

# BRIEFING: CONNECTING LOCAL, PLACE-BASED ACTION TO THE NATIONAL FOOD STRATEGY

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This briefing, submitted to the Defra Food Strategy team, has been developed by the Sustainable Food Places network and its coordinating team. It outlines where national leadership can empower and support local action, champion equity, and target investment to build thriving, resilient communities.

We are enthusiastic about contributing to a robust and effective integration of local, place-based action into the Food Strategy. Our network operates across all four nations in the UK, where much of the responsibility for food is devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and differences exist between nations' policies impacting food and farming. We recognise these differences and identify where UK Government leadership is required to benefit all four nations, and where alignment is needed between nations.

## What is the Sustainable Food Places Network?

The [Sustainable Food Places Network](#) (SFP) brings together 123 cities, towns and regions across all four UK nations, funded nationally by the National Lottery and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and locally through local authority, charitable and other sources.

Each place has a food partnership convening local authority (e.g., public health, environment and business teams), civil society, food businesses and other key players, with a food strategy and implementation plan to drive change. SFP supports local and national action, advocacy, and sharing of proven good practice, provides tools for change, and connects hundreds of individuals and organisations united in driving change through food systems.

The place-based partnerships have demonstrated positive impact across health, food security and a sustainable food business sector, evidenced in independent evaluations [1,2,3](#). Our awards and [cross-cutting action framework](#) drive action, reflecting the pillars of the Food Strategy with several members achieving prestigious Silver and Gold Sustainable Food Places awards for leadership in food systems practice.

The network is coordinated by Food Matters, Food Sense Wales, Nourish Northern Ireland, Nourish Scotland, The Soil Association and Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

Contact: Vera Zakharov, Sustain [Vera@sustainweb.org](mailto:Vera@sustainweb.org); Leon Ballin, Soil Association, [lballin@soilassociation.org](mailto:lballin@soilassociation.org)



## Why is local action so important and effective?

Place-based food policy and practice has national impact, with evidence to show its power to transform places and communities. It is both scalable and replicable to reach a tipping point for significant national impact. This can include (further detail available in the Appendix):

- **Health:** Local use of planning policies to ensure access to premises, kitchens, street markets, land and enterprise development grants; or prevent proliferation of unhealthy practices, including adoption of healthier food advertising policies. Other examples include increasing uptake of national food and health schemes, healthy school breakfast clubs, Healthy Start/Best Start, and supporting food growing.
- **Food Security:** Work across public, community and retail settings to improve supply chains, alongside household level cash-first, food-based and dignity-led approaches.
- **Economic Growth:** Innovating to improve public sector food procurement for good growth, through integrating health and sustainability while providing market outlets for nature-friendly farmers, and supporting good jobs and skills development.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Supporting green growth via enabling diverse horticultural enterprises to access land and improve supply of fresh produce, enable local routes to market, jobs and access to nature.

**Lessons from food system shocks:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, areas with food partnerships and action plans responded faster and more cohesively; SFP found partnerships with food strategies rapidly aligned efforts between local authorities and VCS organisations, avoiding duplication and reaching vulnerable groups more effectively.<sup>4</sup>

## Why does local action need national policy support?

Local, place-based food systems is powerful—but it can only go so far without supportive national policy and investment. To truly transform the UK's food system, local ambition must be matched with enabling national policy.

National leadership sets the direction, creates consistency, and unlocks resources to scale local efforts, removing the barriers that local actors currently face. For example:

- **Policy consistency**, e.g. mandatory school food standards and healthy food advertising rules, ensures fairer, effective local implementation. Creating targets e.g. targets to deliver on the Government's pledge to source 50% local and sustainable food for the public sector, stimulates local supply chains and markets.
- **National investment** in food infrastructure, equipment and market access, through existing or new schemes can unlock significant potential good food supply chains and enable local producers to thrive and grow the sector.
- **Introducing frameworks**, e.g. a household food insecurity national framework, would reduce emergency food reliance and support cash-first and food-based responses, while requiring auto-enrolment in schemes like free school meals, Best Start and Healthy Start would reduce local admin burdens and increase uptake.
- **Look to nations' leadership.** Where overarching national frameworks exist—like Scotland's *Good Food Nation Act*, the *Community Right to Buy*, or Welsh government support for food partnerships as part of its Community Food Strategy, local innovation has flourished. Conversely, gaps or inconsistencies in national policy reduce local impact, waste resources, and create postcode inequality.

# What's happening, and what's needed, at different government levels

## Devolved Nations

- In Wales 'Food Matters' illustrates how food-related policies are developed and delivered in response to the Welsh Government's strategic agenda which is primarily framed by the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#). Welsh Government's recently published [Community Food Strategy](#) aims to strengthen local food systems including through supporting a network of food partnerships.
- In Scotland the [Good Food Nation \(Scotland\) Act 2022](#) places a statutory duty on the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and Health Boards to each produce cross cutting, systems-led Food Plans, whilst the Community Empowerment Act and forthcoming Community Wealth Building legislation support stronger local food democracy.
- [Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework](#) sets the long-term direction and presents a new whole of government approach around food to deliver better outcomes for Northern Ireland, transform our food system for future generations and help position Northern Ireland as the home of sustainable food.
- England authorities have no duty to address food systems holistically, leading to siloed work (see recommendation 2a).

## Local authorities and Sustain's Good Food Local

- High disparity between nations and England creates incoherence and we strongly recommend a statutory duty and/or dedicated funding, to ensure English councils can prioritise food systems work and deliver cross-cutting benefits.
- Some areas, like Birmingham, have invested in food system teams, but most rely on food partnerships to drive and support strategic work.
- Sustain runs [Good Food Local](#), which benchmarks local authority action on healthy, sustainable, and equitable access to good food, complementing SFP. Developed over a decade in consultation with councils, it has benchmarked 31 London councils with support from the Mayor of London, and all 13 councils in North East England, and has recently launched as a national programme available across England and Northern Ireland.

**English Combined Authorities:** Metro-mayors have no formal food responsibilities, although some, e.g. London, invest in food system change voluntarily. *Integrating a requirement to focus on food through health duties being assigned to Mayors in the Devolution White Paper is a key opportunity.*

**Local resilience forums/emergency preparedness groups:** These regional forums are key to emergency planning but don't typically consider or include food resilience. The *National Preparedness Commission* recommends they engage with food partnerships, food enterprises and community groups and assess local food assets to close this gap. *This could be a pivotal opportunity to embed food systems into local frameworks.*

# What could the national Food Strategy do to accelerate the power of local action?

Local leadership can transform places —but national support and policy alignment are essential to achieve lasting food system transformation. This briefing sets out opportunities for national policies to create an enabling environment for place-based approaches to thrive, highlighting which aspects have UK Government responsibility, and which are England-specific or devolved. This should be recognised, prioritised and integrated into the national Food Strategy, covering recommendations under three key areas:

- **Explicit recognition:** A strong UK Food Strategy must combine national and local efforts, with each city, town, and region expected to have a food strategy.
- **Clearer mandating and support:** Use established frameworks and benchmarks, like the Sustainable Food Places Awards (used in Wales) and Sustain's Good Food Local's key indicators. Gather local authority data nationally for accountability.
- **Introduction, implementation or strengthening of policy:** Examples include enforcing public sector food standards for health, climate, and nature, and improving policies on healthy food advertising and promotion.

## Recognition

Food partnerships have proven themselves as effective delivery mechanisms for delivering local and national food priorities as well as driving health and sustainability outcomes.<sup>5,6</sup> The recognition of food partnerships' role in the 2021 National Food Strategy, during the pandemic and ongoing through the cost of living crisis<sup>7</sup> has motivated more local authorities to support the development of food partnership structures in their areas.

Recognition within the national Food Strategy of food partnerships' expertise and their role as critical local infrastructure will unlock opportunities locally, regionally and across all four nations. Metro Mayors should also be encouraged to participate.

## Mandating of reporting and action

A major setback to driving a strategic approach to food systems transformation locally is the lack of a remit within English and Northern Irish local authorities and mayoral authorities to consider food across different policy areas. To date, the food system, especially the obesogenic food system, is considered in public health as standard practice, but does not extend sufficiently to economic development, planning and place-making, skills or even environment and climate change strategies.

It is critical that the Food Strategy recognises the cross-cutting nature of food policy by requiring local and combined authorities to report on and consider how their strategies and policies impact their citizens' food systems.

**SFP recommends mandatory development of local and/or regional food strategies for all local authority areas across the UK.** These can be embedded within existing local government functions -e.g. health and wellbeing boards, joint health and wellbeing strategies, local plans and climate action plans - to avoid duplication and maximise impact. Ideally, they would be supported by national frameworks and delivered through cross-sector, whole food system partnerships.

**Nationally coordinated data collection and impact evaluation, through a shared metrics framework**, would help councils demonstrate the value of their work and secure ongoing support. Frameworks already exist for the indicators that could be used, including Sustain's Good Food Local approach.

## Policy Recommendations

These policy recommendations have been developed by Sustainable Food Places members, structured around the Food Strategy four key pillars of a sustainable food system: Food Security, Health, Economic Growth, and Environment. We have also included a cross-cutting focus on Governance and Enablers, recognising many of these recommendations deliver co-benefits across the four pillars.

The Food Strategy affords the UK Government an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and a unified, all-nations direction on transforming the UK food system. Many of the policy levers listed are predominantly relevant in an England context, as powers relating to food and farming have been devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. However, action in an English context will strengthen related action at devolved nations' levels. Sections 1 and 2 below pertain to UK Government reserved powers and apply to all nations, with backing from our entire four nation network. Sections 3 through 6 pertain mainly to England.

Further information (Appendix 1) is available for each recommendation, showcasing how local partnerships are already responding in practice and where approaches can be replicated and scaled nationally.

### 1. UK-wide Policy Recommendations

- a. **Back an Essentials Guarantee ensuring that, at a minimum, Universal Credit protects people from going without essentials** such as nourishing food and heating, allowing a transition away from a reliance on charitable food aid as a matter of urgency. This should be further supported by a cash-first approach and implementing dignity standards in community advice and support pathways.<sup>8</sup>
- b. **Guarantee that UK food standards are not undercut in any future free trade agreement**, as promised in the UK's Trade Strategy, in order to maintain the highest food safety, animal welfare and sustainability standards and enable farmers and producers across the UK to produce to a higher standard competitively.<sup>9</sup>
- c. **Mandate transparent and meaningful reporting by the food and drink industry** on key human health, environmental sustainability and animal welfare metrics, based on volume of sales. Reporting should be transparent, comprehensive, consistent, quality-assured, and holistic, accounting for retail, catering and supply chain businesses.<sup>10</sup>
- d. **Mandate restrictions on junk food advertising in the media and online**, with adequate powers for enforcement by Ofcom and ASA, ending the junk food cycle and its associated costs to the NHS, communities and local authorities.<sup>11</sup>
- e. **Give food parity with transport and energy in climate mitigation and adaptation funding**, empowering devolved nations, regions and local authorities to prioritise concrete policies to reduce emissions from food.<sup>12</sup>

### 2. Governance and Devolution

- a) **Mandate the development of local or regional food strategies in every authority across the UK**, supported by national frameworks that allow for place-based tailoring.<sup>13</sup>

- b) **Provide long-term core funding to support the coordination of cross-sector food partnerships**, recognising them as key infrastructure for local delivery.<sup>14</sup>
- c) **Ensure devolved governments and combined authorities are empowered and resourced to invest in sustainable, localised food systems**, including through agricultural, public health, and economic levers.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. England-focused policy recommendations

#### i) Food Security

- a) **Introduce a statutory duty for local authorities to develop and deliver a cross-sector food poverty action plan.** This could be part of a wider food strategy and should go beyond a focus on emergency food provision to include income maximisation, cash-first approaches and dignified community food support.<sup>16</sup>
- b) **Mandate the inclusion of food insecurity and food system resilience into national and local risk planning processes**, including Local Authority risk registers, Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and Emergency Preparedness Group (EPG) structures.<sup>17</sup>
- c) **Invest in new and safeguard existing community food assets and infrastructure via planning and spatial strategies** to strengthen community food culture, resilience and supply chain shock preparedness, including food sharing, distribution, production and processing infrastructure such as community food hubs, kitchen and dining facilities, as well as food growing infrastructure, including a rights-based approach to community land access.<sup>18</sup>

#### ii) Health

- a) **Enable auto-enrolment for the Healthy Start Scheme and Free School Meals**, including for children in families on low incomes with no recourse to public funds, removing barriers to accessing vital children's nutritional safety nets.<sup>19</sup>
- b) **Build on existing pilots utilising veg on prescription voucher schemes** and 'nature on prescription' connecting patients with community food growing as public health interventions, with funding allocated to the provider).<sup>20</sup>
- c) **Lever the power of local planning policy through a refreshed National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) with national guidance and support as well as implement a healthier placemaking framework**, backed by national legislation and local authority powers <sup>21,22</sup> that includes:
  - o mandatory restrictions on HFSS advertising on high streets and public transport networks
  - o guidance and powers for local authorities, including training for planners on the role of food in planning, to restrict unhealthy food outlets near schools and support 'healthy zones' on high streets
- d) **Roll out a funded national whole-setting approach to good food**, as exemplified by Food for Life, with targets for schools, early years, NHS, and care settings.

#### iii) Economic Growth

- a) **Provide targeted investment and support to food SMEs and social businesses**, building on the [Local Food Growth Plan](#), including skills and training, start up support, infrastructure, scaling and business efficiency, and a transition to digital systems, in order to boost the 'green growth' of supply of healthy, sustainable, and locally



produced food, to build community wealth, and improve access for SME and farmer-focused supply chains to public food procurement and regional markets.<sup>23</sup>

- b) **Support workforce development and training in sustainable and community food systems**, including food safety, agroecological, cookery and specialist skills such as butchery, linked to entry into public sector and agroecological supply chains, and utilising employability pathways such as further education, apprenticeships and collaboration between DWP and local authorities.<sup>24</sup>
- c) **Support the reintroduction of Public Diners as critical social and economic infrastructure** building on the legacy and history of British and Civic Restaurants provision in the 1940s-1960s, enabling councils to invest in public diners to further support the use of public meals to deliver on climate, public health, food access and ethical supply chain development.<sup>25</sup>

#### iv) Sustainability (Climate & Nature)

- a) **Deliver the government's commitment on public food procurement** to guarantee that 50% public sector food is local and sustainable as well as ensuring meals reflect the Eatwell Guide, cultural needs and diverse preferences. Enable local authorities to facilitate local and sustainable producers to access contracts and work with catering teams to handle seasonal produce and reformulate recipes.<sup>26</sup>
- b) **Reform public food procurement to deliver on climate, nature, animal welfare, health, fair work standards and local economic objectives**, including revising the Government Buying Standards for Food (GBSF), alongside targets to reduce the procurement of livestock products and increase plant-rich options. This should include mandating minimum standards for sustainability and animal welfare for all animal-sourced foods, such as requiring certifications like organic, pasture-fed, or certified sustainable fish.<sup>27</sup>
- c) **Revise national planning policies and guidance to protect, support and encourage sustainable nature-friendly farming enterprises in the Green Belt and wider urban fringe** and strengthen protection for high-quality farmland. Use the Land Use Framework to encourage strategic land use plans that promote large-scale landscape enhancement in urban fringe areas outside designated national or regional park or National Landscape.<sup>28</sup>
- d) **Develop a cross-departmental horticulture strategy** to boost domestic production of fruit, veg and legumes, reducing dependency on imports and enhancing supply chain resilience. This could also increase access to healthy low-emissions diets, support a just transition to farming on peat-free soils, improve supply chain fairness and flexibility, and invest in farmer-led research, collaboration and innovation.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Food partnerships are essential for the development and the delivery of the UK national Food Strategy. As a network of local expertise covering public, community and private sectors, they are best placed to deliver national priorities locally and innovate best practice to share with governments. Provided with the recognition, policy support and security of resources they deserve, they can drive change at scale.

We call on the national Food Strategy to champion place-based approaches to food systems transformation and call for a UK food system where food partnerships are critical infrastructure, enabling communities to thrive and sustainable economies to grow - ensuring that everyone has equitable access to healthy, fair and sustainably-produced food.

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