

TOWN HALL

Sustainable Food Places : Understanding the contribution to Local Government

**Sustainable Food Places Phase 3
Interim Evaluation Report, June
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Four more evaluation reports on Sustainable Food Places see https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/resources/past_reports/

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Overview



Local food partnerships have become an increasingly widespread feature in localities across the UK. The membership of the Sustainable Food Places Network has over 95 local food partnerships, and a wider number of newly formed partnerships are seeking to join the network. These partnerships are hosted by, or share close links with, local government bodies and are often closely aligned in their priorities. This report is one part of the wider evaluation of the Sustainable Food Places programme in phase three of its development between 2019–2024.

Through in-depth qualitative interviews, the purpose of this element of the evaluation has been to understand the perspectives of local government representatives on the contribution of food partnerships and the relationship to local priorities on food and other policy issues. This work is ongoing, so the summary presented here is an interim report of initial findings. To date we have interviewed senior leaders in local government including those with responsibilities for local economic development, spatial planning, public health, and sustainability, plus representation through the NHS (n=20). We also interviewed councillors who held briefs for food related issues in their local authority (n=5). In future research, we intend to collect the perspectives of further local government representatives to enhance our understanding of the field. A summary of the methodology is provided at the end of this report.

Local Food Partnerships in the UK

The structure of local government looks different across the UK, not just in terms of unitary and two-tier authorities but in terms of moves to pool or combine council services, regional collaborations, mayoral and committee political systems, and joint working with other public services such as the NHS. Research from the UWE evaluation in 2023 showed that food partnerships are active across a range of types of local authority geographies in the UK and a wide range of local government stakeholders have interests in food partnerships.

From the perspective of food partnership coordinators, the leading points of engagement in local government, and NHS health boards in Wales, are with teams in departments of Public Health and of Sustainability and Climate Change. In 2023, **60% of local food partnership leads reported 'strong support' or 'quite strong support' from local councillors and other elected officials.** The initial findings from our current research indicates that local government staff engagement with food partnerships reflect the specific history of the development of the partnership and the skills and interests of staff themselves. The following section sets out leading themes on areas of contribution as reported by interviewees, alongside some of the main challenges.



Key themes for interviewees

Taking a whole systems approach

The work of food partnerships was reported to align well with an existing systems approach (an approach that takes account of the interconnections within and between policy areas and sectors) to policy in some areas and some teams/departments. In many areas, the food partnership and associated strategies were helping local decision makers to understand the full spectrum of food issues and the relationship to different areas of local policy. The work of food partnerships also helped clarify the potential levers for change in a complex system.

I think [the Food Plan] provides a clear agenda and helped the council see what you could do and what is our role in what might otherwise be a black hole situation. #20, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Sustainability and Climate Change.

The Sustainable Food Places model for local food partnerships takes a holistic and integrated approach to address local food system issues. This whole system approach was reported by interviewees to fit well with the vision for local authorities, especially those that are seeking to shift away from a service delivery focus and towards a more collaborative and facilitative approach.

The current direction of [the council] is very much towards whole systems approaches and population level approaches. So, the approach of [the local food partnership] aligns very well with departmental values and the direction of travel for the council. #14, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.

For some local government staff, the 'big picture' work of food partnerships freed them up to focus on delivering targeted programmes.

[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. So that's very valuable not least because it frees us up to do the direct action – the 'leg work' if you like. #10, Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Economic Development.

In a context where local authorities have stretched resources and limited capacity for action, food partnerships bring welcome specialist expertise.

We desperately need people to come in and help. We've stripped funding out to the point where [the council] has lost a lot of the big knowledge people- the expertise we would have had in the council around food sustainability and decarbonisation. #24, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Councillor.

It's a phenomenal team. The expertise that they have brought to the table along with their drive and with the drive of everybody around the table is making things happen. #21, Rural Local Authority, Wales, Councillor.

They have great expertise through their members: how to set up community projects; how to make sure that you're reaching a really broad range of residents; how to set up an environment that's really welcoming and create a cross fertilisation of ideas. There's a lot of energy there... they reach areas and people that we can't get to. #15, County, Midlands, Public Health.





Bringing expertise and insight to the table

Through their wide representation and diversity of perspectives food partnerships are valued as bodies that are relatively independent and outside local party politics.

*The food partnership is not a political organisation at all, and it cannot be used as a political football.
#24, Urban Local Authority, North, Councillor.*

The expertise and autonomy are valued as a basis for setting agendas and identifying solutions for a complex area.

*Part of the beauty about having a [food partnership] is that it allows other partners and perspectives to be expressed but also gives more freedom for ideas. They can say things that the council can't say. #20
Urban Local Authority, South of England, Sustainable Development.*

For some interviewees, the convening influence of food partnerships had a valuable role in bringing colleagues together from different departments within the local authority, sometimes in contexts where these internal relationships had been historically segregated or poorly coordinated.

[The local food strategy] is taking things out of silos and making different areas realise their potential with collective by-in...it is totally changing how food is seen in the city. #04, Urban Local Authority, South, Councillor.

Extending council teams to achieve their goals

Local government officers often look for ways to extend the impact of their work beyond the services they are involved with. Food partnerships were often reported by interviewees to help extend the reach of their work, particularly in a context of chronic financial constraints.

[As a council team] we don't provide, we commission, we enable. [The local food partnership] is actually working on the ground with communities. They were in with the food banks and all the other mechanisms [for tackling food security]. #05, Urban LA, South, Public Health.

[As a council] we've got very little capacity to really get in and support this agenda. So I think their value is massive. [For example] the food partnership had an emergency food response when we first went into lockdown, and it happened straightaway within days. Without the food partnership I'm not really sure how we how the city would have done so well in COVID. #03, Urban LA, South of England, Public Health.

Catalysing new initiatives

The combined expertise, drive and collaborative approach of food partnerships catalysed the development of significant new projects (for example around local supply chains) that would have been unlikely to have happened otherwise.

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. #21, Rural Local Authority, Wales, Councillor.

There's a project around [some] 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. #14, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.

Engaging a diverse field of actors

Food partnerships helped local government staff have dialogue with a wider range and greater number of parties than they could have acting through their own channels alone.

It can foster some of those conversations in a bit more of a neutral environment where it's everybody coming together. #13, Urban Local Authority , North of England, Public Health.

For some practitioners, food partnerships provide an arena to adopt a broader approach than their work would otherwise take. For example, rather than focusing on a single outcome, many Public Health leads felt that a whole system approach on a range of food issues represented a stronger platform to achieve specific goals for healthy weight.

[Local experts in population health] are not convinced that focusing just on healthy weight is really making the difference we needed to make. We think we need to combine that with our work [for example] on education and community growing. #08, Urban Local Authority , Scotland, Public Health.

I think that the partnership has made that difference. It's given permission for public health to have [a systems approach] as a priority. It's made a fundamental impact on [how our team works] #05, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Public Health.



Leveraging alternative sources of funding

Interviewees often reported that their food partnerships had proved their financial case through their track record in drawing down alternatives to mainstream funding. These funds complemented existing services or commissions through local government or helped build the capacity of community and voluntary sector organisations. For one area, funding success flowed from the partnership's strong evidence of collaboration and long-term planning, alongside a commitment to evaluation. Another interviewee was confident that the presence of the partnership gave them an advantage in competitive funding bids.

[The food partnership] is getting funding opportunities, partly because we have built a robust framework for working in the next 5-10 years...and because we're measuring some of the outcomes. People can see the evidence. #05, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Public Health.

We've attracted quite a lot more funding than other places that don't have these partnerships. #08, Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Public Health.

Channels for creating community capacity

Food partnerships offered a route through which local government staff could hear the voice of groups that they were not otherwise in contact with. Many interviewees reported that this engagement has led to the creation of new networks and specific community projects.

One of the things that that partnership has catalysed is the development of quite a thriving food network in each of our districts where good practice is shared and where resources might be pooled. #11, County Local Authority, South of England, Public Health.

They've helped a lot of new projects open, especially affordable food projects, because one of the things that the partnership is trying to get three entities to move away from is the food bank model and moving more towards affordable food project models. I'm not sure any of the many different projects existed five years ago. #03, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Councillor.

Linking to a national programme and network of other places

The Sustainable Food Partnership was widely felt to provide a framework, vision and source of expertise for action on local food issues. Being connected to a large and established national network gave credibility to work at the local level and helped to gain the support of senior managers and other local stakeholders.

It has been incredibly helpful to work with a group of people who have other external links [with Sustainable Food Places] to pull on new ideas. I wouldn't have even heard of them if it hadn't been for [the local food partnership members]. #24, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Councillor.

I think the value of the Sustainable Food Places partnership is really significant. When I was starting off, I was able to say to my senior managers in the Health and Well-being Board "There's 50 other local authorities involved in this you know" and that really helped. #17, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.



Celebrating the work and achievements of local partners

Food partnerships, and the UK recognition they obtain through Sustainable Food Places award scheme, were reported to have an important role in bringing visibility to local efforts to address food system issues.

[The food partnership] highlights the amount of work across the food system that's going on. It really helps us keep track, celebrate, and recognise the work that everybody is trying to do. #13, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.

The partnership helped bring together [such as] community food growers and people facing food insecurity. Those patterns of collaboration are so powerful. I think positive news stories are so essential to the way that we talk about ourselves as a city. #04, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Councillor.

In some areas, the work of food partnerships has attracted substantial outside interest, which has been a source of validation for local agencies and communities.

We get a huge amount of people coming to us wanting to hear more about what we're doing. #08, Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Public Health.



Challenges for local government work with food partnerships

- **Fragile funding.** Many local government representatives are concerned that the funding for food partnerships is short-term and insufficient. Notably this lent uncertainty to the ability of actors to commit to long term plans.

Whilst the [political] support for [the food partnership] is there, if we have another round of austerity, I don't know what's left to cut even if we are talking about tiny sums of money in the local council's budget. #20, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Sustainability and Climate Change.

- **Leadership from within local government.** Many interviewees felt that responsibilities for engagement with food partnerships were not clearly worked out from within local government.

One of the main challenges is nobody in our local authority, as far as I can tell, has got it within their remit to look at sustainable food. #17 Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.

- **Food partnerships and other partnerships.** Partnerships can be formed around many different issues, all of which may be important for local government. For some interviewees there was a question whether partnership working around food could be prioritised when there were pressures to engage on other partnership agendas. As one interviewee put it, 'there are always different umbrellas' to choose from, and it is not sensible to choose all of them.

There's various 'umbrellas' under which this sort of work could sit. I think that's a difficulty - and the beauty of it. #11 County, South of England, Public Health.

- **Maintaining engagement over the long term.** A minority of interviewees felt that it was hard to keep an array of stakeholders actively involved.

Overall engagement within the food partnership has dropped or dwindled a little. [Post pandemic] everybody's priorities may be shifted to other things so it's about trying to get them back in and re energise [the partnership]. #13, Urban Local Authority, North of England, Public Health.

- **Divergent perspectives.** Some of the engagement challenges reflected divergent perspectives about the priorities for food partnerships.

We have lost some of our partners who are very focused on organic growing who feel that they are not being heard amidst the food poverty and health priorities. #08 Urban LA, Scotland, Public Health.

There is quite an 'interesting tension' between that kind of National Farmers' Union side of farming and the likes of organic sustainable growers. #16, County, Midlands, Community Development

Challenges for local government work with food partnerships

- **Limited capacity to engage.** Some local government officials have responsibilities that span multiple food partnerships, and they found it was difficult to maintain balanced commitments.

I'm very aware of how much time we allocate to the different food partnerships [across three local authority areas]. #07, 3 Counties. Wales. Public Health.

I think councils are well placed for these sorts of things, but I think we have to recognise without proper staff resourcing we're not going to engage with the partnership properly. #09, Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Spatial Planning.

- **Measuring impacts.** While many interviewees were able to identify short term benefits, partnership working was widely felt to take time ('a slow burn' in the words of interviewee) to demonstrate results through long term investments of time and effort.

It's difficult, isn't it? When you're looking at an organisation that's working in a sort of infrastructure building way. #11, County, South of England, Public Health.

One stakeholder felt that the partnership should give more focus to what they felt were urgent priorities such as food security and support this with initiatives that would give measurable outcomes.

So, there is a bit of a need to stop making the grandiose statements and get down to the ground and what will solve the problem. [Location and role withheld].

- **Geographical constraints.** Particularly in urban settings, interviewees reported that there were spatial challenges when attempting a coordinated approach to food issues, when many questions lay beyond the city boundary.

In order to achieve all the good food outcomes for the city, you can't achieve it within the boundary of the city it was too small a boundary. Yes, there's bits of land could be used for better food growing, but really, we should start looking at those regionally. #09, Urban Local Authority, Scotland, Spatial Planning.

- **Overstretched partnerships.** As partnerships take on the complexity of food system issues, some interviewees expressed concerns about their ability to act effectively with very limited resources. There was also concern about burnout and staff turnover within small, overstretched teams – 'critical person dependency' as one stakeholder put it.

Small organisations that rely on small groups of individuals committing huge amounts of energy, emotional capacity, commitment and time to an organisation makes them vulnerable. #20, Urban Local Authority, South of England, Sustainability.

Methodology and next steps in the research

The research presented in this report was conducted between February and May 2024. The study adopted an exploratory in-depth qualitative approach. We sought to engage senior leaders in local government including those with responsibilities in a range of local government departments and elected positions. Requests for interview were sent to 30 candidate local government areas from across the interview. Prospective interviewees were identified through combination of independent direct contact by the researchers and recommendations from food partnership coordinators.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and inductively analysed. For some quotations we have made minor grammatical revisions to help the reader. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the UWE Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee Reference HAS.17.10.031.

Due to our sequencing of interviews, at this stage of the research there is strong representation from leaders in public health. The final composition will reflect a wider variety of roles and localities. The full report for this element of the UWE evaluation is planned for September 2024.

Further details on the wider evaluation can be obtained through associated reports on the Sustainable Food Places website:

https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/resources/past_reports/