

# THE ROLE OF FOOD PARTNERSHIPS IN ENVIRONMENTAL LAND USE TRANSITIONS



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## The Sustainable Food Places model

Food Places (SFP) is a fast growing network of over [80 UK food partnerships](#) which work on all aspects of the food system to solve some of today’s most pressing social, environmental and economic issues. Food partnerships bring together key stakeholders, from the local authority, health, university and public sector bodies to growers, retailers and the hospitality sector. Through working together, each partnership drives local activity to create a more resilient and sustainable food system.

The Government Food Strategy recognises the key role of food partnerships in delivering its objectives. Under section 2.2, ‘Encouraging healthier and more sustainable dietary choices’, the Government Food Strategy includes:

*“Local Food Partnerships have already brought together councils and partners from the public sector, voluntary and community groups, and businesses to reduce diet-related ill health and inequality, while supporting a prosperous local food economy. We will learn from their approaches and work to understand and identify best practice in addressing food affordability and accessibility to healthy food. As part of our levelling up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy, government will identify the areas most in need of this insight, and Defra will work with local authorities and food charities in these priority areas.”*

The Sustainable Food Places approach is based around six key issues.

- Good governance and strategy – Taking a strategic and collaborative approach to good food governance and action;
- Good Food Movement – Building public awareness, active food citizenship and a local good food movement;

- Healthy Food for All – Tackling food poverty, diet related ill-health and access to affordable healthy food;
- Sustainable Food Economy – Creating a vibrant, prosperous and diverse sustainable food economy;
- Catering and Procurement – Transforming catering and procurement, and revitalising local and sustainable food supply chains;
- Food for the Planet – Tackling the climate and nature emergency through sustainable food and farming, and an end to food waste.

These different areas of the food system are individually complex and hard to take meaningful action on, but they are also interconnected. However, they are often looked at in silos, failing to take advantage of the synergies between them. A food partnership is in a unique position to 'join the dots', providing the essential communication 'glue' linking different actors together.

## What are sustainable food partnerships currently doing to support environmental land use transitions?

Food partnerships, particularly at a county or regional level, are already supporting land use transitions to more sustainable land use models through several mechanisms, including:

- Convening urban and rural actors to create a vision for food and farming at a local or regional level;
- Delivering partnership projects and attracting funding for land use projects;
- Networking farmers and food producers with each other and with new markets, and leading innovation on food economy projects;
- Supporting rollout of workforce/training programmes around sustainable food production skills;
- Supporting and promotion of local sustainable farmers and producers, helping consumers better understand where the food they buy comes from and its impacts;
- Growing more agroecological food in urban and peri-urban areas.

### a) Convening urban and rural actors to create a vision for food and farming at a local or regional level.

Food partnerships normally employ a coordinator whose role is to convene a steering group, coordinate projects and sometimes manage a team responsible for running projects. Steering groups convene representation across urban and rural stakeholders and actors including council and other public institutions, food aid organisations, environmental organisations, and farmer clusters among others. They act as a consulting body for the food partnerships, ensuring fair representation of the different perspectives.

Many food partnerships start by producing a ‘charter’ and inviting organisations and individuals to sign up to those principles. This can often include creating a vision for the future of food and farming in the local area. Most produce a food strategy for their local area outlining strategic priorities and an action plan in consultation with local stakeholders, communities, people with lived experience, and the public.

### Case study Devon

Farming accounts for 75% of Devon’s land use. However, food and farming’s environmental impact is mixed. Devon is well served by farm advice, with local projects led by the county council such as Future Farming Resilience and Devon Agri-Tech Accelerator already helping to provide support, while the national Farm Carbon Toolkit helps guide farmers through the process of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Teams of advisors, employed by NGOs such as the Devon Wildlife Trust and the Westcountry Rivers Trust, provide many farmers with free advice as to how to improve soils, enhance biodiversity, and reduce water pollution. However, there are gaps in provision, and it is not always straightforward for farmers to access the advice they need.

The Devon Food Partnership can help do this by connecting farmers with relevant initiatives and organisations including a Devon Land Use Framework and Nature Recovery Network, promoting routes to market, and linking up with county-level strategies such as the [Devon Carbon Plan](#), which sets out the steps that need to be taken to help Devon achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. In 2020, agriculture, forestry, and other land use accounted for 24% of Devon’s greenhouse gas emissions, caused primarily by the application of manure and other fertilisers to land and from the digestion of food by cattle and sheep.

The recently launched [Devon’s Good Food Strategy 2023-2028](#) is aligned with the key actions set out in the Devon Carbon Plan. It was produced in collaboration with representatives from across the food system, including several Devon County Council departments, farmers, NFU, academia, environmental groups, food aid organisations, and other local food initiatives. One of the strategic priorities in the strategy is to ‘*Support the development and implementation of a Devon Land Use Framework and Nature Recovery Network on land and sea*’. Devon Food Partnership is already collaborating with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission who are leading on the Devon Land Use Framework project.

### b) Delivering partnership projects and attracting funding for land use projects.

Food partnerships are often involved in delivering projects leading to substantial change in land use in partnership with other local organisations and landowners. This ranges from small projects in one growing site such as The Plot and FarmStart programme in North Lancashire, to projects across an entire estate, as in the case study below.

### Case study Brighton & Hove

Around 13,500 acres of the South Downs surrounding Brighton & Hove are owned by the City Council (BHCC). This land was purchased by the Council in the 19th century to protect the city's water supply and preserve it for future generations to enjoy. The Downland Estate is a biosphere reserve and home to a large farming community. It is also within the South Downs National Park boundary. The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership worked with BHCC and other partners to define plans for how the farmland is managed in the future. The resulting [City Downland Estate Plan](#) was recently published. It has a clear focus on ensuring farming in a nature friendly manner is profitable and sustainable for farmers, and that their interests are protected long term through improvements to local routes to market, support to accessing finance for nature friendly farming, and diversification of their activities beyond farming alone.

Brighton & Hove Food Partnership now hosts the [Land Use Plus project](#), funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which will help deliver the City Downland Estate Plan working with the city council, the national park, wildlife organisations and farmers.

#### **c) Networking farmers and food producers with each other and with new markets, and leading innovation on food economy projects.**

Food partnerships are increasingly involved in linking up networks of farmers and food producers with markets, which offer higher remuneration for primary producers and shorter supply chains.

### Case study Leicestershire

The work of Good Food Leicestershire (the food partnership for the county) supports the Leicestershire Good Food strategy and aligns with the county council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. One of their priorities is to normalise and expand regenerative agriculture in the county, through projects working with farmers and linking them up with markets for their produce.

Leicestershire Traded Services, the council's catering wing, recently greenlighted local procurement trials. This involves working with external consultants and measuring impacts on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and biodiversity from switching to products from local regenerative farms. The results are imminent and hopefully will make the case for incorporating more locally grown products into local procurement and promote regenerative farming to a wider cohort of farmers. Engagement with farmers and partners is ongoing with the aim of identifying products and potential suppliers, showcasing best practice, supporting farmers to work towards greater sustainability and develop long-term partnerships. The local NFU branch, Allerton Project and Brooksby Agricultural College are key partners in this project. It builds on national policy direction and best practice such as Environmental Land Management roll out, Defra consultation on having targets for local food purchase in public spend, and high environmental standard food for public spend.

Another project started with the realisation that the UK imports 50,000 tons of raw beans from Canada each year. The BeanMeals project is a collaborative project involving Good Food Leicestershire and five universities to grow haricot beans regeneratively in the county to incorporate in school meals across the county and city of Leicester by caterers at Leicestershire Traded Services and City Catering.

The food partnership has been working with Wildfarmed, the bread maker, by promoting their aims for a 1,000 acre farming cluster within Leicestershire. Wildfarmed use regeneratively grown wheat for their bread.

Further work includes the Sustainable Food and Procurement Summit they organised in 2022 with the Allerton GWCT Project that invited local farmers, food producers and food processors to discuss steps towards local procurement.

#### **d) Supporting rollout of workforce/ skills programmes around sustainable food production skills.**

Many food partnerships and their partners are played an active role to develop opportunities for farmers, growers and land managers to access training, advice and support on how to adopt agroecological production and management techniques. For example, ShefFood (the food partnership for Sheffield) coordinated involvement of agroecological retailers, producers and wholesalers in the Sheffield food system to participate in DEFRA New Entrants Support Scheme and Environmental Land Management consultations to help shape future food system policy and support. Others are working with the FarmStart Network to develop their agroecological sector as in the example below.

## Case study North Lancashire

The FoodFutures Futures (the food partnership for North Lancashire) co-chair works for the Food Farming and Countryside Commission and several of our working groups, including representatives and people working on agroecological farmer transitions in the area. This includes the coordinator of the [Northern Real Farming Conference](#) (building supportive network for farmers wishing to move towards real farming methods), the coordinator of [The Plot](#), and [Where The Wildings Are](#) school project that is embedding food skills (including sustainable land management) into how schools operate and the curriculum.

To help overcome some of the obstacles facing new entrants to agroecological farming, the Landworkers' Alliance is working with member organisations including running FarmStart programmes. Food Futures 'The Plot' provides local, seasonal organic vegetables in North Lancashire grown within 8 miles of Lancaster Town Hall and aims to build a ring of growers across the District. Their FarmStart training programme covers business and horticultural skills, and supports the transition of trainees to new businesses growing food to high environmental standards.

In 2022 they piloted a successful crop-share scheme with 25 members in 2022, as well as selling to hospitality and retail. They have piloted new delivery methods via a milk round (to extend reach) and with pick-up from a community pub and three other collection points. They doubled sales income from organic veg, trained three FarmStarters and employed a previous FarmStarter as a seasonal grower. They are currently undertaking a review of FarmStart training with a view to providing accredited training in future years working with Landworkers' Alliance and the UK FarmStart network.

To diversify their sources of funding, FoodFriends runs as a small society lottery scheme with 151 members, raising funds towards the development of the training scheme. Food Friends are entered into a monthly prize draw with the chance of winning £30 local food vouchers from 11 business partners signed up to the scheme.

This work is inextricably linked to developing new routes to markets and short supply chains. FoodFutures, in partnership with Sustain, launched the ['A Tale of Two Counties'](#) report which highlighted missing infrastructure in Lancashire to transition to sustainable farming. A local launch event was held at Mysercough College with farmers and other food system workers which led to a UK Shared Prosperity Funding bid being submitted to address gaps identified. FoodFutures runs seasonal markets in Lancaster Market Square, offering an opportunity for local food and drink producers, crafters, hot food stalls and community food organisations to benefit from a bustling marketplace. Over 600 members of the public regularly shop at each seasonal market.

**e) Supporting and promotion of local sustainable farmers and producers, helping consumers better understand where the food they buy comes from and its impacts.**

**Case study Somerset Food Trail**

The [Somerset Food Trail Festival](#) is a celebration of sustainable food and farming: a ten-day, countywide 'open farm and farm-to-fork showcase' that provided a unique opportunity to lift the lid on the farms, people and places behind Somerset's most flavourful and nature-friendly food.

The event addresses the unprecedented challenges confronting farmers, the enormous pressures on our natural environment, and the seismic increase in the number of people not being able to afford the good food they need. The aim is to raise awareness of the benefits of supporting local, sustainable suppliers: for our health, the environment, our long-term food security and to boost local economic prosperity.

The Trail is organised every year by Sustainable Food Somerset (the food partnership for the county), an alliance of community organisations, local authorities and food and farming businesses. In 2022 it included events and open days at over 190 enterprises, helping to build 'local loyalty' to food produced in the county.

The concept offers huge potential for replication. In 2023 food partnerships in Shropshire and Vale of Glamorgan are planning their first food trails inspired by this example.

**f) Supporting and promotion of local sustainable farmers and producers, helping consumers better understand where the food they buy comes from and its impacts.**

Growing agroecological food on the outskirts of towns and cities provides several benefits. It can create more jobs per tonne than conventional food production, jobs and training in a regional economy, access to green space, and outdoor skills. Being more exposed to food growing may help communities be better informed in how to make healthy and sustainable food choices. This can build better relations between food citizens (or what are more commonly called 'consumers') and farmers towards developing a more supportive and reciprocal relationship. However, competing land uses with housing and nature conservation means unrealised potential.

### Case study Bristol

Bristol Food Network, with the support of Bristol City Council, bring stakeholders together under the Bristol Good Food Partnership which aims to make change across the local food system. The partnership is divided into six themes, each with a working group. The outputs of these groups are the [Bristol Good Food 2030 Action Plans](#), which is a set of priorities and initiatives which aim to make Bristol's food system better for people and communities, climate and nature, workers and businesses.

Growing good food in and around the city is one of the six action plans. The priorities are to increase diversity in the people engaging in allotments and community growing, and to support more land becoming available for nature-friendly commercial and community growing in the city with an initial focus on improving access to Bristol City Council-owned land. To make this happen, an Urban Growing Working Group meets monthly. Participants include Lawrence Weston, Avon Wildlife Trust/Grow Wilder, Bristol City Council, Bristol Disability Equality Forum, Bristol Food Producers, Hazelnut Community Farm, and Sims Hill. They have recently launched an Action Plan for Sustainable Growing.

New entrants face many barriers to getting started and land access is a huge part of this. Land prices have increased so significantly that many cannot afford to buy land, yet accessing a secure tenancy can be difficult. Bristol Food Producers is currently running a land access pilot project, supported by the Landworkers' Alliance and the Defra New Entrant Support Scheme. The aim of this pilot project is to match new entrant farmers with landowners in the area (both private landowners and public bodies who own land).

## What more could sustainable food partnerships do to support environmental land use transitions and what would they need to make that happen?

The food partnership model is voluntary, and despite the recent growth in the number of food partnerships, the network does not cover every local authority in England.

In Wales, the Minister for Social Justice has announced £3 million of funding in 2022 to support the development of food partnerships in every local authority. The funding will also strengthen existing food partnerships that help build resilience in local food networks through the co-ordination of on the ground, food-related activity; help tackle the root-causes of food poverty; develop citizen action; maximise the effectiveness of projects and ensure that resources are targeted at areas of greatest need. SFP's Welsh partner, Food sense Wales, is co-designing and supporting this.



In Scotland, the Good Food Nation Bill will require every local authority to produce a Good Food National plan and food partnerships are ideally placed to help deliver this requirement.

To support environmental land use transitions, the network of food partnerships would firstly need to grow to ensure full coverage, matching the rapid growth in Wales and Scotland. Secondly, to enable food partnerships to deliver on government policy would require building on our existing support model, and long-term funding to each food partnership for coordination and project management functions – current capacity is variable on local funding and central SFP programme funding which is finite.

In some local areas such as Leicestershire, food partnerships are already meeting with environment teams in the county council to progress the links between Local Nature Recovery and Land Use Frameworks. However, some strategic direction from National Government is needed to understand how these two elements work together (including a hierarchy structure), as well as the need for funding for local coordination. Partnerships excel at being local connectors, bringing together key stakeholders to gather information, coordinate action and feedback at local, regional and national level. Nonetheless, more capacity would be required to create opportunities for landowners to engage in the partnership and opportunities for collaboration and discussion around the topic.

Food partnerships could actively support and advocate for reforms to the planning system to prioritise a sustainable and democratic use of land. There are two key mechanisms that would support these objectives:

- Having an open access map of all publicly owned land in the region which local citizens and community groups have access to view and eventually send requests for parcels of land;
- Promoting a common or collective use of the land by advocating for different land agreements that are adapted to community use and local food growing.

Food partnerships could help seek funding, capacity-building, commission research and consult on these objectives.

## **What role could sustainable food partnerships play in local-territorial-regional land use governance?**

The progressive economic strategy of Community Wealth Building pioneered across UK local authorities offers some useful principles to support better land use and governance structures aiming, among others, to support a socially productive use of the land and a plural ownership of the economy. Food partnerships could play an important role in driving these principles forward by acting as a convener for fostering sustainable land governance, bringing together key stakeholders to the table, including: the local authorities, local food growers, community groups, private landowners.

As part of this work, food partnerships could support the creation of a land commission, [like the one trialled for the city region of Liverpool](#), as a useful platform to provide a long-term vision for land governance and use across regional authorities. Recommendations from the Liverpool land commission included, among others, the need to establish a body to identify underused land and make it available for community use, advancing progressive use of the planning system (re-allocating and reinvesting land for socially valuable uses and collective benefit), setting up an open access online map of publicly owned land.

In summary, there is great potential for food partnerships to play a significant role in driving forward land use frameworks at a local level. Food is unique in its ability to address all key elements needed within a land use framework – space for nature, carbon sequestration, local rural economy, food production, health considerations, and local-subregional-regional planning. Also, food partnerships tend to form much broader external partnerships, therefore they can be active in steering external leadership linked into strategic ambitions. A food partnership's ability to couple bottom-up community-based activity with top-down strategic direction and buy-in, would be hugely beneficial to developing local land use frameworks which support/inform a national 'sister' document.

