocks that climate, geopolitical and cyber threats are making more likely. Resilience cannot be run from the centre alone – it is delivered locally. Local food partnerships are the proven vehicle, but they need Government to act on four fronts:

- **Give resilience bodies a remit for food** – including food in the official risk registers that local areas plan around.
- **Fund and recognise food partnerships** – multi-year funding and a formal role in local planning.
- **Use public sector food buying and local infrastructure** as levers to strengthen supply chains.
- **Lock it in through a Good Food Bill** – a statutory duty that turns this from good practice into standard practice.

## The challenge of food resilience

There is growing consensus amongst both civil society and the food industry that the UK is not prepared for the food supply shocks which are becoming increasingly likely in the perfect storm of climate, geopolitical and cyber threats. The UK imports close to half of its food through long, consolidated supply chains that DEFRA’s own analysis acknowledges contain single points of failure and dependence on a small number of supplier countries.

The Government has recognised that resilience cannot be coordinated from the centre alone and must be “grounded in place”, yet there is still no mandate, remit or dedicated resourcing for local planning around food supply stability. This briefing sets out how local food partnerships can lead on this planning and are key to building resilience into the UK food system.

**What is civil food resilience?** The capacity of people in their daily lives to be more aware of risks to food, more skilled in reducing unnecessary risks, and more prepared to act with others to ensure all of society is well fed during and after crisis. It is not the responsibility of individuals or community organisations alone, but a collective ‘whole-of-society’ responsibility, with action needed at every level of governance.

## Why food resilience must be delivered locally

Civil food resilience is delivered at the point a shock is felt – which is always a place. Effective response depends on operational knowledge that cannot be held centrally: which households are vulnerable (data often held in communities rather than by statutory services), where local storage, surplus and distribution capacity sit, and which trusted intermediaries can mobilise quickly.

The Government has recognised that one size does not fit all and that expertise and energy must be unlocked at local level to deliver improved outcomes where they are most needed. What is missing is the connective

tissue which can turn national ambition into local delivery e.g. a mandate, a remit for resilience bodies, and multi-year resourcing.

Good practice is emerging across the country, but it is patchy. Where food partnerships and resilience leaders collaborate, it is largely voluntary and outside of funded remits. Two structural gaps stand out:

- **Institutional.** Local resilience forums and councils lack food-system expertise, and food partnerships (currently non-statutory) are often outside the conversations they are best placed to inform. Anchor institutions such as schools and hospitals face infrastructure and budget constraints.
- **Governmental.** Existing resilience bodies lack central Government guidance to inform and legitimise remits to plan around food access, so current activity is minimal, fragmented and unaligned, lacking a common approach or framework. DEFRA and the Cabinet Office’s Civil Contingencies Secretariat are not currently required to act together on this.

**What is a food partnership?** An organisation or alliance acting as a local coordinating hub, convening local authority teams (public health, environment, economic development, procurement), civil society organisations, food businesses, farmers and community groups around a coproduced local food strategy and delivery plan. They act as ‘living labs’ for scalable food system interventions and hold trusted relationships across community networks that are critical during crises.

### Why food partnerships are the vehicle

Food partnerships are uniquely positioned to build strong food resilience. They are embedded in communities, hold systems-thinking expertise across the local food economy, maintain maps of community food assets, and convene the diverse networks – businesses, civil society, public health – that a coordinated response requires. Critically, these relationships of trust take years to establish and cannot be created during a crisis; the groundwork must be done beforehand. The Covid response is the clearest evidence: partnerships that had already built these networks coordinated local responses faster and more equitably than central systems could.

### Barriers to building civil food resilience

The Issue	The problem	The solution	Who?
<b>Lack of consistency and expertise in local emergency planning around food</b>	Central government does not require food to be included in the official lists of risks that local areas plan for. Local Resilience Forums (multi-agency groups that coordinate the response to floods, power cuts and similar) have little food system expertise.	Look to Local Resilience Forums and food partnerships already planning for food responses as proofs of concept to be replicated.  Legislate for a Good Food Bill requiring local authorities to produce local food plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central government</li> <li>• Local Resilience Forums</li> <li>• Local authorities</li> <li>• Food partnerships</li> </ul>



<p><b>Limited funding and recognition of food partnerships</b></p>	<p>Most food partnerships are funded only year to year, threatening long-term planning. With no formal legal status, they are not automatically engaged by statutory bodies.</p>	<p>Provide stable, multi-year funding. Embed partnerships within councils and build alliances with public health teams to give them standing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central government</li> <li>• Local authorities</li> <li>• Food partnerships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Public sector food difficult to transform</b></p>	<p>Public sector food offers a powerful mechanism to build supply chain resilience. But councils have limited staff capacity to manage food contracts; budgets for school, hospital and prison meals are low; and supply chains are fragmented, making local sourcing harder.</p>	<p>Break large contracts into smaller lots so local producers can bid; coordinate buying across public institutions such as schools and hospitals; weight contracts towards social and environmental value; and share a common approach across areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local authorities</li> <li>• Public institutions (schools, hospitals, prisons)</li> <li>• Food partnerships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Loss and fragmentation of local food infrastructure</b></p>	<p>Decades of consolidation have removed local capacity to store, process and distribute food. Smaller farms (under three hectares) are excluded from the Sustainable Farming Incentive, despite being more likely to deliver mixed farming.</p>	<p>Rebuild distributed capacity: regional food hubs, shared storage, community seed banks, shared-machinery schemes, community kitchens, and direct farm-to-consumer sales.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central government</li> <li>• Local authorities</li> <li>• Food partnerships</li> <li>• Farmers</li> <li>• Business</li> </ul>
<p><b>Exclusion of vulnerable communities from engagement and decision-making</b></p>	<p>The communities most exposed to food shocks – low-income, disabled and marginalised households – are least likely to benefit from existing crisis preparedness guidance focused on stockpiling, and the least represented in decision-making and planning for food emergency response.</p>	<p>Include vulnerable communities and people with lived experience in food crisis planning, paying people for their time to remove barriers to participation. Embed proven frameworks like Food Ladders and Dignity Principles in community food services to build skills, strengthen community relationships, and ensure people have a say in how they're supported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food partnerships</li> <li>• Local authorities</li> <li>• Funders</li> </ul>

## What we are asking the Government to do:

Local food partnerships and local authorities need a clear mandate and the resources to plan for community responses to acute food shocks, and to address existing chronic pressures (household food insecurity, supply chain fragility, unsustainable production) that make shocks worse. Five interventions can enable this:

1. **Give resilience bodies a remit for food.** Ensure the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (Cabinet Office), working closely with DEFRA, utilises the latest research and data on food system vulnerabilities to inform Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and steer their remits to focus on food resilience, and require household and supply-chain food vulnerabilities to be included in Local/Community Risk Registers.
2. **Enable place-based Food Resilience Committees.** Support councils, LRFs and food partnerships to convene diverse food-system stakeholders for joint resilience planning, which should include assessment of pinch points and vulnerabilities, food asset mapping and disaster scenario response planning.
3. **Fund food partnerships for the long term.** Recognising the core work of food partnerships addressing existing chronic food system pressures, provide multi-year funding so partnerships can plan beyond short rolling grants, as has been provided by the Welsh Government for food partnerships across Wales.
4. **Use public procurement as a resilience lever.** Break contracts into smaller lots to widen local producer access, coordinate procurement across anchor institutions, and mandate and enforce improved Government Buying Standards across all public-sector settings, including schools.
5. **Invest in local food infrastructure.** Link food resilience to the development and regeneration agenda – safeguarding critical infrastructure in planning and using investment streams to build new capacity, especially storage and processing. Note that sub-3ha farms, which tend toward high production diversity, are currently excluded from the Sustainable Farming Incentive.
6. **Introduce a Good Food Bill.** A Good Food Bill would put this work on a statutory footing. It would place a duty on local authorities to produce local food plans, turning resilience planning from good practice followed by some areas into standard practice followed by all. It would also create ministerial duties that join up DEFRA and the Cabinet Office on food resilience, so that risk registers and Local Resilience Forum remits are no longer left to local initiative alone. More details on the Good Food Bill, supported by over 150 organisations and academics can be found [here](#).

## About Sustainable Food Places

The Sustainable Food Places Network (SFP) brings together 120+ cities, towns and regions across all four UK nations, funded nationally by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and locally through local authority, charitable and other sources.

Each place has a food partnership driving change across health, food security and a sustainable food economy, evidenced in independent evaluations.

The network is coordinated by Food Matters, Food Sense Wales, Nourish Scotland, The Soil Association and Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

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