

Ensure good food shapes your community

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Are local elections important?

With some local elections postponed in 2020, Council elections are bigger than ever this May, with the direct election of thousands of local councillors in over 150 local authorities in England.

From improving school meal provision, to reducing carbon emissions from food and land under Council control, to investing in local food infrastructure such as markets, or to make more areas available for community food growing, your councillors and elected mayor have the power to deliver initiatives that will shape your area, not to mention your food partnership or project work, and contribute to solve the challenges of our food system.

It's a great opportunity for the Sustainable Food Places network and local groups to ensure their future local elected leaders, no matter their political party, take good food seriously. Our objective is not to influence the result of elections or favour one candidate over another. Party political impartiality is vital for effective campaigning. We are asking organisations and individuals in the Sustainable Food Places network to interrogate their candidates and ensure good food is embedded in the local political agenda for years to come. For places not yet members of Sustainable Food Places, the local elections offer a unique opportunity to call for a food partnership in your local area.



Where and when

Local elections are [taking place in the following areas](#):

- Councillors in 24 County Councils, 35 Metropolitan Boroughs, 28 Unitary Authorities, 62 District Councils, City of London Corporation and Council of the Isles of Scilly
- Local authority mayors in Bristol, Doncaster, Liverpool, North Tyneside, and Salford
- Combined authority mayors in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West Midlands, West of England, and West Yorkshire
- London Mayor and members of the Greater London Authority
- Parish council elections in some parts of England.

The election date is **6 May** and here are two other key dates to be aware of:

29th March – The latest date that the pre-election period (purdah) can start for the local elections. It may be earlier in some areas (for example 22nd March in London). Local authorities should not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters including use of council facilities and resources, developing new policies, and holding of events featuring elected officials. This should not affect the work of food partnerships hosted by the local authority as they are independent.

9th April – Full list of candidates to be published (although many candidates will be announced before this date).

Get involved

Identify your calls to action

The first step is to identify your calls to action. Is it to establish a food partnership in your area? Is it to gain support to a few key areas in your food strategy? Is there one call to action that stands out for your organisation? You may want to draft a 'manifesto' outlining your priorities. You can do this on your own or seek the support of a coalition of allies and like-minded organisations. Your campaign will be stronger and more impactful when you collaborate and build alliances. London Food Link, for example, is working with several other organisations to prepare a manifesto for London mayoral elections (Case study 1: London Food Link).

You can use the local elections as an opportunity to galvanize your steering group and wider network of supporters around the issues that are important to your food partnership or organisation. Involve your supporters in setting up key questions for candidates, define the top five or ten priorities for candidates or invite your supporters to go to hustings armed with key questions for candidates.

Check who are the candidates standing for election in your local area

The next step is to research who are the candidates standing for local elections in your ward and local area. Mayor candidates are usually announced well in advance but councillor candidates for different wards may not be announced until the April deadline (according to the Electoral Commission, full list of candidates will be published on the 9th April). Good sources of information

are the pages of your local political parties, local media or websites such as <https://whocanivotefor.co.uk/> or <https://candidates.democracyclub.org.uk/elections/>.

Write to the local political parties and candidates

As the candidates may not be announced until the 9th of April, you can write to the local political parties as a first point of call before this. Once candidates have been announced, which may be before April, writing to them directly will be most effective (Appendix 1: template letter for candidates). Prioritize candidates in your ward and check if council leader and relevant cabinet members are up for re-election. Ask them to pledge support to the food partnership in your area, ask them questions, send them your call to action, manifesto or food strategy and invite them for a meeting. Publish and disseminate their answers to your supporters so their commitments are made public. The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership for example, took the local elections as an opportunity for engaging candidates in the partnership's good food vision for the city and to mobilise supporters and the community (Case Study 2: Brighton and Hove Food Partnership).

Organise or participate in hustings

Hustings are panel discussion where candidates debate policies and answer questions from the audience. They're a great way to push candidates to make commitments on good food or other issues. As local council candidates may not be confirmed until Friday 9 April, most hustings will happen after this date. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, hustings will be held online this year. If you are interested in organising an online hustings, [Climate Action produced a handy guide](#). Friends of the Earth is organising a [webinar 'How to organise an online hustings'](#) 4 March with some top tips for facilitation. A partnership of organisations in Bristol for example, is organising hustings with mayor candidates in 2021 (Case study 3: Bristol hustings). Partnership work is a great way to boost the reach and number of people participating in hustings, spread the workload and costs, ensure a diversity of perspectives, and strengthen the offer to candidates and audiences.

Even if you don't have capacity to organise hustings, there will be plenty of opportunities for you to participate in hustings organised by other organisations. Many candidates publish hustings they will be participating in their local websites. Check if environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth or the local chamber of commerce are organising hustings. You can also invite members of your steering group and your supporters to go to hustings armed with key questions for candidates. (Appendix 2: template questions for hustings).

Due to Covid-19 there will be less opportunities to interact face-to-face with your candidates. In previous elections, candidates would be knocking door-to-door or standing at transport hubs and other busy spots handing out leaflets. Therefore, hustings offer an even more valuable opportunity to interact with candidates and push candidates to make commitments.

Invite candidates to visit your food partnership or a project in your area

At the time of writing this toolkit it is envisaged we will be out of national lockdown in England at some point ahead of the elections. Some face-to-face interaction with candidates may be possible respecting social distancing. Is there a food growing space, community kitchen or food hub that emboldens your vision? Is there a project they can invite in their ward? Visiting and experiencing projects first-hand and communicating with beneficiaries is a powerful way for candidates to understand the aims of your food partnership or organisation and get one step closer to make commitments. Middlesbrough Food Partnership, for example, always make sure to invite councillors

and mayor to events to make the work of the partnership visible and relevant (Case study 4: Middlesbrough Food Partnership).

Vote!

Don't forget to exercise your democratic right and vote!

Congratulate the winners and arrange follow up meetings

Regardless of your political preferences, it's important to congratulate the winners and arrange a follow up meeting. Hopefully by this stage you will have built a relationship with the candidates and they will be aware of the importance of your work. Some councillors may have made commitments relating to food in their campaigns, so build on this and encourage them to deliver on these promises or explore how you can help them to do so.

Local authority powers

At the time of writing, there are 343 local authorities in England made up of five different types. This patchwork results from successive governments having drawn and redrawn the geographical and power boundaries of local authorities.

Many parts of England have two tiers of local government:

- county councils providing services such as education, social services, and waste disposal
- district, borough or city councils. Each county council area is subdivided into districts or boroughs, for which there is an independent district council. District councils are responsible for local services such as waste collection, housing, and planning applications.

In some parts of the country, there's just one (unitary) tier of local government. They provide all local government services in their area. These are mainly in cities, urban areas, and larger towns, although there are now county councils that are unitary i.e., have no district councils within them. The three main types are:

- unitary authorities in shire areas
- London boroughs
- metropolitan boroughs

There are also approximately 9,000 town or parish councils in England. These operate at a level below district councils and unitary authorities. Because of their great diversity, parishes do not generally have statutory functions, although they are often responsible for smaller local services such as allotments, parks, and community centres. They may provide other services with the agreement of the county or district council.

In addition, there are 10 Combined Authorities (CAs). In these areas, member councils can be more ambitious in their joint working and can take advantage of powers and resources devolved to them from national government. Most CAs are led by elected metro mayors.

Local authorities are well placed to influence the local food system. As institutions they have a wide range of levers, which may include school meals, planning decisions, markets, allotments, food

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Local elections in England 2021 toolkit



waste, public health, environmental health, and trading standards, and some may even own farmland.

These are summarised here, but for detailed descriptions of how these levers relate to food, and examples of food partnerships that have influenced them see our [Policy Levers Guide](#). Sustainable Food Places has also published a helpful guide with stories, challenges and tips for [Engaging with Local Authorities](#).

	County councils	District, borough or city councils	Unitary authorities or counties, London boroughs and metropolitan boroughs	Combined Authorities (CAs)	Parish, community and town councils
Education (including school food)	X		X		
Planning	X		X		
Social care	X		X		
Waste collection and management	X		X		
Trading Standards	X		X		
Planning applications		X	X		
Allotments		X	X		X
Community centres		X	X		X
Grants to local organisations		X	X		X
Parks and play areas		X	X		X
Skills training				X	
Economic development				X	



Local authority leadership

Achieving recognition and publicity of food systems work at a senior level in the local authority can be a big boost to the credibility of the local food partnership and there's no time like the local elections to get on their radar.

The vast majority of local authorities have a council leader, who is elected by the council (made up of councillors elected by residents). The leader, in turn, appoints a selected number of councillors to their cabinet. To narrow down the number of candidates you are approaching, check if the council leader and cabinet leads are up for re-election and the candidates in your ward.

At the time of writing, only 24 local areas have mayors directly elected by residents: 15 single local authority areas and nine mayoralties covering more than one local authority area.

Under the council leader model, major decisions need the collective view of the cabinet, and you have to get a cabinet majority and preferably unanimous consensus. Mayors may in theory offer some advantages to advance the agenda of food partnerships. Firstly, the mayor can make some decisions themselves without reference to cabinet or council. They may also be independent and not bound by the policy of the major parties and free to decide their own approach on food at the local level. Nevertheless, there are some risks. If the work of the food partnership is not institutionalised/embedded sufficiently in local food policy, there is the risk that work is abandoned when a supportive mayor leaves their post.

The role of councillors is undeniably important, either in setting up a food partnership or supporting an established food partnership. The case studies from Peterborough and Aberdeen (Case study 5: Peterborough and Case study 6: Aberdeen), illustrate how councillors can be the driving force behind setting up a food partnership. In all cases, it's important to avoid the partnership being aligned too closely with any one political party. Party political impartiality is vital for effective campaigning and the credibility and success of food partnerships.

After a food partnership becomes established, political support from councillors, leader of the council or elected mayor continues to be vital to ensure food objectives are written into top strategies and embedded in the work of the local authority.

Appendix 1 – Template letter to candidates or political parties

Subject: Creating a resilient food system for [XXX]

Dear [XXX],

I am writing to you on behalf of [food partnership name and description].

Food has become an ever more important issue over the last year. Covid-19 has exposed pre-existing structural inequalities and is pushing more people into food insecurity, threatening the viability of small food businesses and increasing social isolation. Whilst at the same time our food system and supply has a major impact on our health, with obesity being a contributing factor to many covid-related deaths, and has a major impact on future crises such as the climate and nature emergency. **We believe that creating a resilient food system should be a top priority and we are approaching candidates from the main political parties inviting them to answer seven questions.** The responses will be publicly shared with our growing network of individuals and supporter organisations in [XXX].

We commend the leadership you have shown on food issues, including [XXX], [declaring a climate and nature emergency] and [XXX]. The Sustainable Food Places network offers support to budding and established food partnerships including tools, guides, grants, network events and discussion forums. We would welcome the start of a conversation with you and your team on how you could build on this leadership to support everyone in [XXX].

1. Do you pledge to support a food partnership in [XXX]?

Cross-sector food partnerships bring together local authorities and other public bodies, community groups and the third sector, businesses and academic organisations to transform their local food system with the aim of improving public health and wellbeing; fostering community connection and resilience; building prosperous and diverse local food economies; and helping to tackle the critical sustainability issues of waste and the climate and nature emergency. [adapt if there is a food partnership or strong prospect]

2. Do you pledge to appoint a food lead in [XXX] Council?

Whether a lead councillor or a policy coordinator among council staff, a food lead can coordinate action on food, working across different departments ensuring the council has a joined-up approach to food.

3. How will you tackle food poverty?

We believe good food is a right not a privilege. [XXX]'s already high levels of food insecurity have risen dramatically during the pandemic as many individuals and families reach breaking point. As the long term impact of the crisis continues to unfold, we risk seeing worsening food poverty without decisive action. More should be done to stop the institutionalisation of food banks and to enable everyone to access good food as part of a robust safety net.

4. How will tackle diet related ill-health and improve access to affordable healthy food?

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the risks that health inequalities and obesity pose to our national resilience. It's time to make sure every [XXX] neighbourhood offers a healthy food



environment – from institutional settings to high streets – to ensure affordable healthy food is available and accessible to all.

5. How will you create a thriving food economy that creates good food jobs and skills and includes food in plans for a green economic recovery?

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility in our food supply chain but has also proven that smaller-scale and localised food supply chains are resilient and can adapt to demand and support the emergency response. Food organisations, from growers to restaurateurs, who provide vital jobs in our local economy have been hit the hardest. To rebuild [XXX], better investment in the local, sustainable food economy will be vital in safeguarding our unique food culture while protecting livelihoods and our high streets to build back better.

6. How will you use catering and procurement to revitalise local and sustainable food businesses?

Catering and procurement provide a uniquely powerful lever for promoting good food. By transforming catering across a wide range of settings – from nurseries, schools and colleges through hospitals and care homes to workplace canteens – it is possible not only to improve the eating habits but also to create the large-scale demand for healthy, sustainable and local food needed to underpin a fundamental shift in the food production and supply system.

7. What plans do you have to tackle the climate and nature emergency?

Our food system causes great damage to nature and contributes to climate change, yet also offers solutions for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and restoration of biodiversity. [XXX] has a huge opportunity to improve food resilience, support carbon-sequestering agroecological farming and dramatically reduce food and plastic waste. We can also empower residents to take action both on the food they eat, and to get involved in community activities such as food growing and buying climate and nature friendly food.



Appendix 2 – Template key questions for hustings

Q1: [food partnership] has produced a food strategy and food action plan bringing together key stakeholders in [area] including the Council, academics, food businesses and voluntary sector organisations. How will candidates, if elected, support this strategy and action plan?

Q2: [food partnership/I] believe that good food is a right not a privilege and food banks are not a long-term solution to solve hunger and food insecurity. Our high levels of food insecurity have risen dramatically during the pandemic. Number of people using food banks increased XX% in [area] / food hub is distributing meals to XXX people in need very week. What will you do as a councillor to ensure that everyone has access to good food with dignity along with a robust safety net and look beyond the food bank for solutions?

Q3: [XX%] of reception children are overweight and obese in [area] and this increases to [XX%] by the time children leave primary school ([check the figures for your area in this LGA website](#)). Furthermore, Covid-19 has laid bare the risks of health inequalities and obesity. We know that unhealthy food environments including junk food advertising, proliferation of takeaways and food deserts – where there simply are no shops offering healthier food such as fresh fruits and vegetables – lead people to make the wrong food choices. What will you do as a councillor to ensure [area] becomes a healthier [city/county/etc]?

Q4: The food sector is a major employer in [area]. Many food businesses, from growers to restaurants, who provide vital jobs in our local economy, have been hit the hardest. But Covid-19 also demonstrated that smaller-scale and localised food supply chains are resilient and can adapt to demand and support the emergency response. What investment are you planning in the local food economy to safeguard our SME's?

Q5: (relevant for higher tier authorities with control over catering and procurement) Catering and procurement across nurseries, schools and colleges through hospitals and care homes to workplace canteens is a powerful lever to create large-scale demand for healthy, sustainable and local food. How will you use catering and procurement to revitalise local and sustainable food supply chains and reduce the climate impact of the food bought by the council?

Q6: Almost one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture. [adapt according to council powers in your area] The council has a role in procuring food for schools and other services, manage waste and composting, local land use and has a significant role in shaping the diets of residents and the food available locally. What actions will you support to reduce food-related emissions in [area]?



Case study 1: London Food Link

London Food Link is a network for people who grow, make, cook, sell, and simply enjoy good food in the capital, run by Sustain. It helped to drive the set-up of London's food partnership – the London Food Board in 2003. Following the positive experience of campaigning in the 2016 local elections Sustain are springing into action again in 2021. They are coordinating with other organisations including Food Foundation, Feedback and School Food Matters to prepare a manifesto, and:

- Are writing to candidates with 10 key asks
- Meeting with candidate teams where possible, to focus on top priorities that resonate with the current political priorities
- Publishing a Vote Good Food briefing [based on the one produced in 2016](#), including candidate track record and commitments on food issues

The team are also looking for hustings organised by other organisations to see how they can work with supporters and London-based food partnerships to ensure food is raised at these events; for example, they will suggest questions for candidates. They will also write to London Assembly candidates to promote the 10 key asks.

Case study 2: Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

The last local elections for councillors in Brighton & Hove (unitary authority) took place in May 2019. The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP) took this as an opportunity for engaging candidates in the partnership's good food vision for the city and to mobilise supporters and the community. The first contact with candidates, as soon as they announced their candidacy, was to ask them ten questions about their proposals on food and publish their answers on the BHFP website. In previous elections in 2015 BHFP reached out to the community for suggestions of questions, but this produced a huge volume of work which, whilst useful for engagement with the public, was a major pull on limited capacity. Writing to candidates and following up on their responses generated an 'open door' with the support officers working for candidates, and BHFP followed this up and sent them the food strategy. The partnership did not organise specific hustings on food but went to hustings organised by other organisations and asked questions on food always in the context of what was already happening in the area. This generated visibility for the work of the food partnership and the food vision for the city and was definitely worth the time invested.

Case study 3: Bristol hustings

Local elections are taking place in 2021 to elect the mayor and 70 city councillors in Bristol (unitary authority).

In Bristol, the mayor and cabinet have explicitly stated their support for a programme of work leading to the SFC Gold award, coordinated by Bristol Food Network, Bristol Green Capital Partnership, Bristol City Council and Resource Futures. The success of the work to date is due to the spirit of partnership between organisations in Bristol. The campaign around the mayoral elections is no different: several organisations will play a part in trying to ensure that a green, sustainable future is central to the candidates' vision for the city.



In this spirit of collaborative work, Bristol Green Capital Partnership is organising a hustings with Bristol mayoral candidates in April 2021. Building on the experience of a successful hustings in 2016, this hustings will be planned and delivered through an alliance of organisations including: Avon Wildlife Trust, Black & Green Ambassadors, Bristol Food Network, Campaign for Rural England, Eastside Community Trust, Friends of the Earth, Sustrans and XR. Doing the work in partnership with other organisations can be beneficial in boosting the reach and number of people participating, spreading the workload and costs, ensuring a diversity of perspectives and strengthening the offer to candidates and audiences.

Bristol Green Capital Partnership wrote to the candidates from the four main political parties inviting them to the hustings, therefore opening a line of communication with their offices. In 2016, the hustings were a face-to-face event but this year they will be hosted online through a platform such as Zoom or Crowdcast. This will enable even more people to engage, either by joining live or watching the recording after the event.

The format of the questions to candidates will also build on learnings from the last hustings. In 2016 the group curated a series of questions relating to key priorities of each partner and their networks e.g. energy, transport, and local economy, with time for questions from the audience (submitted online or during the event). This year the approach will be slightly different, placing much greater emphasis on engaging audiences and communities across Bristol in advance and encouraging them to share questions about what matters most to them and their community. Under the broad theme of the city's response to the Climate and Ecological emergencies the partners will curate cross-cutting questions about the candidates' vision and commitment, reflecting on the priorities raised by residents. Importantly, they will create much more time within the event for the voices of residents, inviting them to share their questions directly with candidates.

In the build up to the hustings, they will use social media to increase understanding of the role of the Mayor and the opportunity to accelerate progress towards the city's sustainability ambitions in a fair way. Some elements will nevertheless be the same. The hustings will need an engaging and articulate chair to ensure a full response to the questions asked and media presence to report on the answers and commitments from candidates.

Case study 4: Middlesbrough Food Partnership

Middlesbrough Food Partnership always make sure to invite councillors to events. For example, all the councillors are aware of and invited to their emblematic 'town meal'. It is important that they know their ward councillors in areas where they work. Similarly, they have built a good relationship with the elected mayor and invited him to a food summit where he stayed the whole morning.

In Middlesbrough, the food partnership has benefited from doing presentations to scrutiny committees. Each year they ask for topics to focus on. Every couple of years they give them a presentation on the work of Middlesbrough Environment City who hosts the food partnership. This is an opportunity to raise awareness amongst councillors. They are not frightened of engaging with the political process. To a large extent the goals of the food partnership are likely to overlap with many of the objectives of the local authority. They emphasise to senior politicians how what they are doing contributes to what the town is trying to achieve. For example, in the town centre, the council has a vision to change it so that more independent shops, bars and restaurants are encouraged. Their local food offer is part of making that a success.



Case study 5: Peterborough

Motion from Councillor Nicola Day, Peterborough City Council, approved by unanimity:

Access to high quality, affordable, nutritious food should be a right of all Peterborough residents, but is not currently the case. For example, Peterborough is one of the 20% most deprived districts/unitary authorities in England and about 19% (8,500) of children live in low income families. Life expectancy for both men and women is lower than the England average (source: Public Health England).

In Peterborough, in Year 6, 22.6% (524) of children are classified as obese, worse than the average for England (source: Public Health England).

A 'Food Strategy' is a document that identifies actions to help enhance our current food system and prepare for the future. Key elements include environmental sustainability, healthy eating, economic and community growth and social justice. More specific topics within the food strategy may include growing, rearing or foraging for food, processing food, preparing food for consumption for households and the food service industry, eating food and composting the remains.

By creating a collaborative Food Strategy, as 51 other councils have done, Peterborough will become a city with a vibrant food culture, renowned for high quality, sustainable food and offering a rich variety of local produce accessible to everyone. Peterborough will become a city where a wide range of local food businesses achieve high standards of sustainability, generate employment, and contribute to economic prosperity.

The Council resolves to:

Create a Food Strategy to address the causes of food inequality in Peterborough for implementation during the 2021/22 municipal year. In order for this to happen the council will:

Identify 'food champions' within the council to lead the project

Identify a lead partnership organisation and apply for funding to develop the strategy, action plans and projects

Create a network of food partnership organisations and consult residents to contribute to the creation of a 'Food Action Plan'

Prioritise those with least access to healthy food

The Council will endeavour to encourage the production of food locally and support the sale of such produce.

Case study 6: Aberdeen

Sustainable Food City Partnership Aberdeen (now called Granite City Good Food) was initiated by a local councillor who was enthusiastic about the sustainable food agenda and attended a Sustainable Food Cities annual conference. She returned to Aberdeen and suggested that this was something that Aberdeen should engage in. The hook that really got the council on board was food poverty, and in particular the links that could be made with Aberdeen City Council's (ACC) existing priorities in



this area. Two city-wide events were organised over the next two years, largely driven by officers at ACC together with Community Food Initiatives North East. These were promoted to a wide range of stakeholders and successfully captured the interest and engagement of other ACC departments such as Community Planning and Sustainability as well as the NHS Grampian public health team.

When the food partnership steering group set up, the councillor became chair. Having a councillor as chair has enabled the partnership to pass reports through the Finance, Policy and Resources Committee in the Council more easily. This secured council backing and financial support for the recruitment of a coordinator.