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Good Food Local North East

Independent Evaluation Report



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About Food Matters

Food Matters is a charity that works to see healthy, sustainable, fair food become a reality for everybody, every day. We work with people and organisations to create a fairer food system, one where everyone has a voice and access to good food.

Our Core Values

- **Participation** - We put people at the heart of everything we do, ensuring communities shape the changes that affect them.
- **Collaboration** - We bring together diverse voices - from communities, organisations, and policymakers, to create lasting, shared solutions.
- **Equity** - We centre fairness in all our work, amplifying the voices and experiences of those most often excluded from decisions about food.
- **Innovation** - We test new ideas, pilot bold approaches, and help the most promising ones grow and take root.
- **Integrity** - We act with honesty, openness, and care, building trust through relationships and delivering on what we say.

We work nationally and locally on projects and in partnership with other organisations, and at both a strategic policy and community level. All our projects are characterised by two clear motives: pioneering innovative approaches that address the most challenging issues; and exploring initiatives focused on particularly marginalised and excluded communities.



Executive Summary

Overview

Across the UK, local authorities are increasingly recognised as playing a key role in shaping healthier and more sustainable food systems. However, responsibility for food-related activity is often fragmented across departments, and food rarely sits as a clear strategic priority within councils.

Good Food Local North East (GFL-NE) was developed to address this challenge. The programme supports local authorities to assess and strengthen their contribution to local food systems through a structured framework and survey-based assessment tool, which measures action across key domains and provides tailored recommendations to support future action. The process brings councils and third sector stakeholders together through structured regional activity, creating opportunities to coordinate action, share learning, and build a more joined-up approach to food across local government.

Originally developed in London, the model has been piloted in the North East of England since 2023 in partnership with the Association of Directors of Public Health North East (ADPH NE) and with funding from Impact on Urban Health. The pilot involved thirteen local authorities across the North East and Cumbria.

This independent evaluation, conducted by Food Matters, examines how the programme has been experienced in practice, what has enabled or constrained progress, and what early impacts are emerging.

The findings show strong and consistent endorsement of the programme among participating local authorities, although the extent of its positive impact has varied across places and, to some extent, across different sectors. While still at an early stage, Good Food Local North East is contributing to meaningful shifts in how food is understood, organised, and acted on within local government. In doing so, it is helping to create the conditions for stronger coordination, recognition, and collaboration on food related issues across councils in the North East.



Headline Findings

Strengthening strategic ownership of food within councils

Good Food Local North East is strengthening the institutional basis for coordinated food governance within local authorities. It provides a recognised framework of actions to progress food policy and practice that enables officers to convene colleagues, engage multiple departments, and position food as a strategic, cross-cutting issue.

In practice, this has:

- created new routes for interdepartmental coordination
- enabled engagement with planning, procurement, and economic development teams
- strengthened the case for treating food as a council-wide priority
- established clearer expectations of shared responsibility across departmental remits

In several authorities, this has helped move food beyond fragmented project activity towards more coordinated and embedded institutional practice.

Supporting the emergence of a coordinated regional approach to food

Good Food Local North East is enabling a more coordinated regional approach to food governance. Through steering groups, knowledge exchange, and facilitated workshops, the programme has created a set of shared priorities for action in food work and regular convening spaces that connect previously fragmented regional scale activity.

Participants consistently identified the regional dimension as one of the programme's most valuable contributions.

It has:

- established a standing forum for cross-council dialogue
- enabled peer learning across policy areas
- supported the development of shared, cross-departmental priorities and goals within local authorities

Coordination through Association of Directors of Public Health North East, particularly the dedicated facilitation role, has been central to maintaining momentum, coherence, and continuity.

Early impacts are visible in both governance and delivery

While the programme builds on pre-existing food systems activity in the region, the structured assessment framework, recommendation-setting, and follow-up support has acted as a catalyst by accelerating progress, strengthening internal arguments, and providing external legitimacy at key decision points.

Across several authorities, assessment outputs and regional engagement have informed:

- healthy food and physical activity strategies
- sustainable food action plans
- economic development strategies

In some areas, food has gained clearer routes into Health and Wellbeing Boards and other formal reporting structures. In others, the programme has strengthened the case for additional capacity or the formation of cross-department working groups.

Participants also described tangible changes in practice, including:

- introducing procurement requirements that support local suppliers
- increased engagement from planning teams on food environments
- 'quick win' cross-departmental initiatives

Senior leadership buy-in is a critical enabling condition

Senior leadership support emerged as one of the clearest factors shaping how well Good Food Local worked in practice.

Where Directors of Public Health, Chief Executives, or Elected Members visibly endorsed the programme:

- cross-department coordination became more likely and less burdensome
- recommendations were more likely to be taken seriously and picked up more widely

Where senior support or endorsement was limited, delivery relied heavily on the efforts of individual officers and risked being viewed as a primarily public health initiative rather than a council-wide governance priority.

Balancing local authority leadership with wider system engagement

Participants broadly agreed that the local authority focus of the structured assessment framework is appropriate given councils' statutory powers and governance responsibilities within local food systems, providing a clear institutional focus and supporting councils to reflect on and strengthen their own role.

However, much of the food related work across the region is delivered through a wider ecosystem, including food partnerships, voluntary organisations, and civil society. This created challenges around how wider activity was recognised and attributed within a model focused on local authority action.

Where this worked well, the process helped surface partnership-led activity, strengthen collaboration, and support joint planning. Where it did not, civil society contributions were not always clearly recognised or attributed, leading to gaps in how local activity was understood, presented and celebrated. This reflects a wider tension within the assessment approach. While maintaining a clear local authority focus was important, it did not always capture the full range of cross-sector contributions. In some cases, this created uncertainty around ownership and visibility of results, influencing how findings were interpreted and whether councils felt confident publishing them. Getting this balance right is critical to the programme's effectiveness and credibility.

The regional coordination and convening role has been central to progress

The regional support layer has been central to the emergence of a more coordinated regional approach to food. Regular meetings, peer exchange, workshops, and ongoing contact between councils helped maintain engagement, support learning, and build confidence across the region.

This progress was largely dependent on active coordination and convening. A small number of individuals played a key role in bringing the group together, sustaining relationships, and maintaining momentum between formal points of contact.

Sustaining this function will be important in future phases. Without it, there is a significant risk that momentum, shared learning, and regional coherence will weaken.



Recommendations

The evaluation points to seven priorities for the next phase of Good Food Local North East. These are intended to strengthen what is already working well while addressing the main friction points identified through the evaluation.

1. Future survey formats should leave room for local context and progress.

Participants valued being able to explain what was happening locally in their own words. Future formats should avoid over-reliance on fixed achievement bands and retain enough flexibility for councils to reflect local context, progress, and relevant evidence clearly. However, it is acknowledged that creating this flexibility also carries additional administrative demands for Sustain staff, which may limit how far it can be implemented in practice.

2. The structured assessment timeline should allow more time for change and action.

The current cycle was widely experienced as moving too quickly to support meaningful follow-through. A more realistic 2-year timetable would give councils more time to absorb recommendations, engage colleagues, and turn reflection into action.

3. The tool should better support shared completion across departments.

Technical barriers made collaborative completion harder than it needed to be and risked leaving public health teams to carry the process alone. Continued improvements to the platform would help support wider cross-departmental ownership.

4. Support councils to build senior backing and cross-council ownership from the outset.

Future phases should include more practical support for councils to secure visible senior endorsement and wider departmental engagement early in the process. This should include tailored communications materials, stakeholder mapping support, and clear guidance to help local leads engage colleagues across the council and position Good Food Local as a shared strategic agenda.

5. The model should retain a clear local authority focus while better recognising wider cross-sector contribution.

The local authority focus of the model was widely seen as a strength. At the same time, the process would benefit from doing more to recognise and reflect the wider contribution of food partnerships, voluntary organisations, and civil society, without shifting responsibility for the benchmark away from councils. This could be supported through clearer guidance on the role councils play in enabling and coordinating wider activity, alongside strengthened communication and training to help capture and represent these contributions more consistently.

6. The coordination and convening role at the regional level should be sustained.

Much of the value created in the North East has come through the regional layer: peer exchange, shared learning, and active coordination between councils. This function appears to be a core part of the impact model and should be sustained wherever possible.

7. The structured assessment framework should remain collaborative and improvement-focused, while leaving open the option of more competitive elements over time.

The supportive and non-competitive character of the programme appears to have helped build trust and collaboration. However, over time, there may also be value in introducing more comparative outputs, particularly for the leverage they can provide to those who feature lower on league tables, while also enabling recognition and celebration of those who score highly. However, any such shift would need to be introduced carefully, with participant involvement and consent to avoid undermining the collaborative environment that currently underpins the programme.



Introduction

Why Good Food Local, Why Now?

Local authorities across England are increasingly expected to respond to complex and interlinked food system challenges — including rising food insecurity, diet-related ill health, climate pressures, supply chain disruption, and the role of food in local economic development [i] [ii]. At the same time, councils are operating within constrained financial and organisational environments, with competing statutory duties and limited discretionary capacity [iii].

Responsibility for food rarely sits within a single department or formal mandate [iv]. Instead, food related policy and delivery cuts across public health, procurement, planning, economic development, climate strategy, children’s services, and community support and more [v]. While this cross-cutting nature creates opportunity, it also generates persistent coordination challenges [vi].

Many councils are undertaking significant food-related activity [vii]. However, this work is often dispersed across teams, unevenly visible, and difficult to align strategically at whole-council level [viii]. Without structured mechanisms for coordination, opportunities for joined-up action, shared accountability, and longer-term strategic direction are limited, making sustained system-wide action difficult to achieve [ix].

The Good Food Local North East (GFL-NE) model was developed in response to this gap. Originally established in London, the approach provides a structured framework through which local authorities can assess their contribution to healthy and sustainable food systems, identify gaps, and strengthen cross-department coordination. The model combines a structured framework and survey-based assessment tool, tailored recommendations, regional peer learning and knowledge exchange sessions, opportunities to celebrate good practice and facilitated coordination which collectively aim to strengthen the governance conditions through which food-related activity is prioritised, coordinated, and embedded within local authority systems.

With funding support from Impact on Urban Health, the model has been replicated in the North East since 2023 in partnership with the Association of Directors of Public Health North East (ADPH NE). This replication represents the first sustained test of how the approach operates beyond its original metropolitan context and across a diverse group of councils facing varied demographic, economic, and geographic realities.

Evaluation Approach

This evaluation was designed as an embedded, learning-oriented process review. It draws on multiple sources of evidence and analysis to understand delivery experience, usability, engagement, and early impact. Each stage of the evaluation approach is outlined below:

Structured Assessment Review: Process and Practical Value

A focused review examined how the structured assessment tool and process were experienced by participating councils, including perceived clarity, workload, and usefulness of outputs.

This drew on:

- Interviews with local authority officers and delivery partners
- Analysis of feedback gathered during survey delivery
- Comparative review of changes to survey design and functionality

This process also explored how councils were using output from the structured assessment process in practice, including their role in supporting internal discussions, strategy development, and early policy adjustments.

Theory of Change Workshop

A participatory Theory of Change workshop with Sustain and programme partners reviewed and refined the programme's intended pathways of change.

The session:

- Tested core assumptions in the North East context
- Identified early signals of progress
- Surfaced areas of uncertainty
- Clarified intended mechanisms through which change is expected to occur

The resulting Theory of Change provided a shared framework for interpreting findings across the evaluation.

Stakeholder Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (27) were conducted with:

- Local authority officers engaged in the programme (including participants ranging from senior director to officer level)
- Food partnership and other civil society organisations linked to the project
- Sustain delivery staff
- Regional coordination partners

These explored participant experience, perceived value, enabling conditions, barriers, and emerging examples of change, including shifts in cross-department working, leadership engagement, and local food system activity.

Transcripts were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, points of convergence, and illustrative cases.

Observations from Participatory Workshops

Insights were also drawn from observation of systems workshops and regional learning events.

These observations provided real-time evidence of:

- Participant engagement
- Areas of momentum or friction
- How structured assessment findings were translated into action

This strand grounded the evaluation in programme delivery dynamics and helped connect reported experience with observed practice.

An Embedded, Learning-Oriented Approach

The evaluation was conducted in close dialogue with Sustain and regional partners. This enabled emerging insights to be tested and refined iteratively, while maintaining independence in analysis and interpretation.

By combining these approaches and focusing on early institutional effects alongside implementation experience, the evaluation reflects the evolving nature of place-based systems work and supports informed decision-making for the programme's next phase.



Good Food Local North East - Theory of Change

The Good Food Local North East programme is underpinned by a shared Theory of Change that sets out how its core activities are intended to contribute to change within local authorities and across the wider regional system (see Annex 1. for full Theory of Change model).

The model is based on the idea that providing local authorities with structured opportunities to reflect, connect with peers and wider cross-sector stakeholders, and access targeted support may help make food related work more visible, more coordinated, and more firmly embedded within local governance. Over time, these shifts are expected to contribute to more joined-up policy, stronger cross-sector working, and greater alignment across the region.

Using the Theory of Change in this Evaluation

As part of this evaluation, the Theory of Change was refreshed through a participatory workshop with Sustain staff and programme partners. This created space to reflect on how the programme is intended to operate in the North East context and to test whether these assumptions resonated with delivery experience.

In this report, the Theory of Change is used as a reference point for understanding how the programme is intended to generate change. The analysis that follows explores how far these intended mechanisms appear to be activated in practice, and where they appear more or less effective.

To support this, the model can be understood through three interconnected areas of activity:

1. Creating Structured Reflection, Visibility, and Direction through the Assessment Process

The structured assessment process is intended to create structured time and space for local authorities to review their current activity across different areas of work.

In doing so, it is expected to bring together information that is often dispersed across teams and make food-related activity more visible within the organisation. It is also intended to provide an opportunity to recognise and celebrate existing work, which may help build confidence and legitimacy around food as a strategic issue.

Alongside this, the process generates a set of recommendations and creates opportunities to recognise and celebrate progress already being made. Together, these are intended to act as practical levers, helping councils identify priority areas for action, give greater visibility to existing work, and support internal conversations about next steps.

2. Strengthening Peer Exchange and Regional Coordination

Peer learning sessions, regional meetings, and ongoing coordination are intended to create an environment in which councils can share experience, test ideas, and learn from one another.

In the North East, this regional layer is expected to play an important role in sustaining engagement over time and helping councils situate their work within a broader collective effort. Regular interaction may reduce isolation, build confidence, and support the spread of approaches across different areas.

This strand of the model is also intended to contribute to a stronger sense of regional alignment, with councils developing a clearer understanding of shared priorities and opportunities for joint action.

3. Supporting Capability, Confidence, and Systems Literacy

Workshops, resources, and ongoing support are intended to help councils develop the skills and confidence to work with the complexity of food systems.

In particular, systems-focused training is designed to support officers in taking a more joined-up view of issues that cut across departments, including links between health, environment, economy, and community outcomes. This is intended to complement the structured assessment process by helping participants interpret what they are seeing and think through how change might be approached.

Alongside this, practical tools, examples, and follow-up support are intended to help councils act on the insights generated through the assessment process and peer exchange. This includes applying more integrated approaches in areas such as procurement, planning, and strategy.

This Theory of Change provides a reference point for the analysis that follows.



Evaluation Findings

This section examines how each of the three main areas of the Theory of Change played out in practice across the North East, where they appear to have supported progress, and where constraints or tensions shaped what was possible.

1. Creating Structured Reflection, Visibility, and Direction through the Structured Assessment Process

Across the North East, the structured assessment framework was widely regarded as a valuable and credible mechanism for structuring local food systems work. Participants consistently reported that it helped make dispersed activity more visible, prompted new cross-council conversations, and provided a practical framework for reviewing strengths, gaps, and next steps.

At the same time, experience of the process was not uniform. Feedback revealed important variation in how the tool was used and experienced across different authorities. These differences were shaped both by design features of the structured assessment framework itself and by the wider institutional context within which councils were operating.

The evidence points to a process that is strongly valued in principle and often effective in practice, but whose contribution is shaped by local capacity, organisational ownership, usability, and the degree of cross council buy-in already in place.

1.1 Creating Strategic Clarity, Visibility, and Internal Leverage

Across many participating authorities, Good Food Local was described as helping bring greater coherence to previously fragmented food-related activity. The structured nature of the assessment process created space for teams to step back from operational pressures, review what was already happening, and assess their overall direction.

“[the GFL structured assessment process] brought people together, created time and space for reflection, and sparked much more interesting conversations than we’d had before.”

– Local Authority Officer

For some councils, this marked the first time food-related activity had been considered through a more joined-up lens. Participants described the process as surfacing gaps that had previously gone unnoticed, clarifying where effort was already strong, and helping teams articulate a more coherent narrative about their local food ambitions.

As one officer reflected:

“Through Good Food Local we realised nothing was bringing everything together to ask: what is our purpose, our approach to food for the city, our vision?”

This process of reflection was closely linked to stronger internal visibility. By drawing together information from across departments, the structured assessment process helped reveal food-related work that had previously been dispersed, disconnected, or not widely recognised.

“[Good Food Local] revealed work happening in the council that I didn’t even know existed before.”
– Local Authority Officer

Participants repeatedly highlighted the value of this increased visibility. In many cases, the assessment framework created both the rationale and the structure needed to engage colleagues across planning, procurement, climate, economic development, and community functions. This helped stimulate new or strengthened cross-departmental conversations and, in some authorities, led to tangible moments of joint problem-solving.

Others emphasised the broader shift in awareness and alignment:

“The process showed clearly how food cuts across every department — it helped people see they’re part of this strategy whether they realised it or not.”

Participants also described the process as providing a form of internal leverage. The benchmark offered a combination of structure, legitimacy, and external mandate that helped officers initiate conversations that might otherwise have been difficult to begin.

As one local authority officer put it:

“[Good Food Local] gave us a legitimate reason to knock on doors, start conversations, and nudge people to think differently.”

This role was particularly important in organisational contexts where responsibility for food is distributed and no single team holds clear ownership. The benchmarking process provided a shared reference point that officers could use to frame discussions, request input, and strengthen the position of food within wider organisational priorities.

In several authorities, assessment outputs were used to inform food strategies, healthy weight plans, internal briefings, and wider council documents. In others, the influence was more indirect but still significant, shaping internal conversations about priorities, sequencing, and the case for future action.

Participants often described the process itself as the primary source of value. The conversations, connections, and internal visibility generated through completing the benchmark were frequently seen as more significant than the final score or comparative position.



Case Study A: Structured assessment built new internal relationships that continued beyond the exercise

In one authority, the structured assessment process required a public health officer to gather information from council teams far beyond her normal remit. While she described this as time-intensive and hard work, particularly in the first round, she also reported that it created new working relationships that made later engagement easier and more productive. In particular, support from senior colleagues continued beyond the benchmarking exercise and proved useful for related work on food access and local food environment issues.

Although engagement remained uneven across departments, the respondent described the process as having tangibly expanded her internal network and strengthened cross-team collaboration in ways that outlasted the survey itself.

1.2 Using Recommendations to Support Action and Internal Advocacy

Alongside the process of gathering data and completing the survey, the tailored recommendations provided to each authority were widely described as a valuable component of the Good Food Local model. Participants highlighted their role both in identifying areas for development, and in supporting internal advocacy, prioritisation, and follow-through.

In many cases, officers noted that the recommendations did not introduce entirely new areas of work. Instead, they often reflected activity that was already underway or being considered locally. Their value lay in bringing visibility and structure to this work, helping to legitimise it within the organisation and create momentum around next steps.

As a result, recommendations were frequently used as a practical lever to support internal conversations, align stakeholders, and reinforce the case for action. Participants described using them to brief senior colleagues, shape strategy discussions, and in some instances make the case for additional capacity or new roles.

“Our Good Food Local recommendations fed directly into our Sustainable Food Action Plan, which is now formally adopted.” – Senior Public Health Officer

Case Study B: Recommendations feeding directly into local strategy

In one authority, Good Food Local recommendations were used to inform revisions to both the local Healthy Food Policy and Physical Activity Strategy. The benchmarking findings were reviewed alongside existing priorities and fed into live policy development. Officers described the recommendations as relevant to their local context and useful in clarifying both where progress was already being made and where further work was needed.

The participants reflected that this helped ensure that food was more explicitly reflected within formal strategic documents, while also reinforcing the connection between food, health, and wider council priorities.

This function was closely linked to the external framing of the process. Recommendations carried additional weight because they were seen to come from a structured and recognised framework, rather than being internally generated alone. This made them particularly useful in contexts where food lacked a clear mandate or where cross-department engagement needed to be strengthened.

At the same time, some participants reflected that the recommendations did not always fully account for local context. There were instances where suggested actions were perceived as more applicable to larger urban authorities or areas with semi-rural profiles. This occasionally limited their immediate relevance or required additional interpretation to adapt them locally.

Participants generally recognised that producing highly tailored recommendations for each area involves a significant time and resource commitment, but several suggested that there may be value in creating more space for dialogue around how recommendations are interpreted and used.



Case Study C: Recommendations were used to prioritise action and strengthen governance routes

In one authority, participants reviewed benchmarking recommendations collectively and grouped them into short, medium, and longer-term actions. This helped distinguish between immediate opportunities and more ambitious structural changes. The recommendations were then used to inform a Sustainable Food Action Plan, which was subsequently signed off by the Health and Wellbeing Board.

While Good Food Local should not be seen as the sole driver behind the action plan, participants did describe it as helping to strengthen, sharpen, and give added structure to a process that was already underway. The recommendations provided an external reference point that helped bring greater focus to existing priorities, clarify which actions could be taken forward in the short and longer term, and reinforce the case for giving the plan clearer strategic and governance backing.

For example, structured conversations between Sustain and local leads could help translate recommendations into locally meaningful priorities, ensuring they align more closely with existing work, governance arrangements, and capacity.

1.3 Recognition and Visibility

The release of the assessment findings, including the publication of the results tables, created moments of visibility that some local authorities used to draw attention to their work and to the Good Food Local programme more broadly.

In a number of cases, participants described using these moments as an opportunity to convene colleagues, partners, and stakeholders. These events were used to reflect on progress, share learning, and recognise the range of activity taking place locally. For those able to do so, this provided a way to raise the profile of food within the organisation and create a visible focal point for ongoing work.

Participants also noted that these moments of recognition could support wider engagement. Bringing people together around the release of findings created opportunities to strengthen existing relationships, introduce new stakeholders to the work, and expand participation in future assessment rounds.

However, this experience was not consistent across all areas. In other cases, opportunities for celebration or public recognition were more limited. Participants highlighted a number of factors that constrained this, including the timing of assessment rounds, wider capacity pressures, and the practical challenges of convening stakeholders across departments and sectors. The relatively low

public profile of Good Food Local in some areas also limited the extent to which findings could be used as a platform for wider visibility or external engagement

Participants expressed mixed views on the role of league tables within this process. Some emphasised the importance of maintaining a non-competitive framing, suggesting that this made the approach more politically viable and supported open reflection rather than comparison. Others noted that the visibility of rankings could act as a lever, particularly where there was concern about being positioned towards the lower end of the table.

As a result, there was no consistent appetite for making the league tables more explicitly competitive. Views varied depending on local context, leadership dynamics, and how the process was perceived internally.

There were also instances where participants expressed concern about how results were represented. In some cases, officers felt that their local activity had not been fully captured, particularly where limited engagement from other departments led to gaps in the information submitted. This created a sense that scores did not always reflect the full extent of work taking place, and for some, raised questions about how fairly their role and contribution had been represented.

1.4 Structural Assessment Framework Limitations and Design Challenges

While the benchmarking process was strongly valued by most participants, they also highlighted a set of limitations, constraints, and contextual conditions that shaped how effectively it worked in practice.

Participants generally described the original assessment format used in the first round as clear, structured, and supportive of internal reflection. At the same time, the first round of structured assessment was also experienced as time-consuming, and some participants highlighted technical challenges that made completion difficult in practice. These included limitations in the platform and the effort required to coordinate input across teams (see Annex 2. for full technical advisory note on survey design).

In contrast, experience of the later “light-touch” second round iteration was mixed. While the intention to streamline the process was welcomed in principle, many officers reported that the revised format did not significantly reduce workload and, in some cases, introduced additional points of friction.

Several factors contributed to this:

- Performance banding reduced the space available to describe local context and activity
- Changes in question framing created uncertainty about what was being assessed
- Technical constraints limited collaborative completion
- Expectations of a quicker process were not met in practice
- Tight timelines constrained meaningful internal consultation

As one officer noted:

“Although branded light-touch, it still required broad internal consultation and significant effort to complete.”

A consistent theme across interviews was the gap between how the second round was presented and how it was experienced in practice. The “light-touch” framing led participants to anticipate a simpler and quicker process. When this expectation was not met, it created frustration and, in some cases, reduced confidence in the tool.

More fundamentally, participants highlighted a shift in how the tool supported reflection. The first round format allowed officers to describe what was happening locally, including work that did not fit neatly into predefined categories. This created space for narrative, context, and internal discussion. By contrast, the second round placed greater emphasis on performance banding and structured responses. While this provided a more standardised framework, it limited the ability of participants to capture the nuance of local activity and made it harder to represent work that fell outside formal schemes or accreditation models.

The issue was therefore not only about workload, but about how the structure of the tool shaped engagement. This was closely linked to wider organisational dynamics. In many authorities, responsibility for coordinating the assessment process sat primarily with public health teams, often without formal mandate or dedicated resource. Securing input from other departments required significant time, relationship-building, and informal influence, particularly where food was not yet recognised as a shared organisational priority.

Across both rounds, there was also recognition that Sustain has actively sought to respond to feedback and refine the approach over time. The introduction of the second round iteration reflected an effort to reduce burden and improve usability, even where this resulted in new trade-offs in practice. This ongoing process of adaptation was valued by participants and reflects the programme’s broader learning-oriented approach.

Crucially, participants also emphasised that the effectiveness of the assessment process depended heavily on the degree of broader organisational ownership established around it. Where ownership extended beyond public health — particularly with visible backing from senior leaders — the process was more likely to unlock wider engagement across planning, procurement, climate, and economic development teams. In these contexts, the exercise became a genuinely cross-council endeavour.

“[Good Food Local] stopped this being seen as just a public health initiative — it became a genuinely council-wide effort.” - Public Health Officer

Case Study D: Strong senior ownership helped shift food from a public health issue to a council-wide priority

In one authority, participants described unusually strong political and senior leadership support for food systems work, with food recognised as a formal corporate priority and championed by elected members and senior officers. In this context, Good Food Local activity was experienced as part of wider council business rather than as something owned narrowly by public health.

Benchmarking results and public-facing outputs were used to celebrate progress, support communications, and reinforce the message that food was a legitimate strategic issue linked to wider community priorities. Participants also pointed to wider policy influence, with food, farming, and local food enterprise becoming more visible in an economic strategy that had previously focused more narrowly on other sectors

By contrast, in authorities where leadership endorsement was weaker, or where internal food governance was less mature, officers reported that significant effort was required to secure input from colleagues. In some cases, the process remained heavily dependent on personal relationships and informal influence.

These findings suggest that the potential contribution of the assessment process is shaped not only by the technical design of the tool, but by how it interacts with local organisational realities, including leadership support, officer capacity, internal ownership, and the ability to engage colleagues across departmental boundaries.

The process appeared to deliver greatest value where three conditions were in place: visible senior endorsement, sufficient officer capacity, and some existing cross-department engagement on food. Where these factors aligned, councils were better able to use structured assessment framework as a platform for reflection, coordination, and forward planning. Where they were absent, the process was more likely to be experienced as demanding, fragmented, or difficult to translate into sustained momentum.

Even in these more constrained settings, participants generally continued to express support for the overall Good Food Local approach. Difficulties were more often framed as issues of fit, timing, or support than as fundamental flaws in the model itself. These usability and design challenges are explored in more detail in the technical advisory note included in the annex.

1.5 Recognising the Wider System Around a Council-Centred Model

Participants both within and beyond local authorities agreed that the local authority focus of Good Food Local provided a strong institutional foothold. By centring councils, the programme created a clearer route into formal strategy, governance, and decision-making, and helped secure engagement from local authorities in ways that a more diffuse model may not have done.

At the same time, many noted that food systems work in practice is often shaped by a wider mix of food partnerships, voluntary organisations, and civil society actors. The assessment process was one of the main opportunities to surface and recognise this wider activity, since it required local areas to gather evidence, reflect on what was happening locally, and describe how progress was being made. In some places, this helped bring partnership and civil society contributions more clearly into view and supported more joined-up planning between councils and wider actors.

Experiences were mixed, however, in how far this wider contribution was recognised through the process itself. In some settings, partnership and civil society activity was clearly drawn into discussions and evidence-gathering. In others, wider partners felt their contribution was less visible within a process focused primarily on local authority action. This was especially the case where wider partners were contributing time to coordination, evidence-gathering, or workshops, but their role in the process was not always clearly defined.

This became more difficult in cases where responsibility for completing the assessment process fell largely to food partnerships or civil society actors. Where these actors did not have the same access to internal local authority information, systems, or colleagues, the process could become harder to complete and more confusing in its focus. In these situations, there was sometimes uncertainty about whether the exercise was intended to assess council activity, broader place-based work, or partnership-led delivery, which could weaken clarity and confidence in the process. Civil society partners reported that the funding offered to them for their time was appreciated and enabled their involvement. However, several civil society partners also reported that they were not always clear on what their role was, or what relevance GFL-NE had to their work.

2. Strengthening Peer Exchange and Regional Coordination

A distinctive feature of the Good Food Local North East model is the importance of the regional layer. Alongside the structured assessment processes taking place within individual authorities, the programme has created regular opportunities for peer exchange, shared reflection, and coordination across the region. Participants consistently described this as a significant source of value in its own right. In the North East context, regional coordination appears to function as an active part of the model, helping sustain momentum, connect local work, and create a stronger sense of collective endeavour across councils and partners.

2.1 Regional Momentum and Community of Practice

The most widely reported and arguably most durable form of value associated with this part of the model was relational. Across interviews and workshop observations, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of the connections built through Good Food Local activity.

At the regional level, regular meetings, peer exchange opportunities, workshops, and wider engagement activity supported by Sustain helped foster what many participants described as an emerging 'community of practice' across the North East. As one participant observed:

"This is the first time the entire food network in the North East has come together to work collectively on a shared project."

This regional infrastructure appeared to create a stronger sense of shared momentum around food systems work. Participants described the value of being able to situate their own local efforts within a wider regional picture, rather than working in isolation. For some, this helped reinforce that the challenges they were facing were not unique to their authority, and that progress was possible through shared learning and collective effort.

This was particularly important in a context where food-related work is often spread thinly across teams, and where individual officers may otherwise have limited opportunities to engage with peers facing similar challenges elsewhere.

2.2 Knowledge Transfer and Shared Problem-Solving

Participants also described the regional layer as a practical mechanism for knowledge exchange and problem solving. Officers reported drawing directly on peer experience, adapting approaches from neighbouring authorities, and using regional forums to test emerging ideas before taking them forward locally.

Examples of policy and practice diffusion cited by participants included:

- Procurement reforms informed by North East Procurement Organisation (NEPO) discussions
- Uptake of Right to Grow models
- Shared learning on No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) coordination and Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) delivery

These examples suggest that the regional process was not experienced only as a forum for general discussion. In several cases, it supported more targeted exchange around concrete policy and delivery questions, helping councils avoid duplicating effort and move more quickly from exploration to action.



Participants valued the opportunity to hear what others were doing, what had worked, and where barriers had arisen. In this sense, peer exchange was not only motivational, but also practical: it provided locally relevant intelligence, examples, and contacts that could be drawn on in live areas of work.

2.3 Limits and Unevenness in Participation

At the same time, participation in the regional layer was not uniform. The extent to which councils were able to engage consistently in peer learning, workshops, and wider coordination was shaped by local capacity, competing pressures, and the maturity of local food governance arrangements.

In some areas, officers were well placed to make active use of regional opportunities and translate learning into local discussions. In others, engagement was more intermittent, often reflecting limited staff time or the absence of strong internal mandate for food-related work.

This unevenness matters because the value of peer exchange depends partly on the ability of participants to remain connected over time. Where capacity or organisational support was weaker, authorities were less able to make full use of the regional offer, even where they recognised its value.

3. Building Capability, Confidence, and Systems Literacy

Alongside the reflective and relational value created through the assessment process and regional coordination, Good Food Local is also beginning to support changes in capability, confidence, and systems literacy within and across local authorities. These changes are most visible in the development of systems thinking, greater confidence to take food systems work forward, and early signs that reflection is beginning to translate into strategy, governance, and practice. At this stage, these effects remain uneven, but the evaluation identified credible evidence that the programme is starting to strengthen both the capacity and the confidence of local authority officers to provide a practical systems informed approach to their work.

3.1 Systems Thinking and Practical Application

Where the structured assessment process encouraged councils to take stock of existing activity, the systems change workshops created space to step back and consider the wider dynamics shaping local food systems. Participants consistently highlighted this as a valuable opportunity to move beyond immediate delivery pressures and think about food in a broader and more connected way.

The workshops were valued both for their content and for their format. Participants appreciated the teaching element, including the opportunity to develop a clearer understanding of systems thinking and how it might apply to local food work. They also valued the collaborative and practical aspects of the sessions, particularly the chance to work through issues together, connect different perspectives, and explore interdependencies across health, environment,

economy, procurement, and community wellbeing.

“I feel that the [systems change workshops] helped my colleagues and I think in new ways about how food connects across the system... it definitely made us think more about the big picture and the need to not work in silos” – Director of Public Health

For some participants, this strengthened their ability to frame food-related work internally in a more connected and strategic way, moving it away from isolated projects and towards a clearer understanding of food as a cross-cutting systems issue. The workshops were also valued because they created a rare opportunity to bring varied stakeholders together in one place for facilitated strategic thinking. This helped participants reflect collectively, explore connections across agendas, and develop a more shared understanding of the wider system.

*“The process has taught us much more about the food system than we expected.”
– Local Authority Officer*

At the same time, several participants felt that more time was needed. There was a sense that the workshops opened up important ways of thinking, but that sessions were sometimes too short to explore issues in sufficient depth or move fully from conceptual discussion to practical application. Some suggested that future delivery could benefit from a clearer balance between teaching and learning sessions, with space both for Sustain to share its knowledge and experience, and for participants to share their own practice, challenges, and examples.

Participants spoke positively about Sustain’s expertise and indicated that there would be value in more opportunities for this knowledge to be shared directly. This points to an appetite not only for peer exchange, but also for more structured facilitation and input to help authorities build their confidence in applying systems approaches in practice.

Case Study E: Regional learning helped authorities avoid duplication and move faster

At the regional level, participants described using the steering group and wider North East infrastructure to identify which authorities were already ahead on particular issues and to follow up directly for practical learning. Examples included procurement approaches, and links between food and anti-poverty work. This enabled councils to access relevant expertise quickly, build on existing work, and avoid duplicating early-stage development.

Participants emphasised that this kind of peer learning was supported by the collaborative, non competitive framing of the programme. Rather than focusing on rankings, councils were able to identify who had relevant experience, learn from them, and apply this learning in their own context. In this way, the regional model complemented the structured assessment process, helping to translate identified strengths and gaps into practical exchange and action across geographic boundaries.

3.2 Confidence, Internal Mandate, and Capacity to Act

A further important area of change relates to the confidence participants reported in taking food systems work forward within their organisations. Across the evaluation, officers described feeling better equipped to frame issues, ask different questions, and make a stronger case for action. This appears to have been supported by the programme as a whole, including structured assessment, recommendations, workshops, and regional dialogue. Together, these elements helped some participants feel that they had a clearer basis from which to engage senior colleagues, open up discussions across departments, and position food as a strategic issue within wider organisational priorities.

As one officer noted:

“[Good Food Local] gave me a strong rationale for pushing issues forward — it definitely helped.”

This was particularly important in contexts where food did not yet have a clear institutional home. In these settings, participants reported how GFL helped them articulate the significance of food systems work in ways that resonated more clearly with colleagues and decision-makers.

These changes were often indirect and incremental rather than immediately visible. However, participants repeatedly described the programme as having strengthened their ability to navigate internal systems, build relationships across the organisation, and maintain momentum around food related priorities.

3.3 Strategy, Governance, and Policy Integration

The evaluation identified early signs that Good Food Local is beginning to influence formal strategy and governance arrangements in some authorities.

Across several areas, outputs from the programme had started to feed into planning processes, review existing priorities, and strengthen alignment across different policy areas. Participants described using findings and recommendations to ensure food considerations were more explicitly reflected within corporate or thematic strategies.

“It has pulled 11 different departments into it, with responsibility for responding every six months, for creating a food plan for the city for 2045.” – Local Authority Officer

In some authorities, this meant revisiting existing strategies through a more explicit food systems lens. In others, it helped officers make the case for including food within wider policy and place-based planning documents where it had previously been less visible or more peripheral.

As one participant explained:

“We’ve already incorporated some of the Good Food Local recommendations into new healthy food and physical activity strategies.”

The evaluation also identified several cases where the programme appeared to contribute to clearer or more formalised food governance arrangements. In these settings, findings and recommendations were used to convene partners, clarify roles, and establish more explicit oversight or reporting routes. In some cases, this has begun to shift food work from dispersed activity towards more structured programme management.

These developments remain uneven across the region, and in many places are still at an early stage. Even so, they provide credible early evidence that the programme is beginning to influence how food is positioned within local policy and governance architecture.

Case Study F: The structure assessment framework helped legitimise the case for dedicated food capacity

Engagement with Good Food Local structured assessment framework helped surface and articulate the need for dedicated food capacity within on local authority. The benchmarking recommendations were acknowledged at senior public health level and recognised as an area the council “should be working on”.

While this recognition did not immediately translate into delivery, it has informed ongoing discussions about public health funding a full-time food role hosted by the independent food partnership. The local authority officer involved described the bassessment framewok as providing external validation for this need, even though progress remains constrained by limited resources and existing governance arrangements.

3.4 Early Operational Follow-Through and Quick Wins

Although many of the changes identified through the evaluation were in early shape, there were also some examples of more immediate practical action.

In several authorities, participants described using programme outputs to identify actions that could be progressed within existing remit and resources. These were often modest or practical steps rather than major structural reforms, but they were seen as important in helping maintain momentum and demonstrate movement.

In one example, officers convened contributors after receiving benchmarking feedback to assess which recommendations could be taken forward quickly. This led to a small set of “quick win” actions that could be initiated without waiting for wider council approval. As one public health officer reflected:

“It [GLF] gave us an opportunity to bring together procurement, local food business support, and food waste teams into the same room for the first time — and within ten minutes we had solutions that will change how we procure school meals.”

Participants described these kinds of developments as useful in two ways. First, they helped turn a reflective process into something more concrete. Second, they provided visible signs of progress that could sustain engagement while more ambitious or cross-departmental recommendations continued to work through slower governance processes.

Case Study G: Quick wins helped turn recommendations into action

In one authority, officers convened contributors after receiving assessment feedback to review which recommendations could realistically be taken forward within existing remit and resources. This led to a short list of “quick win” actions that could be progressed immediately without waiting for wider council approval.

Participants described these actions as modest but important. They helped turn a reflective process into something tangible, maintained momentum, and demonstrated that the assessment process could generate practical movement even while more complex recommendations continued to work their way through slower governance routes.

What Is Changing So Far

The evaluation points to a clear early pattern of change. While Good Food Local in the North East remains at an early stage, participants across the region described a range of meaningful shifts associated with the programme. These changes are most visible in the way councils are organising, prioritising, and acting on food system issues.

A consistent message from interviews and workshop feedback was that not all valuable change is immediately measurable. Much of the programme’s contribution to date lies in strengthening the conditions that make more substantial policy and practice change possible over time. This includes making food-related work more visible, strengthening internal and regional relationships, building confidence and shared understanding, and creating greater strategic traction within local government.

Participants repeatedly characterised the work as cumulative and slow-moving, reflecting the fact that embedding food within complex local authority systems unfolds over multiple years and depends on wider organisational and political conditions. In this sense, many of the most important changes identified so far are upstream: councils becoming better able to see food as a

cross-cutting issue, connect work across departments, make the case internally, and draw on regional support and learning.

Across the findings, the most consistent areas of value relate to structured reflection, stronger coordination, increased confidence to act, and the development of local and regional relationships that can support future action. These are not minor shifts. In complex local government settings, they are often the foundations on which more formal changes in strategy, governance, and delivery depend.

There is also credible early evidence that in some authorities these foundations are beginning to translate into more formal change, including strategy development, clearer governance arrangements, more sustained cross-department engagement, and practical follow-through on selected actions.

At the same time, progress remains uneven and strongly shaped by leadership support, officer capacity, local governance maturity, and the extent of cross-department ownership. The programme is therefore not generating identical effects in every place. Even so, across much of the North East there are credible early signs that Good Food Local is helping reposition food as a cross-cutting strategic issue within local government, while beginning to create the conditions for deeper and more sustained change over time.



Conditions and Constraints

Shaping Progress

Strong endorsement of the Good Food Local approach was a consistent theme across interviews. At the same time, participants were clear that delivery takes place within complex institutional environments characterised by limited capacity, shifting political priorities, and competing demands. They also highlighted areas where design, communication, and pacing within the programme itself shaped how manageable, clear, and useful the process felt in practice.

Understanding these conditions is essential for interpreting both progress and unevenness across the region.

Leadership, Ownership, and Organisational Fragility

The presence or absence of visible senior endorsement was one of the clearest determinants of traction. Where Directors of Public Health, Chief Executives, or elected members were actively engaged, participation broadened beyond public health teams and food work gained stronger institutional legitimacy. In these contexts, assessment findings travelled more easily into strategy, governance, and delivery.

By contrast, where endorsement was weaker or informal, Good Food Local often relied heavily on the persistence of individual officers. In these settings, progress was slower, more fragile, and more vulnerable to staff turnover. Participants repeatedly described the burden of carrying significant administrative and relational labour without protected time or formal authority.

Capacity, Competing Pressures, and the Pace of Change

Local authorities continue to operate under sustained financial and staffing pressure. Food systems work competes with statutory duties, crisis response, and immediate service pressures, particularly in areas shaped by cost-of-living demands and wider public health pressures.

Participants emphasised that meaningful engagement with Good Food Local requires time: time to coordinate across departments, time to reflect, and time to act on findings. In better-resourced contexts, this investment was seen as manageable and worthwhile. In more constrained settings, it could feel like an additional burden, even where the programme itself was valued.

Many participants also described the work as inherently long-term. Governance shifts, cultural change, and policy embedding do not happen quickly. This creates a structural tension between the slower pace of systems change and the shorter-term rhythms of local government planning, reporting, and political attention.

Design, Usability and Timing

Earlier sections have already highlighted a number of design and usability issues associated with the structured assessment process (see also Annex 2). More broadly, participants' feedback points to a wider lesson: for the model to work well, it must fit the operational and political realities of local government.

This includes making the assessment process easier to use in practice: providing enough space for local context and partial progress to be explained, enabling collaborative input across departments, and ensuring that supporting materials clearly position the work as a cross-council governance issue rather than a narrowly public health exercise. Timing and pacing were also important. Participants described the need for clearer advance notice, longer response windows, and more space between rounds to allow for reflection, internal engagement, and action on recommendations. Where delivery cycles felt too compressed, the process was more likely to be experienced as burdensome or procedural.

Partnership Roles, Boundaries, and Shared Responsibility

A further tension concerned how activity beyond the local authority was recognised within a programme centred on local authority benchmarking.

The council-centred model gives the programme a strong institutional foothold because councils hold formal powers, governance routes, and budgetary authority. At the same time, local food systems work is often shaped by a wider ecosystem of food partnerships, voluntary organisations, and civil society actors. In some areas, the process helped surface this wider activity and support more joined up local planning. In others, participants felt that important partnership and civil society contributions were not always clearly recognised or attributed within a framework focused primarily on local authority action.

This was particularly challenging where wider partners were contributing significant time to coordination, evidence-gathering, or workshops, or where the practical burden of progressing Good Food Local had shifted towards them without equivalent visibility in how local progress was represented.

Sustaining the Regional Layer Under Volatility

One of the clearest messages across the interviews was the importance of the regional convening role. Participants consistently valued the time and labour involved in bringing people together, maintaining contact between meetings, linking local authorities to one another, and ensuring that regional activity remained purposeful and relevant.

In particular, participants highlighted the role played by the Association of Directors of Public Health North East coordinator in holding this space together. This coordinating function was described as central to maintaining continuity and momentum across the programme, especially in contexts where local authority capacity was stretched and food systems work could easily lose visibility among competing priorities.

At the same time, this points to a vulnerability within the model. The regional coherence that has emerged appears to rely heavily on a small number of coordination roles and relationships. Participants were clear that, without sustained facilitation and convening, the knowledge-sharing and relational infrastructure built through the programme could weaken quickly.

These risks are intensified by wider political and economic volatility. Elections, restructures, leadership changes, funding uncertainty, and external shocks all shape what local authorities are able to prioritise and sustain over time. In this context, the regional layer has provided an important source of continuity, but its future strength depends on whether this coordinating function continues to be resourced and recognised.

Implications and Recommendations

The evaluation suggests that Good Food Local North East is generating meaningful value across the region. Early signs of impact are visible, engagement remains strong, and the project has helped create new capacity for coordination, learning, and collaboration. The recommendations below focus on strengthening the model for the next phase: improving the assessment process, supporting stronger ownership within councils, and protecting the regional conditions that have helped the work gain traction.

1. Future survey formats must make room for local context and progress

The evaluation suggests that future survey formats need to leave enough room for councils to explain what is happening locally, rather than relying too heavily on fixed achievement bands. Participants consistently valued opportunities to describe progress, context, and locally specific activity in their own words.

While the Round 2 format was intended to simplify completion, participants often found that deciding which performance band best reflected their local position took time and introduced uncertainty. In some cases, this was experienced as more burdensome than being able to explain activity through a short narrative response.

At the same time, the evaluation suggests that the work involved in completing the survey should not be treated simply as administrative burden to be stripped away. For many participants, the process of gathering evidence, speaking to colleagues, and reflecting on current activity was itself part of the value of the process. The aim should therefore be to remove unnecessary friction, rather than over simplify the process to the point where important elements of that value are lost.

Future survey formats should therefore:

- Retain narrative text boxes throughout
- Avoid relying too heavily on fixed achievement bands
- Make clear how narrative evidence informs scoring and feedback
- Recognise strong locally tailored activity, including where it falls outside national schemes
- Provide clear guidance on what evidence is expected and how it will be used

This would make the process easier to use, more credible to participants, and better able to reflect the reality of local progress.

2. Restructure the structured assessment timeline to allow time for change

The evaluation suggests that the current assessment cycle moves too quickly to support meaningful follow-through. Participants consistently felt that being asked to complete another round of assessment too soon limited their ability to absorb findings, engage colleagues, act on recommendations, and demonstrate progress.

For the next phase, Sustain should consider adopting a more realistic timetable that gives councils time to turn reflection into action. The evaluation suggests that, once the pilot phase concludes, a two-year cycle is likely to be more realistic.

This could include:

- Moving to a two-year assessment cycle after the pilot phase
- Ensuring there is at least one full year between receiving recommendation letters and the next survey round
- Using the years between full assessment rounds for lighter-touch support, such as peer learning sessions, themed workshops, and voluntary progress updates to help maintain momentum

This would give councils a more realistic opportunity to respond to recommendations and embed change, while keeping the project active and visible between rounds.

3. Improve the tool so it supports shared completion across departments

The technical structured assessment framework review (see Annex 1) highlighted several practical barriers to collaborative completion, including single-user editing, limited draft-sharing options, rigid response formats, and weak support for uploading or presenting evidence. In practice, these issues increased the likelihood that public health teams would coordinate the process alone, even where wider ownership across departments was needed.

Many of these concerns have already been recognised and addressed by Sustain through their processes of iterative learning and development. The recommendation here is therefore to continue and embed this improvement work.

This could include:

- Making it easier for multiple people to contribute to one submission
- Allowing different sections to be completed by different teams
- Providing a completed version that can be downloaded and shared internally before final submission restoring or improving document upload options where these are useful
- Replacing rigid word limits with clearer but more flexible guidance
- Including options such as “information not yet available” where appropriate

The aim should be to reduce avoidable friction and make it easier for councils to complete the survey as a shared cross-department process, rather than funnelling responsibility through a single lead officer.

4. Build senior support and cross-council ownership early

The evaluation suggests that senior backing is one of the clearest factors shaping whether the project leads to wider organisational change. Where Chief Executives, Directors of Public Health, elected members, or other senior leaders were visibly supportive, engagement broadened beyond public health, coordination was more secure, and recommendations were more likely to influence formal strategies and governance arrangements.

Where that backing was weaker, the project was more easily misunderstood as a public health concern, and responsibility often fell to a small number of officers without a strong enough mandate to engage others. This made it harder to build wider ownership across departments whose decisions already shape local food outcomes.

For the next phase, Sustain could do more to support senior-level onboarding and broader cross-council ownership from the outset. This could include better materials for local leads, as well as targeted use of Sustain’s own credibility and reach to reinforce the strategic relevance of the project where useful

In practice, this could include:

- Providing short briefing for senior leaders that sets out the purpose of the project, the benefits for councils, and the case for cross-council involvement
- A one-page overview that local leads can share internally at the start of each cycle
- Tailored briefing notes for key departments, showing how their work shapes local food outcomes and why Good Food Local is relevant to their role
- Template wording and practical materials to help local leads engage colleagues, share recommendations, and build follow-up support
- Selective direct engagement with senior council leaders, where useful, to reinforce the strategic relevance of the project and support wider buy-in

This would help ensure the project is understood early on as a whole-council process, with shared ownership across functions rather than reliance on a single lead team.

5. Keep a clear focus on local authorities, while better recognising wider cross-sector contribution

The evaluation suggests that the project's focus on local authorities is a strength and should be retained. Participants, both within and beyond local authorities, broadly saw this as appropriate, given the important role councils play in shaping local food systems. A council-led model gives the project a clear institutional focus and helps position food as a strategic issue within local government.

At the same time, local food work is often delivered through the work of food partnerships, voluntary organisations, and wider civil society. The key challenge is to ensure that this wider contribution is properly recognised and reflected within the process.

This is partly a matter of survey design and guidance, but it also depends on how individual councils approach the process and whether they engage constructively with local partners. This means the issue cannot be fully resolved through design alone.

In practice, supporting councils to find this balance could include:

- Supporting local authorities to explain clearly to local partners what Good Food Local is assessing, what it is not assessing, and how wider local work may be reflected
- Working more closely with the Sustainable Food Places programme to clarify how Good Food Local and the SFP award scheme relate to one another, and how they can complement rather than duplicate each other
- Providing clear guidance to local authorities on how to recognise and reference the contribution of cross-sector partners within the assessment process
- Adapting survey design to ensure that councils are able to attribute wider local activity clearly

This would help preserve the strength of the model while giving a fairer account of the wider ecosystem of work shaping local food systems.

6. Protect the coordination and convening role at the regional level

A clear finding from the evaluation is that the regional support layer has been central to the emergence of a more coordinated regional approach to food. Regular meetings, peer exchange, workshops, and ongoing contact between councils have helped maintain engagement, support practical learning and knowledge exchange, and build confidence across the region.

This depended in large part on the work of a small number of individuals holding key coordination responsibilities, who convened the group, sustained relationships, shared learning, and kept momentum going between formal points of contact.

The evaluation therefore recommends that the coordination and convening role is protected and resourced wherever possible in future phases of the project. It is recommended that this role,

where possible, should be performed by someone with local knowledge and existing relationships within the project geographic scope. While an equivalent role may not be feasible in every area, particularly if the model is expanded more widely, the underlying coordination function should still be treated as a core part of delivery.

The structured assessment framework is most effective when it sits within an active structure for support, exchange, and follow-through. Without that coordination layer, the project risks losing much of the added value it has created in the North East.

7. Keep structured assessment framework collaborative and improvement-focused, while leaving open the option of more competitive elements over time

The evaluation suggests that the participatory and collaborative character of the project has been an important part of its success to date. Participants generally experienced Good Food Local as constructive and improvement-focused, which appears to have supported honest engagement, trust, and collaboration across the region. The absence of a strongly competitive league-table element may have contributed to this, although this cannot be separated fully from other features of the project's design and delivery.

At the same time, some participants also identified potential value in more explicitly comparative outputs over time. In particular, league-table style benchmarking may give officers useful leverage within councils, including where weaker relative performance can help make the case for action, resource, or senior attention, as evidenced by the success that this approach has had in the London context.

However, any more competitive element should be introduced carefully. While it may have value as an internal lever, it may also create risks if it is seen as punitive or reputationally threatening, especially at senior level. Introducing such elements too early could undermine the collaborative culture that has helped the project gain traction.

For the next phase, the project should remain primarily supportive and improvement-focused, while considering whether more comparative elements could be introduced gradually as the model becomes more established.

In practice, this could include:

- Keeping structured assessment primarily framed as a tool for reflection, learning, and improvement
- Retaining space for explanation, local context, and narrative interpretation alongside any scoring
- Involving participants in decisions about whether and how comparative elements are introduced
- Using a non-competitive approach in the early stages, with more comparative benchmarking considered only once the process is more established

- Taking care in how any ranked or league-table style outputs are presented, particularly where these may affect senior-level support

This would allow the project to retain the benefits of a collaborative model while making careful use of comparison where it adds value

Conclusion

Good Food Local North East demonstrates the potential of a structured, locally grounded approach to strengthening food governance within and across local authorities. Through a clear framework for assessment, tailored recommendations, and sustained regional coordination, the programme is already contributing to more coordinated, visible, and strategic approaches to food. It is helping to create the conditions for councils to move beyond fragmented activity, engage multiple departments, and position food as a shared, cross-cutting priority.

The evaluation shows that progress has been shaped not only by the assessment process itself, but by the relationships, leadership, and coordination that surround it. In particular, the regional layer has played a critical role in enabling peer learning, maintaining momentum, and translating reflection into practical action.

At the same time, the findings highlight a set of important trade-offs that will need to be carefully managed as the programme develops. These include balancing flexibility with deliverability, maintaining a clear local authority focus while recognising wider system contributions, and preserving a collaborative ethos while considering the potential value of more comparative elements. Sustaining the conditions that have enabled progress to date, particularly senior-level engagement and active regional coordination, will be critical to ensuring that early gains are embedded and extended over time.

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Annex 1. GFL-NE Revised Theory of Change

Good Food Local North East

Revised Theory of Change



Inputs / Resources

- **Strategic Leadership & Coordination** – Sustain, ADPH, and combined authority leadership for benchmarking, governance, and advocacy.
- **Local Authority Commitment & Capacity** – Officer time, cross-departmental engagement, and political leadership across councils.
- **Funding & Sustainability Resources** – Core project funding plus capacity to secure long-term financial support for regional governance.
- **Partnerships & Community Expertise** – Food partnerships, voluntary sector, and local networks providing on-the-ground knowledge and engagement.
- **Data, Evidence & Knowledge Infrastructure** – Benchmarking data, toolkits, case studies, evaluation frameworks, and shared resource hubs.
- **Digital & Technical Tools** – Platforms for communication, collaboration, and data sharing (e.g., SharePoint, websites).
- **External Expertise & Peer Learning** – National partners, academic experts, and peer regions supporting shared learning and best practice. |

Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes (0–2 years)	Medium-term Outcomes (3–5 years)	Long-term Outcomes (5–10 years)	Impact Indicators
Benchmarking exercises (Rounds 1–3)	Benchmarking reports, league tables, recommendations	Councils use data to identify strengths, gaps, and learning needs	Benchmarking insights shape council strategies, funding bids, and project delivery	Regional monitoring system institutionalised; data routinely informs policy and investment	Benchmarking findings explicitly referenced in council strategies or Health & Wellbeing Board plans; Local strengths/gaps identified in benchmarking informing at least one policy or funding decision per council; Regional food system monitoring framework established and maintained beyond project funding; Increase in councils embedding food system priorities in long-term plans by end of funding period
Regional steering group meetings	Regular meetings held; regional platform established	Partners build trust and identify shared priorities	Councils coordinate policies, funding bids, and delivery plans across boundaries	Regional food governance formalised and aligned with combined authorities (e.g., NECA)	Regional steering group established with representation from all local authorities and key sectors; Number of joint cross-council initiatives or funding bids developed through the steering group; Formal endorsement of shared regional food priorities by participating councils
Celebration events	Regional events showcasing impact and learning	Increased political visibility and public support for Good Food Local	Local authority leaders commit to sustaining collaboration and funding	Long-term financial and political backing for regional food governance	Media coverage, council statements, or public communications citing Good Food Local successes; Political leaders committing publicly to continuation of Good Food Local collaboration post-funding; <u>Multi-year</u> funding agreements secured for regional food governance activities; North East region cited in at least one national food policy report, consultation, or parliamentary debate
Knowledge exchange sessions	Peer-learning sessions delivered	Councils learn from each other’s successes and challenges	Successful practices adapted and scaled across multiple councils	Regional knowledge-sharing network sustained beyond project funding	Regional knowledge-sharing network maintained beyond funding period (e.g., mailing lists, forums, events); Officers reporting increased capacity in systems thinking, evaluation, or cross-sector collaboration via surveys; Case studies or resources from knowledge exchange cited in at least two council strategies or plans

Systems change workshops & capacity-building	Training on systems thinking, evaluation, cross-sector collaboration	Officers gain skills to apply systems approaches and integrated planning	Councils use systems tools to redesign policies, procurement, and planning frameworks	Whole-systems food governance embedded across health, environment, and economic sectors	Adoption of procurement frameworks integrating health, sustainability, and equity standards by councils; Introduction of local food environment policies (e.g. planning restrictions) in at least three local authorities; Cross-sector food governance framework adopted linking health, climate, economy, and planning; Regional food governance structure formalised with independent funding and leadership arrangements by project end
Sharing case studies & communications	Toolkits, newsletters, case study libraries produced	Councils access practical tools and examples to inform local action	Regional repository maintained; resources referenced in planning and delivery	NE region recognised nationally for innovation in food governance	Expansion of community-led food initiatives (e.g., "Right to Grow" schemes) supported by councils; Commissioned food-related projects embedded in local authority delivery plans; Regional food governance priorities formally aligned with combined authority strategies (e.g., NECA plans); National funding frameworks or policy calls influenced by regional evidence and advocacy outputs
Policy advocacy & alignment with combined authorities/national forums	Policy briefs, consultation responses, advocacy campaigns delivered	Regional voice coordinated across councils and forums	NE cited as exemplar region in national policy and strategy debates	National frameworks and funding mechanisms influenced by NE experience	Regional food governance priorities formally adopted within combined authority strategies (e.g., NECA plans); Coordinated regional advocacy coalitions established and maintained; North East contributions cited in national policy consultations, parliamentary debates, or strategy documents; National funding frameworks or policy mechanisms influenced by regional evidence and advocacy

Assumptions:

- **Political Will:** Councils and combined authorities remain open to embedding food priorities if framed in ways that align with their strategic agendas.
- **Capacity & Resources:** Local authorities and partners have the time, staffing, and funding to engage meaningfully in benchmarking, collaboration, and implementation.
- **Data Credibility & Use:** Benchmarking and evidence outputs are viewed as credible, relevant, and politically acceptable, and councils have the capacity to integrate them into decision-making.
- **Stability of Context:** National policy, funding, and political environments remain sufficiently stable for advocacy and regional alignment efforts to influence them.
- **Collaboration Value:** Regional collaboration delivers added value beyond local activities, sustaining trust and engagement across councils and partners.
- **Public & Stakeholder Support:** Public attitudes and voluntary/community sector engagement remain broadly supportive of council food system actions.

Risks and Challenges:

- **Political Volatility:** Elections or leadership changes shift priorities or slow adoption of food system policies; risk of food work becoming politicised or associated with a single party.
- **Funding Uncertainty:** Lack of long-term funding post-2025 undermines continuation of regional governance structures and activities.
- **Capacity Constraints:** Limited staffing and time in councils, combined authorities, and Sustain restricts ability to engage deeply in benchmarking, governance, or implementation work.
- **Evidence Uptake Risks:** Benchmarking outputs risk being perceived as superficial, overly technical, or irrelevant if feedback loops are delayed or poorly communicated.
- **Collaboration Fatigue:** Regional collaboration risks being seen as duplicative or burdensome if local value and practical outcomes aren't clear.
- **Equity & Inclusion Risks:** Overemphasis on council actors risks sidelining wider food partnerships, community groups, or sectors beyond public health.
- **External Shocks:** Economic crises, cost-of-living pressures, or other policy emergencies disrupt council focus on long-term food system goals.
- **Implementation Feasibility:** Councils may struggle to translate regional strategies into local delivery due to bureaucratic barriers or competing statutory duties

Annex 2. Advisory Note: Round 3 of the Good Food Local North East Benchmarking Survey

1. Key Strengths to Build On (early impact findings)

- The structured assessment process has catalysed internal reflection and seeded new cross departmental collaborations (e.g. planning, procurement, public health).
- Authorities have used the tool to build the case for governance reform, e.g. through new working groups, healthy weight declarations, and strategy integration.
- High engagement across the region reflects a shared commitment to advancing place based food systems.
- The process is valued not only as an external accountability tool, but also as a local lever for internal planning, advocacy, and coordination.
- For emerging food partnerships, the process has helped initiate contact mapping, legitimise local work, and guide the development of Sustainable Food Action Plans.

2. Challenges Identified in Round 2

A. Perception vs Reality of “Light-Touch”

- Although branded “light-touch,” Round 2 was not experienced as lighter — it still required broad internal consultation and significant effort to complete.
- Framing it as light-touch led participants to expect a simpler, quicker process. When the survey proved more demanding, it disrupted expectations and conflicted with internal timelines and planning cycles.
- Respondents struggled with the subjective framing of performance (“emerging”, “developing”, “exceeding”) which offered less space to explain their work or nuance their progress. In contrast, Round 1’s action-based format allowed participants to describe what was happening on the ground, even if it didn’t fit neatly into a fixed performance band.

B. Framing and Conceptual Clarity

- Changes in question structure and scoring logic introduced confusion about what was being measured — council action, partnership work, or place-wide food systems development. This made it harder to know what kind of evidence to submit, or who should lead on completing each section.
- There was concern about reputational risks where scoring didn’t reflect local progress due to narrowly defined criteria — such as awarding credit only for participation in national schemes or accreditation bodies, even when equivalent local action was being taken.
- Participants felt that the narrative evidence they submitted — often detailed and context rich — was not clearly acknowledged or reflected in final scores. This created perceptions of opacity and unfairness, particularly where the scoring appeared predetermined or disconnected from the nuances of local delivery.

C. Technical and Functional Barriers

- The inability to upload PDFs and poor hyperlink formatting made it difficult to share supporting evidence effectively.
- Strict word limits made it hard to explain complex work clearly; shortened URLs and limited editing flexibility added to confusion.
- Participants were frustrated by having to select ‘no action’ when they simply lacked information from another department — leading to incomplete or misleading responses.
- Only one user could edit a submission at a time, which created bottlenecks and slowed coordination across teams.

D. Timing, Pacing, and Fatigue

- Round 2 followed too soon after Round 1, leaving little time for local teams to digest findings or act on recommendations — especially given delays in receiving detailed reports.
- Many participants felt they were being asked to engage again before they had the chance to reflect or implement any changes from the previous round.
- While regular benchmarking can help sustain momentum, a one-year gap between receiving feedback and starting the next survey would allow for more meaningful progress — rather than a fixed one-year cycle between survey rounds

E. Ownership and Internal Engagement

- Public health teams were often left to lead the benchmarking process alone, without formal mandate or backing from senior leadership.
- The absence of clear communication tools or briefing materials made it difficult to engage other departments and foster shared ownership.
- In some areas, limited political or executive engagement reinforced the misconception that Good Food Local is a public health programme — rather than a system-wide governance tool.

3. Recommendation: Revert to the Round 1 Tool (with Enhancements)

Round 3 should adopt the original Good Food Local - North East benchmarking tool as its foundation, with targeted improvements based on feedback. Round 1 was consistently described as clearer, more credible, and easier to use for local teams. It provided a structure that better supported reflection, planning, and internal collaboration.

Building on this model — rather than introducing a new format — will reduce confusion, restore trust, and ensure consistency across rounds.

C. Process Design and Timing

- Allow a minimum two-month window between survey launch and submission deadline, with advance notice and formal briefings to support preparation and engagement.
- Avoid launching surveys during school holidays or major reporting deadlines, and ensure timelines are communicated clearly and early.
- Introduce a two-year benchmarking cycle post-pilot, but allow flexibility — for example, one year between feedback and next survey round to maximise action planning potential. In the alternate (off) year, provide lighter-touch engagement such as check-ins, peer learning events, or optional progress updates to maintain momentum and visibility.

D. Ownership and Collaborative Completion

- Enable section-specific ownership by allowing questions to be assigned to relevant teams (e.g. Planning, Procurement, Economic Development), reducing the burden on public health to coordinate all responses.
- Avoid defaulting public health teams into the lead role by supporting a broader system wide approach, including a clearly defined engagement strategy and shared ownership model.
- Provide practical tools and guidance to support cross-departmental engagement, such as explainer briefs, talking points, and suggested communications tailored to different council functions.

E. Outputs and Feedback

- Continue to provide tailored, actionable recommendations for each local area — as in Round 1 — using a consistent format that supports internal planning and follow-up.
- Reinforce the use of formal recommendation letters as key tools for internal advocacy, particularly when engaging senior officers and elected members.
- Provide brief guidance notes or decision trees to help participants understand how scoring works and what types of evidence are considered valid.
- Clarify how different outputs will be used and by whom — including dashboards, league tables, and peer learning resources — to ensure transparency and manage expectations around visibility and comparison.

F. Communications and Positioning

- Develop a suite of clear, tailored communications materials to help local teams advocate for and embed Good Food Local, including:
 - A one-page explainer: “What is Good Food Local and why does it matter?”
 - Department-specific briefings (e.g. Planning, Comms, Events, Economic Development) to make the case for cross-council engagement
 - CEO and Elected Member briefing packs to support senior-level buy-in and visibility
 - A stakeholder mapping template to help local teams identify and engage the right internal leads

- Clearly state whether and how survey responses and results will be shared publicly, to ensure transparency and manage reputational concerns.
- (early messaging insight) Consistently frame the survey as a governance and systems change tool — not a performance audit of public health — to support wider institutional engagement.

5. Broader Lessons for Scaling Benchmarking Tools (early insights)

- Be cautious with “light-touch” framing — fewer questions do not always mean less work. Simplification can still create confusion or burden if not paired with flexibility and clarity.
- Platform efficiency must support user needs, not just streamline delivery. Automation and structure should enhance — not limit — meaningful participation and useful outputs.
- Local practice deserves equal recognition. Survey tools must allow space for councils to showcase locally tailored schemes and practices that may not align with national accreditations.
- Keep benchmarking reflective, not punitive. The process should support honest self assessment, learning, and progress — not tick-box compliance.
- Support local adaptation. Delivery teams need better onboarding, practical guidance, and adaptable formats to align the tool with their governance structures, political dynamics, and resource constraints.

6. Conclusion

Round 3 of the Good Food Local benchmarking process offers an opportunity to consolidate learning and build on what has worked well.

Feedback from local authorities, regional leads, and delivery partners highlights several clear priorities:

- The original Round 1 tool is preferred — seen as clearer, more credible, and better aligned with action planning.
- The “light-touch” model did not reduce workload — and often introduced confusion, rigidities, and diminished flexibility.
- Narrative evidence and local nuance matter — users want to tell the story of what’s happening on the ground, not just select from fixed categories.
- Process design and timing are critical — authorities need more notice, a longer lead-in period, and a more realistic cycle (e.g. two years between full rounds).
- Public health cannot carry the burden alone — future rounds must support multi-departmental engagement, with clearer ownership and communications tools.
- The benchmarking process itself has value — as a catalyst for internal reflection, cross-sector conversations, and political buy-in.

With clearer guidance, better functionality, and more realistic timelines, the benchmarking process can continue to build momentum, helping local areas to coordinate action, make the case internally, and track progress over time.

Methods and Approach

This advisory note was developed through a mixed-methods review of feedback from local authority officers, regional coordination leads, and national consultants involved in the Good Food Local (GFL) benchmarking process.

Data sources included:

- Five interviews with local authority officers who participated in both benchmarking survey rounds (Survey 1 and Survey 2), representing multiple local areas.
- A stakeholder interview with consultant, Emily O'Brien, who was involved in the national rollout and technical development of the survey platform.
- An interview with Sustain staff members delivering the London benchmarking model and supporting the North East rollout.
- Analysis of feedback received by Sustain during and after both rounds of benchmarking, including open text responses, usability comments, and support requests.
- Reflections from the GFL North East regional steering group, including insights from the Association of Directors of Public Health (NE).
- Comparative review of the Survey 1 and Survey 2 instruments to identify differences in structure, framing, and functionality.

Analytical approach:

- Thematic coding of interview transcripts to identify recurring concerns, usability issues, strategic tensions, and perceived value.
- Comparative synthesis across stakeholders to identify consistent findings and outlier views.
- Triangulation with platform documentation and advisory inputs from Sustain's technical team.

This approach ensured that recommendations reflect both the lived experience of survey completion and broader strategic considerations, grounded in qualitative evidence and practical insight.

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