



Sustainable Food Places

Final Evaluation Summary and Synthesis Report
for Phase 3 of the programme (2019–24)

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Executive Summary

This report brings together a summary account of the University of the West of England's evaluation of Phase 3 of the Sustainable Food Places (SFP) programme.

Through the 'power of partnerships' SFP aims to 'make healthy and sustainable food a defining characteristic of where people live'. Since its origins in 2013, SFP has grown during a period of transformation and turbulence in public policy and society more widely. Key circumstances – notably public service austerity, low UK government policy engagement on sustainable food, the global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis – have created a challenging context for the programme.

Nevertheless, SFP has supported the growth of a UK-wide network of local food partnerships from 50 to 110 members between 2019 and 2024. Over 50 have benefited from a total of £1.5 million to fund the core work of food partnership coordinators with an additional £0.5 million to fund specialist projects. SFP has provided a framework and toolkits for action, an award scheme, networking and peer-to-peer support, evidence to support the case for funding, and advocacy in policy arenas. SFP has unlocked significant local investment for local food system action, through matched funding and the generation of additional funded work.

For Phase 3 SFP has exceeded its target number of members and met its wider goal to support a critical mass of local areas that reflect all types of local authority governance and location. The transition to establish partnerships in diverse settings has made SFP's whole systems approach the preferred model for local food partnerships in the UK, with government support in Scotland and Wales and recognition through the Local Government Association in England and the National Food Strategy in Northern Ireland.

SFP's model for LFPs (in terms of its principles, organisation, associated charters, strategies and plans) is widely adopted across the UK and shows that it can be adapted to many local authority contexts. Snowball growth acceleration in the membership signifies a 'normalisation' of the need for LFPs.

SFP awards are intended to represent progressive levels of achievement, with 28 Bronze, 14 Silver and 4 Gold Award holders in late 2024. The SFP awards application and assessment process has become increasingly accessible and robust in Phase 3. In part this is a consequence of the accumulated expertise within the programme network, with higher level award holders helping co-create standards of good practice. The openness of the applications process supports its credibility and has enabled an acceleration of learning between places.

There is fluctuation in the make-up of the membership. A proportion (about 1/10) drop out or become dormant within two years; often due to lack of ongoing funding to support a partnership coordinator. Nevertheless, SFP continues to receive application requests indicating strong interest in the value of network membership and whole systems approach.

The six key issues framework has been widely tested as a route for organising action on local food systems. SFP's emphasis on principles rather than categories is appreciated by members. Flexibility in its application means that LFPs adapt the framework to local circumstances. Using a whole systems approach, many LFPs convene a remarkable array of stakeholders, which in turn is generating unprecedented insights and actions around local food systems. Operating as 'backbone organisations' (Collective Impact Forum, 2012) analysis of how LFPs apply the six key issues framework shows a wide range of types of impacts that we summarise under the following themes:

- Providing leadership on complex and at times urgent local issues
- Driving forward local authority food plans
- Changing local policy
- From crisis response to preventative and community action on affordable food
- Bringing many voices to the good food movement
- Community food growing, supply chain innovation and procurement
- Putting food at the centre of the agenda for planetary health
- Creating collaborations across larger geographical areas

For Phase 3, evidence from LFPs shows that the overall pattern of progress across the six issues is varied. Pressures linked to the pandemic and rising cost of living have propelled action in some areas (such as food access), but impeded others (such as procurement).

While the programme has made progress on building a food movement, recent events took much work in the direction of food poverty relief, rather than around a more holistic set of issues.

Many LFPs have reported that these recent events have made it difficult to maintain a whole systems approach. Under-resourcing has emerged as an important theme: in many instances the scale of a given issue is more than the capacity of the LFP to address it within current resources.

The Network is central to the vision of the programme. Knowledge and skills sharing is fundamental to the SFP ethos and approach. SFP – and network members themselves – are evolving channels for communication. A challenge is managing the scale of the network, avoiding too much bureaucracy, and maintaining personal relationships. As a 'network of networks', devolved nation groups and area specific groupings are becoming increasingly important. Efforts are ongoing to delegate more network leadership activities, however with limited resources this remains a difficult ask for local food partnership members.

Issue-based campaigns have become an established aspect of the SFP programme. They bring substantial benefits for the membership, both in terms of convening actions as a whole movement, and through creating opportunities to enhance work at the local level.

LFPs generate a very wide range of evidence of impacts that show how they are improving their local food systems, and related human and environmental aspects. While it is important to be clear that many impacts are rooted in specific projects, instances of the added value of partnerships are well evidenced across all areas of the local food system. However, for the purposes of 'making the case' the multitude of effects create some difficulties with communication. Diverse and complex impacts are not necessarily simple to summarise to non-specialist audiences.

LFP Coordinator funded posts are pivotal to the development of LFPs. Coordinator positions are taken up by individuals with a wide variety of skillsets. This diversity generates significant practice innovation across the membership, and there are opportunities to distil key competencies. However, the lack of a workforce development framework for LFP coordinators and related practitioners impedes the acceleration of progress in this field, including important Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) aspirations.

Building upon the Race, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) for Change Review Tool of SFP, there continue to be questions of how partnerships better reflect the diversity of the communities they work with. While progress on REDI across the SFP network has been mixed, in 2023 most partnerships reported either some (59%) or a great deal (8%) of progress in this area.

Through bringing together six leading organisations, the Soil Association, Sustain, Food Matters, Nourish Scotland, Food Sense Wales and Nourish Northern Ireland, SFP has become well-recognised as a leading part of 'sustainable food infrastructure' in the UK. Alongside responding to growing policy-maker interest in local food partnerships, programme leads and the network members support innovative food interventions and research on public health, food security, public engagement, spatial planning, and climate change.

Funding arrangements for the programme, and for LFPs specifically, are uncertain and a cause for concern. This is despite the successes of lead agencies both nationally and locally in attracting funding from many sources. While a minority of local government areas have committed long term investment, in most instances the funding sources are short-term and not assured. With increasing interest to join the membership, it is difficult to envisage how a UK-wide or devolved nation programme can maintain its core functions on scaled-back resources. While the pathway to a solution looks more promising in Scotland and Wales, the central question concerns the funding of LFP Coordinator and local core staff positions. Evidence from existing LFPs shows that while partnerships can operate on piecemeal resources this situation compromises their ability to deliver and – importantly – demonstrate their local impacts.

Sustainable Food Places: programme and evaluation

Through the ‘power of partnerships’ the Sustainable Food Places programme aims to ‘make healthy and sustainable food a defining characteristic of where people live’. Sustainable Food Places (SFP) is led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain, with three nation delivery partners – Food Sense Wales, Nourish Scotland and Nourish Northern Ireland. SFP was founded to support local action on major challenges ranging from diet-related ill health, obesity, food insecurity to food waste, and environmental degradation. SFP supports local food partnerships to harness the diverse energies of their public agencies, voluntary sector organisations, businesses, and citizens for a joined-up approach on food issues. Phase 3 of the programme (2019–24) has been funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The National Lottery Community Fund.

Sustainable Food places Phase 3

In a policy context where food problems and opportunities are often siloed or overlooked, SFP champions the need for a system-wide, coordinated, and long-term strategy. With moves in this direction now taking place across the UK, SFP and local partnerships intend to show how action on food can support goals for local economic resilience, sustainable development, community cohesion and citizen participation.

Building upon Phases 1 and 2 of Sustainable Food Cities from 2013–19, the five-year Phase 3 of the programme was re-named Sustainable Food Places to reflect growing ambitions to work with diverse areas, scale up local actions, and to adopt a networked approach of working (See Figure 1). Over the course of Phase 3, SFP has offered partnerships a wide spectrum of support. Over 50 places have benefited from a total of £1.5 million to fund the core work of food partnership coordinators. Alongside a £0.5 million specialist grants scheme, SFP has provided a framework and toolkits for action, an award scheme, networking and peer-to-peer support, evidence to support the case for funding, and advocacy in policy arenas. Through an additional £2 million in matched funding at the local level, local food partnerships have become increasingly well established in the UK.

Towards the end of Phase 3, the SFP Network membership is made up of 110 local food partnerships, with further areas seeking to join. Growth is fastest in Scotland and Wales, where government policies are conducive to the creation of local authority level food

partnerships. While there is a very diverse spread of locations, local food partnerships are more likely to be formed in local authority areas with high multiple deprivation. However, despite advances made during Phase 3 to consolidate and develop the position of LFPs, in a context of stretched resources, many challenges remain to make cross-sector coordinated action on food issues an established feature in all local authority areas.

SFP's Vision

A future where everyone can access affordable, nutritious food that is good for people and the planet.

SFP's Mission

To build and sustain a thriving network of food partnerships driving a transition to healthy, sustainable and more equitable food systems.

The evaluation of Phase 3

This report builds upon five previous evaluation reports produced between 2021 and 2024, each of which cover different aspects of the programme. The overall aims of the evaluation have been to understand the impacts and processes of delivery of the programme and its member partnerships.

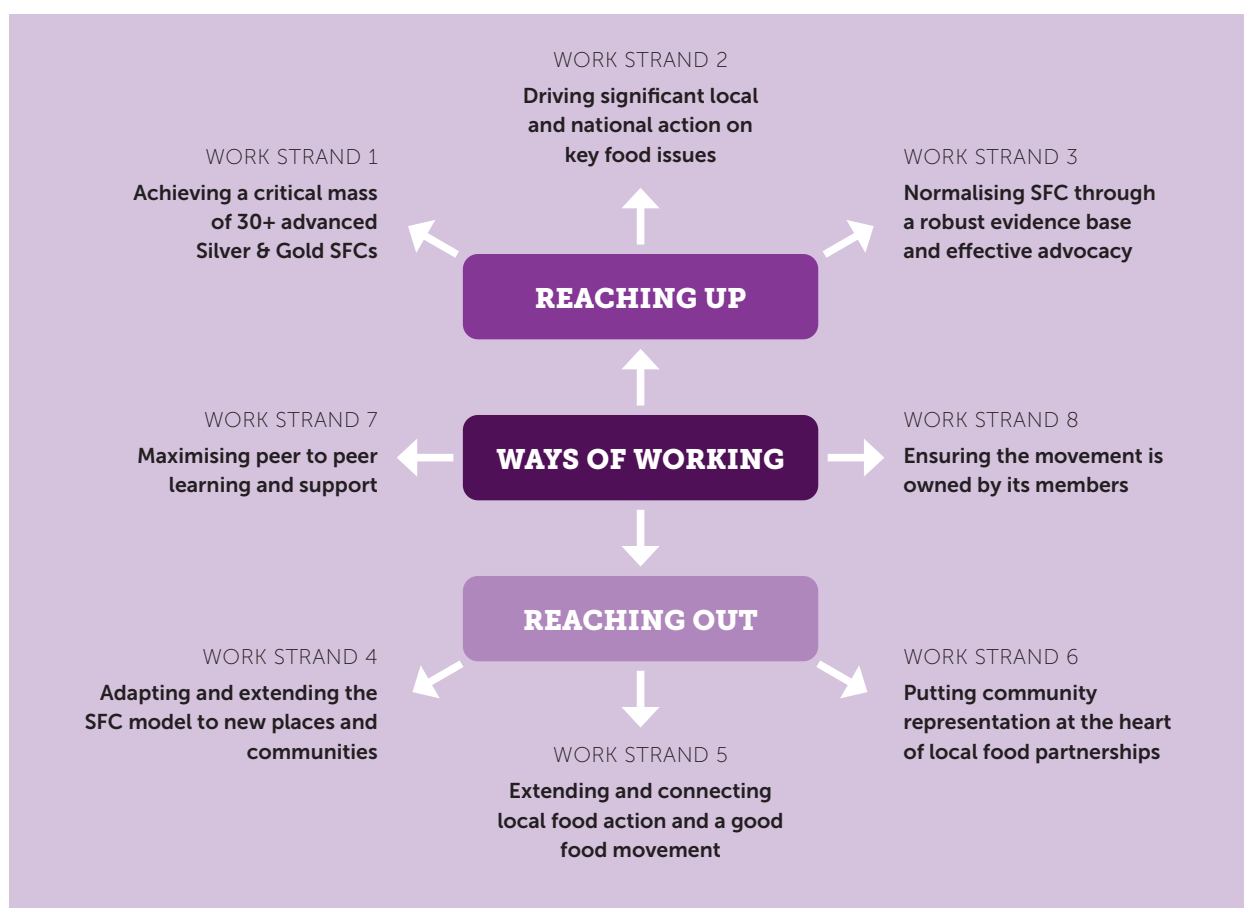


Figure 1: The aims and work strands for Phase 3 of Sustainable Food Places

In this evaluation we adopted a mixed methods approach towards SFP Phase 3 both for the role of local food partnership members and for the programme overall. The programme overall aims and work strands (Figure 1) were used as a point of reference for the evaluation. Over the course of the Phase 3 evaluation, we surveyed 75 LFPs, conducted 95 interviews with LFP staff and local stakeholders, and conducted 34 interviews with the programme team (of which the latest set feature in this report). To help build case study evidence these data have been supplemented with the review of LFP membership and award applications and grant reports from 118 SFP member partnerships, much of which is in the public domain through the SFP Evidence Base website. In this report we also selectively draw upon a deeper set of data that draws upon our role in the evaluation of Phase 2 of the programme between 2017 and 2019.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed through a framework analysis (Gales et al., 2023). The present report anonymizes the identities of most interviewees and places, except where we have been given permission or the information is already in the public domain. As well as interviewee responses, some quotations include material compiled by the SFP programme from grant reports and award applications. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the UWE Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee Reference HAS.17.10.031.

UWE Evaluation Reports for Phases 2 and 3

[Sustainable Food Places: Understanding the contribution to local government](#)

[Remaking Local Food Systems: Progress and prospects for UK local food partnerships](#)

[Local Food Partnerships in Wales](#)

[The Value of Local Food Partnerships: Covid and Beyond](#)
[Sustainable Food Cities Phase 2 Programme Evaluation](#)

Taking a whole systems approach: context and overview

There is increasing recognition of the need for coordinated actions to meaningfully improve the food system. While the research evidence grows on opportunities for action, concerted UK policy responses have lagged. In the absence of formal policy at national or local level, the partnership of SFP organisations have shaped sustainable food policy and governance for local places in the UK.

Food is fundamental to wellbeing, but increasing evidence in the UK shows that the food system is not delivering for health, social justice, the economy and the environment. Concerted action at the local level is widely recognised as a key driver for a better food system, and there are risks if we do not harness this potential.

Diets have become the greatest single contributing factor for ill health, with poor diets responsible for more than 1 in 7 deaths in the UK (Afshin et al., 2019). Diet-related illness is placing increasing stress on the NHS, the wider welfare system and economy (Food Foundation, 2024). This burden of ill health falls disproportionately on people with lower incomes and other forms of social disadvantage (Johnstone & Lonnie, 2023). Food poverty has increased in the last decade, with unequal access to food becoming entrenched during the ongoing cost of living crisis (Francis-Devine, Malik & Roberts, 2024). Economic food security lacks resilience in response to environmental and geopolitical instability. The UK imports a significant proportion the food consumed and has become reliant on an increasingly fragile global food system (DEFRA, 2023). The farming sector is dependent upon government assistance and the food processing and retail sectors have faced extreme turbulence – particularly arising from the effects of the pandemic. The acceleration of climate change is bringing extreme weather events, disease outbreaks, and a wide range of systemic instabilities to the food system.

In a context where there has been little joined up policy making at on food at UK government level (Dimbleby, 2021), the last fifteen years have seen increasing attention turning towards the potential for action at the level of local authorities. While their powers are limited, and not consistent across devolved nations, local governments and partners have the

potential to act across a wide range of food issues including food economic planning, public food procurement and food waste. In coordination with NHS providers, local authorities exert considerable leadership on diet-related population health issues. Much grass roots action and innovative practice on food issues take place through the work of local third sector and civil society groups. While the policy context has been more conducive in Scotland and Wales, local authorities in all parts of the UK are required to better integrate services and create joint strategies notably in the areas of the economy, sustainable development, health and wellbeing. This has been fuelled by an interest to apply systems-based approaches in response to complex issues (PHE, 2019). However, while action at the local level is an important field for food system transition, recent history of austerity and upheaval has also created barriers for action.

Since its inception, SFP has grown during a period of transformation and turbulence in public policy and society more widely. Key circumstances – notably cuts to local government budgets and low engagement from UK government – have created a very challenging context for the programme. SFP has succeeded in responding to much of this adversity, for instance through better coordination LFPs have helped local actors achieve more with diminished resources. SFP forms part of an international movement to develop a whole systems approach to local food issues. Through their focus on local governance of the food system, a systems and integrative perspective, and cross-sectoral working, UK LFPs share many similarities with locally coordinated organisations operating in other countries, such as food policy councils in the USA (Johns Hopkins, 2024). Notably, UK LFPs and SFP share common areas of focus with the international Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2024).

A new way of working: local cross-sector collaborations for food system change

Local food partnerships (LFPs) are the building blocks of the SFP programme. As multi-sector collaborations working on local food system issues, these partnerships bring together interests from across public bodies, business, and third sector agencies. The key role of LFPs is to develop a shared vision for a more sustainable food future and coordinate action to make this vision a reality.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are widely promoted as a pre-requisite to address complex issues such as improving local food systems. Our research on the role of LFPs during the Covid pandemic used the '4 Es' (Efficiency, Effectiveness, Equity, Engagement. Bolden, 2021) as a systems leadership framework to understand the value of partnership working. Alternative perspectives for understanding the value of partnerships include, the Backbone Model (Collective Impact Forum, 2012) promoted in SFP's latest guidance on food partnership impact and focuses on the role of partnerships to foster cross-sector communication, alignment, and collaboration required for systems change.

Growth of local food partnerships

In the past five years, 60 new partnerships have joined the SFP network, which have added to the 50 active members in 2019. The acceleration of their formation has helped SFP make the case for the 'normalisation' LFPs across the UK. Representation became particularly strong in Wales following the Welsh government grant in 2021 to support food partnerships in all local authorities. The Scotland Good Food Nation Act (2022) and the proposed requirement for local authorities to develop local food plans has also stimulated the rise of partnerships. In England, SFP's Phase 3 programme focus on rural areas has contributed to the creation of 42 partnerships operating at county scale. While there is very diverse spread of locations across the UK, local food partnerships are more likely to be formed in local authority areas with high multiple deprivation.

In 2024, the SFP programme team report continued growth in enquiries to from areas seeking to establish LFPs drawing upon the SFP model. Overall, SFP has exceeded its membership growth target for Phase 3 of the programme.

People are desperately wanting change; they want to be involved with the partnership, and they want their opinion to be heard.

[London Borough Partnership, Coordinator, 52]

Since 2013, SFP has evolved its guidance on the development of LFPs to cover a comprehensive range of issues. SFP Toolkit is a free-to-access resource that includes 27 guides, providing a step-by-step approach to partnership development. SFP's toolkit (covering areas such as principles, organisation, charters, strategies and plans) has been widely adopted across the UK and shows that it can be adapted to many local authority contexts.

Over time not all partnerships have an upward trajectory. Since the start of the programme in 2013, SFP records show that 21 areas have suspended their activities for at least six months¹. Several reasons account for these halts including the loss of a leading advocate, changes to the host organisation, the loss of local funding, or a shift in policy priorities. Sixteen areas have left the programme where the challenges are not resolved. In five areas, these changes represent a pause before re-grouping and picking up partnership activities once again. In some cases, re-kindled partnerships can move forward with fresh representation and ideas. This illustrates how local 'stop and go' factors direct the speed at which local food partnerships make progress on their objectives.

¹ Data source: 2023 UWE/SFP Survey



Figure 2: Six Key Issues Framework for the Sustainable Food Places programme

The organisation of partnerships

While LFPs differ in their specific make-up, our evaluation survey found that a ‘typical format’ consists of a full time Coordinator, a part time Chair, and a Steering Group with ten members who represent a range of public, private and third sector agencies and lay membership. This core partnership engages around 25 delivery organisations and, through email lists and social media, operates a network with at least 1000 members in their locality. The majority of LFP Coordinators are hosted within public bodies – usually local government and often within public health, communities or sustainable development teams. A significant proportion of LFP Coordinators are employed by third sector agencies that either specialise in food system issues, or have a wider brief covering community development, regeneration, or environmental goals.

Representation and support within partnerships

Many LFPs bring together an unprecedented array of stakeholders, with support from 34 different types of stakeholder groups represented in the 2023 evaluation survey. This convening role of partnerships offers new insights and opportunities for action on local food system issues.

Amongst this broad field of representation, Public Health, Community Development, and Sustainability/ Climate Emergency teams feature as the teams within local government that provide the strongest level of support (86% ‘quite strong or ‘strong’ support). Reflecting their policy influence, 58% of LFPs surveyed report ‘strong’ or ‘quite strong support’ from local councillors and other elected officials.

Most partnerships (53%) report a high level of support from people who act in a personal capacity. These are often highly motivated individuals who volunteer their time and bring expertise on local food issues and activism. Alongside those from community and voluntary organisations, the presence of these representatives highlights the investment of civic and unpaid commitments in the operations of local food partnerships.

A minority of partnerships reported strong support from food businesses and the farming sector (in the case of partnerships with significant rural areas). While this is a concern given the importance of these actors, many partnerships report that business engagement often follows informal channels. Meanwhile the position on engagement with food producers is shifting, especially in Wales and Scotland where local food policy developments are driving greater dialogue with across the farming sector.

The core staff of partnerships

LFP coordination is a new and exciting field of practice. Coordinator positions are filled by individuals with a wide variety of skillsets. This diversity generates significant practice innovation across the membership, and as the field takes shape there are opportunities to distil key competencies. However, from a workforce development perspective, many Coordinators are employed as skilled administrators but have workloads and leadership roles that go beyond their pay grades. These roles are often short term and lack career development support. The lack of a workforce development framework for LFP Coordinators and related practitioners impedes the acceleration of progress in this field. Some interviewees believe the fragility of Coordinator posts reflects wider under-valuing of community food sector work, with adverse implications for attracting people from diverse demographic backgrounds to the role.

[LFP Coordinator] is an immensely underfunded role. I feel that the work has been largely feminized.

[Prog team, 13]

To manage the breadth of work, sponsors of established and successful partnerships often create two types of paid role, one focusing on strategic development, while another leads on operational projects and community engagement. Where local authorities have combined their partnership efforts (for example in some areas of Wales), there have been opportunities for greater staff specialisation such as the creation of community food grant officer roles. As they move beyond initiating plans and experimentation, many partnerships are building a case for different staff functions.

Funding and hosting partnerships

Ensuring that food partnerships are embedded in their locality for the long term continues to be our greatest challenge.

[SFP Impact Report, 2024]

SFP grants for Coordinator staff in LFPs are strongly reported across our evaluation work to have been pivotal in enabling food partnerships to launch and sustain themselves. The grants require at least 50% local match funding and, in doing so, build local commitments to the partnership. Findings from grant reports to SFP and evaluation survey indicate that Coordinators and supporting partners generate additional income (approximately seven times greater than SFP grant income) through project funding awards, which all supports the case for this type of staff position.

While a minority of places report confidence in local sources of funding, the core infrastructure work of LFPs is less secure. The most recent LFP evaluation survey of 2023 found that the clear majority (86%) of respondents thought that their partnership was either 'highly' or 'somewhat dependent' on national/UK sources of funding – whether this was through government or a charitable funding body. Records from the SFP programme since 2013 indicate that many places can retain some form of partnership activity in the absence of a paid and dedicated Coordinator, however the momentum to deliver and demonstrate impacts soon start to diminish.

Understanding the impacts of a place-based whole systems approach

Alongside funding, specialist resources, networking, campaigns, advocacy and tailored support, SFP provide the Six Issues Framework – a whole systems approach for local food partnerships to help shape and benchmark their work. This framework is intended to reflect major dimensions of a local food system with respect to governance, community engagement, health and food access, local food economy, catering and procurement, and a sustainable food environment.

Members report that the Six Issues Framework gives them an accessible route to effect changes to a complex food system. SFP's emphasis on principles rather than detailed prescriptions is appreciated by members, and the framework strikes a balance between being specific and flexible enough that different places can adapt it to be relevant to local issues and needs.

For Phase 3, evidence from LFPs shows that the overall pattern of progress across the six issues has been strongly shaped by the pandemic and ongoing cost-of-living crisis (LFP Survey, 2023). More than any other factor, urgent events have propelled the rapid action of partnerships, while also impeding progress in other respects. The following sections set out leading themes around the impacts of LFPs.

Providing leadership. For many areas in the early months of 2020, LFPs provided a key source of leadership drawing upon their unique insight into multiple aspects of the food system and experience of facilitating effective collaboration between public, private and third sector agencies. LFPs led or supported the delivery of government programmes at the local level, for example in 2020 in England, this included £16m DEFRA funding to frontline food charities and £120m DfE funding for holiday free school meals.

Brighton and Hove food partnership (BHFP) co-ordinated the emergency food distribution through securing premises for a food processing hub. Through its community kitchen and retail connections, BHFP was able to organize combined purchasing through wholesale suppliers, local farms, and local businesses. BHFP stated that these actions allowed the city to significantly upscale its collective effort.

In the years since the peak of the pandemic, LFPs have continued to catalyse and provide leadership on a wide range of issues including more holistic approaches to public health, connecting local food supply chains and resilience approaches to local food security.

The food partnership looks at the big picture and how we drive forward over the longer term. They have collected all the voices, make sure that everybody's got a place at table and make sure that we're all going in roughly the same direction.

[Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Economic Development Lead, 44]

Driving forward strategic local authority food plans. As well as a catalyst for specific areas for action, the Six Issues Framework is used by many LFPs as the foundation for area-wide food strategies and plans. The Covid and cost of living crises opened a window of opportunity to link food issues to the need for long term coordinated action at the local authority level.

The central role of food partnerships during these crises presented opportunities to write priorities for food system transition into local strategies. LFPs continued to build on this momentum and by late 2023, over half of LFPs were in the process of writing new food plans or refreshing existing ones. For many network members, this work represented the first time their area had put in place a strategic planning document on food.

The local food strategy is taking things out of silos and making different areas realise their potential with collective buy-in... It is totally changing how food is seen in the city.

[Urban Local Authority, South of England, Councillor, 04]

Changing local policy. Building on work that started in Phase 2, LFPs have continued to influence a wide range of local policy areas including spatial planning, public health, food poverty, climate emergency and biodiversity, public procurement and local economic development. This has been a key area of focus for the Bristol Food Network (BFN) during Phase 3. As a key partner in Bristol's One City Approach, BFN put food at the heart of the One City Plan and launched "Bristol Good Food 2030: A One City Framework for Action". From this platform they have also influenced other key areas of policy such as a draft Allotments and Food Growing Strategy and the inclusion of food sustainability clauses in the updated Local Plan.

Some of this work at the local level has inspired national policy making. For instance, Food Cardiff conducted extensive public engagement to assist drawing up the city's food strategy in 2019. This work saw dividends during the pandemic in terms of the rapidity of community mobilisation. Cardiff's example helped shape the Welsh Government's grant for food partnerships across the country.

From crisis response to preventative and community action on affordable food. At the start of the pandemic when statutory authorities were still developing mechanisms to cope with the scale of the food emergency, cross-sectoral relationships established through SFP food partnerships prior to the pandemic helped direct public funds to where they were needed.

With the SFP Six Issues Framework anchoring their response to the pandemic and cost-of-living pressures, food partnerships found creative ways to build community food resilience out of the immediate events of the emergency food effort. By the end of Phase 3, the promotion of preventative approaches to food poverty, underpinned by dignity and empowerment principles has become a major focus for many LFPs. Illustrating the effectiveness of idea cross-fertilisation and knowledge and resource sharing among LFPs and National Programme Partners, Lewes District Food Partnership, Building on and complementing work undertaken by Nourish Scotland and others, led the development of The Alliance for Dignified Food Support. This growing initiative provides a range of resources and tools for delivering empowering food support.

Bringing many voices to the good food movement. In Phase 3, LFPs made progress on supporting a grass-roots movement for good food. In 2019 this was conceived around the increasing role of civil society and small community groups across a range of food issues. SFP benefited from links with the UK-wide Food for Life Get Togethers programme (2019–23) which had a focus on community-based

food growing, cooking, and sharing. Specifically, one project within Get Togethers called 'My Food Community' trained community food leaders, many of whom went on to use their skills to support LFPs. During the pandemic, more experienced and established LFPs helped direct government emergency food relief funding towards community projects taking a holistic and long-term approach, nevertheless constraints during this period were widely reported by the SFP national team to have diverted the programme away from its original aspirations to put community representation 'at the heart of local food partnerships'.

Following the launch of the Race, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) for Change Review Tool of SFP, there continue to be questions of how partnerships better reflect the diversity of the communities they work with. While progress on REDI across the SFP network has been mixed, in 2023 most partnerships reported either some (59%) or a great deal (8%) of progress in this area.

[One of our key successes has been] increasing the dynamic mix of individuals at any one time in the room to ensure lived experience is sharing the floor with subject matter experts.

[West Midlands England Urban Partnership, Coordinator, 17]

Much of the work has been bottom up, for instance in the latest round of SFP awards Lewisham independently applied SFP's REDI tool as a framework for review and action. However, as discussed in the above section on staff roles, weak pay and working conditions create barriers for better EDI in the make-up of local partnerships.

Community food growing, supply chain innovation and procurement. Since 2019, public demand for spaces to grow food has surged, as people looked for opportunities to access fresh healthy food for themselves and others, as well as to improve their wellbeing. Local food partnerships have been instrumental in advocating for better, more equitable access to growing spaces and prior to the pandemic amplified this message through SFP sponsored local Veg Cities campaigns.

There's a project around disused plant nurseries that have been run by the council and disused for decades and decades. And through the partnership coordinator, linking in with the parks team and public health, the food partnership managed to get a business case together to put a tender out so an operator can actually come in and get them growing food again.

[Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health, 14]

Through their ability to bring together partners from different sectors, some LFPs have supported the development of agri-food supply chain innovation

projects. For example, Good Food Leicestershire helped coordinate the Beanmeals project grant funded by UKRI. Following Warwick University's successful development of two Haricot beans that are suitable for UK growing, the Beanmeals project will work with schools and caterers to encourage an increase in beans consumption.

Amongst other priorities, many LFPs have sought to maintain a focus on food procurement. Brexit and the possibilities of UK divergence from EU regulatory and funding formulas has led to a renewed focus on purchasing practices.

I don't think in all honesty, that we would have moved on with this [re-purposing of dis-used farm to grow fresh produce for supply to schools and residential homes] without the partnership.

[Rural Local Authority, Wales, Councillor, 21]

During the pandemic disruption to the economy put a spotlight on supply chains and accelerated digital innovation such as the role of e-commerce to match producers and purchasers. However, the urgency of food poverty caused some partnerships to suspend their work in this area:

Putting food at the centre of the agenda for planetary health. SFP Network members have been a main driving force behind an international campaign (The Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration) calling on local government to put food at the heart of climate policy. With few local climate and environmental policies reflecting the interdependency of food and the environment, the SFP Food for the Planet workstream, through a package of resourcing, expert advice, tools and campaign materials, empowered food partnerships to drive this much needed integration in local policy.

Taking a partnership approach is very effective in terms of demonstrating how food is a connector across whole range of different policy areas. Taking a systemic approach is a much more effective than taking individual issues.

[Prog team, 04]

Creating collaborations across larger geographical areas. Originally conceived as a cities-based movement, SFP has supported new partnerships in a wide variety of geographical areas and in new regional collaborations. Notably, the SFP network has expanded to 42 country-based members. This has enabled the growth rural-urban connections connecting producers to consumers. Originally conceived as city-based partnership, Good Food Oxfordshire accelerated its partnership work across county districts during the pandemic and in 2021 became the first partnership to adapt SFP award scheme for a two-tier local authority. A notable achievement has been to expand its food access services database to cover the whole of the county. This interactive online resource helped bring together over 150 organisations to contribute towards a long term county-wide food strategy the following year. A consequence of the counties and regional work has been to bring a stronger voice from the farming and horticultural sectors to the SFP programme during Phase 3.

Recognition and raising ambitions through awards

Awards are integral to raising ambitions across the SFP programme. The Bronze, Silver and Gold SFP awards are intended to represent progressive levels of achievement across local food systems. By September 2024 there were 28 Bronze, 14 Silver and 4 Gold Award holders, which means that 42% of the SFP partnership members hold an award. In addition to showcasing achievements, many partnership leads prize awards as a means to galvanize local stakeholders and signify the value of area-based food work with key local decision-makers.

SFP awards were an early introduction to the programme in 2013 and quickly became a focal point for debate around how to characterise achievements and change at the local level. Using the Six Issues as a framework, the award applications process has required local partnerships to provide detailed accounts of their actions. With so much innovation at the local level, determining the requirements for award applications has involved reflection and dialogue – with the SFP programme team themselves learning from each new application round. In consultation with the membership, during Phase 3 SFP undertook a major review of the awards process. The revised applications process has shifted the focus onto impacts and achievements, allowed partnerships greater choice in the examples of their work and, overall, reduced the complexity of writing the application itself. The assessment process has also been revised to include a larger group of reviewers and provide more transparency. SFP has moved towards a more co-produced approach, especially for higher level awards. The SFP programme team have found that Gold award applicants are well placed to define and set the agenda around excellent practice. For example, for their Gold award application in 2024, Cambridge asked to present a specific section to show how their work had influenced practice in other parts of the UK.

Awards can create a moment in time for a place to engage people. And awards are a good test bed for places to be able to apply for further funding elsewhere, because it forces places to bring together data.

[Prog team, 18]

Feedback from partnerships shows that SFP awards are a key mechanism for driving change at the local level. The process of bringing together an application often leads to discovery of new issues or initiatives and creates dialogue and opportunities for collaborations. Preparing an award application can ‘really galvanize and inspire action’, create a tangible goal and ‘help places navigate the wide range of potential avenues’ for food system work. Nottinghamshire is one of the most recent places to achieve a Bronze Award in summer 2024. According to the lead public health officer, not only has it ‘really raised the profile of the partnership and the vast amount of work that’s going on’, but the credibility of an award also quickly opened conversations with senior council leaders around new areas of work. These kinds of benefits have meant that several partnerships intentionally draw out their applications process to maximise the opportunities for engagement and to prepare their way forward.

The receipt of an award also provides opportunities for partnerships to propel their work. Most interviewees for our evaluation noted the celebratory value of awards for local authorities, elected politicians, and community organisations – which could translate into further commitment. More widely, the openness of the system ([copies of applications are hosted on the SFP website](#)) has supported its credibility and has enabled an acceleration of learning between places. However, it is worth noting that awards are not necessarily leading considerations for partnerships:



Octopus Community Garden Volunteers, Islington, London ©Mara Galeano Carraro

Some partnerships find [awards] more useful than others. [One place] found it really useful when speaking to their elected members and to show how they've done really well. But then [another place] only recently went for an award. They probably have the one of the strongest partnerships in Scotland, but didn't feel that they needed [an award], because they were already doing the work. They didn't need the badge.

[Prog team, 03]

Over time, matters of renewal, progression, and withdrawal have become more prominent in the management of the awards system. One of the challenges for SFP moving forward involves running a robust assessment process which, when sufficiently resourced, itself generates critical evidence and learning for innovation across the field. Pressures to cut 'administrative' costs of award assessment risks compromising the validity and usefulness of the awards. Partnerships also need the resources to produce high quality and meaningful applications and as one programme lead stated:

We need to be mindful that the process of applying for the award doesn't detract from the actual work that needs to be done.

[Prog team, 07]

A feature of both programme team and partnership feedback has been that ultimately awards need to retain a focus on principles, reflection and learning.

Collaborating and amplifying impact: network and campaigns

Taking a network approach has been at the heart of the SFP vision since the programme's inception. In a context where a framework for sustainable food governance and policy has been largely absent at the national and local level, the facilitation of the SFP network has enabled LFPs to support and learn from one another. National campaigns have brought together the network to express a collective voice and press for change on key issues.

Network approach and growth

Network building is increasingly recognised in policy and research as a basis for transforming the food system (Jones & Hills, 2021; Moragues-Faus, 2021).

Prior to the founding of the SFP programme, the historic lack of a central framework and support for sustainable food work meant that local food activists were often working in isolation and lacking the resources and know-how to effectively coordinate local stakeholders and progress significant new areas of activity.

To counter this, SFP put a network approach at the heart of its work. The Programme uses a variety of mechanisms to support the network including LFP Coordinator group catch-ups, virtual and live training events, national conferences, local and regional food summits, a knowledge exchange email list and an online hub.

It only works really well as a network, if best practice has been shared around the network. Everyone has been talking about this forever: 'let's not work in silos!' Our methodology is, 'you cannot be a member of SFP and not share.'

[Prog team, 19]

In Phase 3, the SFP programme doubled the number of LFP network member areas. It also significantly expanded local authority geographies: bringing in counties, county boroughs and districts for the first time and increasing the number of devolved region members.

Including community and private sector organisations, the wider SFP network has grown to about 1000. This expansion increased the opportunities for members to learn from those working in similar local and political contexts and

build on the experience of and collaborate with LFPs and other stakeholders working on similar issues.

The support material, news, updates, research and kudos of the SFP network and associated partners; it's all has added weight and authority to my ability as a co-ordinator to make the case for change.

[England West Midlands Rural Partnership, Coordinator, 07]

Increasingly the SFP field is a 'network of networks' connected through a combination specialist food system interests and place-based concerns from national, to regional and to the hyper-local level.

Collaboration and innovation transfer

Peer support from other food partnerships has enabled us to make strong, informed and inspiring cases with stakeholders on what is possible.

[East of England Rural Partnership, Coordinator, 86]

The culture of co-learning and innovation transfer fostered by SFP has continued to influence the development of new areas of work and the amplification of existing initiatives in Phase 3. Analysis of member interviews, grant reports and communications through the network Rise-Up channel show that this co-learning infrastructure has enabled the:

- rapid sharing of information and best practice enabled LFPs to provide an efficient and effective emergency food response at the start of the pandemic.
- development of a preventative dignified and empowering approach to food poverty during the cost-of-living crisis.
- Trialling of innovative approaches to public food procurement.

- innovation transfer around the development of effective local food supply chains.
- sharing and pooling communications resources to demonstrate the positive impact of action on food on other key local priorities such as economic resilience, area regeneration, sustainable development and public health.
- sharing governance best practice to enable the rapid consolidation of new food partnerships; saving resources for practical action.

Challenges and the future of the network

The successful expansion of the network has created challenges in meeting its additional administrative and substantive demands. The ability of the central team to provide one-to-one support for LFPs and the closeness between LFPs (reported by LFPs as a strength in earlier phases of the evaluation programme) has become less feasible. To manage within their limited resources, the programme team has had to focus on communicating at the cohort level rather than providing bespoke support relevant to the wide variety of local policy contexts represented by the network.

One of the aims of Phase 3 was to devolve the governance of the network to its members. Both member feedback and our own assessment of the programme indicate that the continued growth and efficacy of the network would be better managed by a national and/or UK-wide programme team with the appropriate skills, experience and national and international reach and standing. Indeed, given stretched local capacity, it is unrealistic to expect that many LFPs will have the willingness or resources to take on this role.

Issue-based campaigning

Campaigns have become an established aspect of the SFP programme. They bring substantial benefits for the membership, both in terms of convening actions as a whole movement, and through creating opportunities to enhance work at the local level. During Phase 3 the planned campaigns were disrupted by the pandemic and cost-of-living pressures. With changing circumstances, SFP had to be agile and to adapt its campaigning to address worsening food poverty.

In Phase 3, the SFP network worked on four main campaigns, with dedicated support through Sustain:

Food Power (to 2021) supported coordinated approaches to tackling food poverty in over 50 areas in the UK. Food Power significantly enhanced the ability of LFPs to take a proactive response to the pandemic.

Formally closing in August 2024, Sugar Smart was a long-running campaign to support a cross-sector approach to raise public awareness of the impacts of consuming too much sugar. Sugar Smart has been a leading campaign for SFP and has been adopted as an area for focus in nearly all member areas. Alongside a clear message, part of the success of the campaign has been its resonance with agencies outside the health sector, including those working in youth, sport, charitable giving, and local philanthropy sectors.

Veg Cities, building on foundational work of Peas Please, has supported 35 member places to campaign on growing, cooking, selling and saving more vegetables.

Food for the Planet sought to tackle the climate and nature emergency through sustainable food and farming and an end to food waste. Under the campaign, over 50 SFP members areas have signed up to take action.

Overall, the pandemic and subsequent events created barriers to progress on some of the intended goals for campaigns in Phase 3, but also gave opportunities to amplify campaigning on food poverty and justice issues. Beyond the specific goal of each campaign, SFP have found that the campaigning approach produces a range of other benefits for the network and partners. Led through Sustain, the provision of specialist resources (research, message framing, targeting methods, impact assessment) significantly improves the ability of local partnerships to run campaigns. Campaigns are useful for newly formed partnerships to come together and get behind a clear cause. A leading benefit has been to bring together like minded people and agencies both locally and nationally, and these connections go beyond campaigns to foster further action:

Campaigns are very much about bringing lots of people together to really focus on something and push doors open at the same time. But probably the most important part of them is the legacy of the relationships.

[Prog team, 13]

In addition, campaigns have been important for the SFP lead organisations to build relationships with local areas, gain local insight, and represent local priorities more effectively. This, in turn, has supported the role of lead organisations in national policy advocacy.

Advocating at national level and communicating impact

For Phase 3 of the programme, part of the 'Reaching Up' aspiration for SFP has been to drive significant local and national action on key food issues. Building upon many years of policy advocacy and work to communicate impact, the consortium of lead partners and the member network gained traction on the need for local food systems action.

National advocacy

Reflecting on the growing body of national and international evidence, in 2021 the National Food Plan Part 2 proposed that *"All local authorities should be required to put in place a food strategy [...] in partnership with the communities they serve"* and recommended this as a key action for a Good Food Bill in England. Subsequently, there was recognition of food partnerships in the UK Government's Food Strategy of 2022.

While there were no further commitments from the UK Government, in England the Local Government Association endorsed the food partnership model as a long-term approach to food insecurity in their 2023 Public Health report. This reflected in growing support for LFPs across public health teams and coordinated action of the SFP network to defend and improve the promotion food support schemes for people on low incomes such as Healthy Start and the Household Support Fund.

In Scotland, the Good Food Nation Bill, introduced in late 2021, had been preceded by several years of work to make the case for coordinated local action on the food system. The subsequent Act in 2022 created an innovative 'framework' solution to embed food issues across the policy landscape and included a requirement for local area public bodies (councils and health boards) to produce integrated Food Action Plans. During this period Nourish Scotland supported substantial growth in SFP membership as areas recognised the close alignment between the SFP's Key Issues framework and their new planning responsibilities. Complex consultation processes and coordination with other legislation such as the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill have slowed decisions on whether LFPs are to receive national government resources to develop local plans.

In Wales, grass roots actions during the pandemic showed the importance of community-led solutions for tackling food poverty. In particular, pandemic responses in Cardiff gained national attention for the city-wide and concerted approach that was led by a local food partnership with deep community connections. The success of this model influenced the Welsh Government to provide a £2.5 grant for all local authority areas to establish or grow local food partnerships and to take community-led action on food poverty. Convened by Food Sense Wales, the Welsh network of LFPs has led efforts to encourage the Welsh Government to integrate food into the national well-being goals, indicators and milestones under the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales).

In Northern Ireland, Nourish Northern Ireland and the SFP network achieved some important policy success in the national food strategy of 2021. However, the recent absence of a government, alongside entrenched ways of working has hampered progress:

We were fortunate to influence the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework so that it mirrors the SFP six themes... But has been a very different way of working: all the government works in silos and we're still battling to 'get people in the room'.

[Prog team, 01]

During Phase 3, SFP made five submissions to UK government consultations. In 2021 at COP26, three quarters of SFP members signed the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration: a call for action by local governments from all over the world to accelerate the development of integrated food policies as a key tool in the fight against climate change. The Westminster Days of Action (Annual events where the SFP network convenes in Parliament to showcase and celebrate the important work of the SFP programme and strengthen relationships with MPs) are widely

reported to be a much needed and highly successful element of the programme. SFP report having engaged 92 members of parliament and, in many instances, opening new connections. Participation at a Westminster event consumes time and budgets – and represents a challenging commitment especially for LFP Coordinators who are at a distance from London. Nevertheless, there is some indication that SFP's support is perceived to be beneficial, with 71% of members reporting that they are more confident engaging with policy (2022 SFP member survey).

Building a national consortium

Over the course of Phase 3, SFP has increasingly become a point of contact for organisations – notably government agencies, food NGOs, businesses, and universities – seeking insights into local area food systems change. In this sense, SFP is becoming a part of the 'sustainable food infrastructure' in the UK. As a consortium, SFP has also contributed to the work of the lead organisations, notably the growth of the member networks has boosted local contacts and information exchange for the Soil Association, Sustain, and Food Matters. This is a rapidly evolving field, and the view of the programme team is that SFP occupies a specific niche that is distinct from other bodies such as the Food Foundation, Food Farming and Countryside Commission and the Obesity Health Alliance.

Over Phase 3, SFP has also matured as an organisation. With the founding director moving on in 2022 and the arrival of new personnel, there have been efforts to consolidate roles and structures. Changes to the governance structure have sought to give a stronger platform for the devolved nation lead agencies. In interviews with the programme team and nation partners, this was widely identified as an area that needed to be addressed, although there were differing views on the degree to which progress had been made in this area during Phase 3.

We're much more dynamic, and we're covering way more bases. I think we're much more 'all nations led' than we were in the in the very beginning.

[Prog team, 13]

Each country was supposed to be taking more control. And I feel that hasn't happened. As far as I can see, it's become extremely highly centralized.

[Prog team, 20]

Core staff reflections on other challenges include that the programme management board could be slow in making decisions on operational issues such as budgets and direction of travel; over stretch with the growth of the network; and that resource did not match the roles of the key agencies involved in the delivery of the programme or the needs of the work strands. The grant component of Phase 3 was highly valued (especially to support Coordinators) but carried an administrative load that might have been streamlined.

Communicating impact: progress and challenge

The programme has shown an increasing ability to demonstrate the impacts of its work. This is not straightforward to do, given that much of the impact derives from the added value of partnership working at levels of local, regional and national networks. In circumstances where results often take time to come to fruition, the crisis and acute events of the pandemic and cost-of-living pressures helped show what LFPs can achieve under emergency conditions. However, this focus on impacts relating to food aid can obscure the value of systemic changes that flow from the more integrative and strategic work of local partnerships. Through SFP's Impact Hub, work led through Food Matters has documented how LFPs generate a very wide range of evidence of actions and effects in their grant reports and award applications. While it is important to be clear that many impacts are rooted in specific projects, there are instances of the added value of partnerships across all areas of the local food system. However, for the purposes of 'making the case' this multitude of effects is not easy to communicate simply. Diverse and complex impacts are difficult to summarise for audiences who are unfamiliar with food system language or who view the food system more narrowly than the holistic framing developed by SFP. Compelling stories of impact all result from attention and dedicated effort – and with both resources in short supply many important stories of change will have been missed.

Pathways forward for Sustainable Food Places

Within the space of a decade, Sustainable Food Places has shifted perspectives and developed a framework for action on how to create a more localised approach towards improving our food system. After this period of rapid development, Sustainable Food Places is at a point where there are choices on the pathways forward.

In the absence of integrated food policy at national or local level, the SFP partnership have created a sustainable food policy and governance infrastructure for local places in the UK. SFP has become a well-recognised as a leading part of sustainable food infrastructure in the UK. However, while some provision has been secured, funding arrangements for elements of the programme, and for LFPs specifically, are uncertain. This is despite the successes of lead agencies both nationally and locally to attract funding from many sources. Notably at the local level, LFPs have demonstrated that they can often attract more funding than they receive through SFP grant channels. Many localities therefore show that they can make investments in partnership staff, but in most instances these funding sources are unstable (underspends, match contributions, grant over-spills) and not commensurate to the tasks. Bottom line long-term funding is needed for the core functions of a UK-wide or nationally devolved programme. In the Phase 3 configuration these functions included local grant funding for coordinators, innovations, and peer support, alongside national roles such as evidence support, award support and assessment, network support policy, policy advocacy, and communications. Our evaluation feedback is that the future of the programme relies upon resources for all these functions and funding to support a core programme management and administration function. The funding question has major implications for the future of the programme and LFPs. There are widespread concerns that the future will be one of managed wind-down, or of folding into another entity.

The SFP Network is central to the vision of the programme. Knowledge and skills sharing is fundamental to the SFP ethos and approach. SFP – and network members themselves – are evolving new ways to build connectedness. There are priorities for action to address diversity and inclusion in all

levels of the programme – from the make-up of the programme team and LFP coordinators to the groups and organisations steering and involved with the work of LFPs. A challenge is managing the scale of the network, avoiding bureaucratisation, and maintaining close working relationships. During Phase 3, SFP have re-affirmed the value of inter-personal communication both within and between members and this is critical aspect of the network that needs to continue to be nurtured in future phases of the programme. Devolved nation groups and area/region specific groupings are particularly important. For the network, the status of SFP as an organisational entity is an important and recurring question. As a project that sits under a consortium, it benefits from the resources and expertise of its overseeing and accountable agencies. However, several leading evaluation participants reflected on the potential for SFP as an independent entity, to direct and execute its vision.

Amongst the SFP Network there is debate on whether LFPs are best run through a public sector host agency, usually local government, or whether they need to sit in a third sector or hybrid space. One programme lead expressed this as:

“the control [of LFPs] needs to be with communities. They need to find ways of working that maintain an objectivity and an independence from statutory sector

[Prog team, 10].

There is a case for a statutory duty (or government guidance) for all local areas to have a food partnership. This would create a more secure foundation for sustainable food work at the local level. Many partnerships report challenges getting heard by local decision-makers. A local statutory framework and integration into local public sector planning would give them an arena to communicate the value and legitimacy of food systems work.

In Phase 3, the pandemic and cost of living crisis created conditions to demonstrate the distinctive value of LFPs to a very wide audience. It is important to recognise the significance of achievements of policy innovation at the local level notably in public health, food security, good food movement, spatial planning, climate change and in the development of area-wide food strategies and plans. In this complex

space of food issues, there are many ways to organise action at a local level, and the SFP model for LFPs has increasingly become the preferred option across the UK. Recent events have demonstrated that SFP's programme approach has had to be adept at responding to new circumstances. With substantial pressure on local food systems, this is also set to be the case in the next iteration of the programme.

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