

Written evidence from the Sustainable Food Places COL0025

Sustainable Food Places is a growing movement of over 80 food partnerships in cities and other municipalities across the UK. Through these cross-sector food partnerships, local authorities and other public bodies are working together with third sector, business and academic organisations to transform their local food system with the aim of improving public health and wellbeing; fostering community connection and resilience; building prosperous and diverse local food economies; and helping to tackle the critical sustainability issues of waste and the climate and nature emergency.

Local Food Partnerships have played a pivotal role in driving and coordinating effective community food responses to the coronavirus pandemic.^{1,2} At a local level, they continue to do so in this cost of living crisis. By adopting a systems approach to food, local actors can have a significant impact in responding to the cost-of-living crisis without compromising the long-term goals of providing everyone access to healthy food while caring for our planet. By experimenting with cooperatives, pantries, food hubs, affordable food projects or other models, food partnerships are testing the limits of new and alternative forms of marketing that don't rely on the just-in-time supply chains that generate so much imbalance of power in the food chain in favour of supermarkets. And which often put back the dignity which 'free food' from food banks can strip away.

Many food partnerships are clear that 'cheap food' is simply not the answer. For a start, many of the 4.1M working in the agri-food sector³ – whether farmers, those working in the processing industry, supermarkets or hospitality – are the ones experiencing food poverty in the UK or overseas. There is a huge imbalance of power in the food system. Only 9% of the £128.7bn generated by the agri-food system reaches farmers and it is estimated that 25% of farmers live below the poverty line⁴. Over two fifths of UK supermarket workers earn below the real living wage⁵ and may struggle to put food on their own table.

Many food partnerships are strongly critical of the common idea that all we need to do is get better at redistributing 'waste' or surplus food. Surplus food redistribution perpetuates the problems it tries to solve i.e. food waste and household food insecurity. It distracts from addressing the root causes of both issues and shifts responsibility from central government and commercial organisations to the voluntarily and community sector and individuals.⁶ And in any case, food partnerships tell us that the amount of surplus in the system drops **radically just when it is needed most**⁷ – so dependency is dangerous.

¹ UWE (2022), The Value of Local Food Partnerships: Covid and beyond, UK Sustainable Food Places Evaluation Report, available online at

https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/uwe_report_value_of_food_partnerships_apr22/

² Lambie-Mumford, H., Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. and Shaw, S. (2021) 'Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)', published July 2021, available online <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket>

⁴ <https://www.fwi.co.uk/news/opinion-no-room-for-error-with-new-food-and-farming-policies>

⁵ <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/news/over-two-fifths-all-supermarket-workers-earn-below-real-living-wage>

⁶ Effie Papargyropoulou, Kate Fearnough, Charlotte Spring, Lucy Antal (2022), The future of surplus food redistribution in the UK: Reimagining a 'win-win' scenario, Food Policy April 2022,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2022.102230>

The current sharp rise in food prices and food insecurity sittings alongside the obesity, nature & climate crises demonstrate system failure. Food doesn't need to become cheaper, but income and benefits need to rise to keep with inflation. Therefore, immediate action is needed to address the cost of living crisis:

Increase working age benefits in line with inflation and ensure employers are paying at least the real living wage. The best strategy to ensure everyone has access to healthy food at a time of rising costs is not through food banks but to ensure incomes and benefits rise in tandem with inflation.

Expand eligibility for Free School Meals to ensure that the two in five children living below the poverty line who don't currently qualify receive a meal. Children in families in receipt of Universal Credit should be automatically enrolled. Scotland and Wales are now forging ahead with primary school meals for all, Northern Ireland is exploring options including universal provision. Children in England are going to be left even further behind unless the Government acts. We need a move towards Universal School Meals to avoid eligibility complexities and ensure no child loses out.

Expand eligibility of Healthy Start/Best Start to include families on Universal Credit (one million additional babies and young children would be eligible) and those on No Recourse to Public Funds. Increase in value to cover the increase in food prices. The cost of infant formula has increased, for some products by as much as 14% - more than double of the average increase in food prices. The current Healthy Start allowance is not enough to pay for infant formula.⁸ Many eligible families, previously on paper vouchers, are being repeatedly rejected for the digital cards and enduring long waits in trying to contact the support centre.⁹ Government need to investigate and resolve the technical errors being reported by health professionals and users and invest in additional capacity for the support centre to reduce waiting times and ensure users are well-supported.

To develop longer term resilience, we need a **Food Bill in every nation, underpinned by an independent body to champion action and scrutinise progress, and a food plan and food partnership in every local area.** Scotland will soon have a Good Food Nation Bill, Wales has cross party support for a Private Members Food Bill and Northern Ireland devised a NI Food Strategy Framework which was opened for consultation last autumn. England needs an overarching Food Bill to drive forward transformative change with a legal backing. The Good Food Nation Bill will require one food plan in every area – other nations can learn from this. England's Government Food Strategy recognises the value of food partnerships, but it is weak in terms of action to support this approach and ways to ensure funding and backing for local areas in England. It also fails to recognise a whole food systems responses to major food system issues, whereas Sustainable Food Places and its

Introduce legally binding government food buying standards for the public sector to ensure the one in four people who eat in the public sector every year receive a healthy,

⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/food-banks-supply-crisis-living-costs-b1976751.html>

⁸ First Steps Nutrition Trust (2022), What the cost-of-living crisis means for infants and young children and recommended actions, Briefing

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/NHSHealthyStart/>

sustainable meal. More contracts should be given to sustainable British farmers. Public procurement is a devolved matter – check what England and NI can learn from other nations.

Introduce mandatory reporting on large food businesses so we can support them to provide better food options to customers. Reporting on health, animal welfare and environmental standards to be made publicly accessible.

Invest in local food infrastructure through existing pockets of funding, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, that would pay for local infrastructure like processing plants, markets, retail and distribution hubs to level up our food system. This would allow more money to be kept and invested in farm innovation as well as circulated in local economies.

Protection of local public health budget and programmes to address growing health inequalities. Only in April 2022 Government cut £100M to adult weight management budget forcing many local authorities to scrap their programmes. Obesity costs the NHS £6B a year and is one of the major drivers of health inequalities.

Commitment to continue the Household Support Fund on the long run as a discretionary fund for local authorities to support the most vulnerable households – local authorities know better than anyone else families in need.

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