

Designing Governance for Transformation in Local and Regional Food Partnerships



Research conducted through the [FixOurFood](#) programme with the [Food for the Future](#) partnership in North Yorkshire shows that transformation requires three shifts in governance:

- Local authorities need dedicated capacity for convening, facilitating and connecting actors across the food system. This ensures partnerships can align around shared goals rather than defaulting to fragmented activity.
- Local authorities should create structures that allow groups to organise and act autonomously while staying connected through clear channels for learning, coordination and shared direction.
- Stakeholders involved in food partnerships should co-design governance through processes that surface shared values, support dialogue and build relational practices that sustain collaboration over time.

Together, these shifts help partnerships move from shared ambition to coordinated implementation to enable conditions for long-term system change.

Summary

Local and regional food partnerships increasingly recognise the need for systemic change to address interconnected challenges such as food insecurity, health inequalities, climate pressures, and rural access. Yet while many food partnerships have developed ambitious visions and action plans, most lack governance arrangements capable of supporting more transformation. Transformation refers to a fundamental shift in how a system functions, what it prioritises, and how it is organised, involving changes to underlying patterns, relationships, assumptions, and structures so that something qualitatively different can emerge.

Description of the problem



Local and regional authorities are increasingly tasked with addressing complex, interconnected challenges such as food insecurity, widening health inequalities, climate impacts, and rural access disparities (Yap & Treuherz, 2025). These challenges span sectors and scales, and often cannot be addressed through isolated programmes or incremental improvements. Yet governance arrangements within many food partnerships remain oriented toward stability, risk management, and short-term delivery rather than the deeper shifts required for transformation. As a result, even where strong visions and action plans exist, implementation often stalls.

Without changes in governance itself, partnerships risk reinforcing existing patterns rather than enabling system wide change (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). Many propose that transformation requires governance that can work with uncertainty, support diverse knowledge, distribute leadership, and maintain coherence across multiple actors and initiatives (Korhonen-Kurki et al., 2025).

In practice this can be challenging to facilitate as local authorities face structural challenges related to being expected to deliver transformation through governance arrangements that are not designed for it. Addressing this gap is essential if local to regional food partnerships are to move from shared ambition to enabling systemic change.

Using an action-oriented, co-inquiry methodology, researchers worked with 30 local authority officers, public health teams, community organisations, and voluntary sector partners to explore how governance could better support regional food system transformation. The process involved iterative cycles of collective sense-making, experimentation, and reflection to enable governance arrangements to be developed and tested in practice (Newman et al., 2026).

Three findings stand out for local and regional authorities:

- **Transformative action requires governance intentionally designed for it.** This research identified three interdependent components of transformation-focused governance: shared values that orient collective purpose; relational decision-making practices that support dialogue and enabling conditions that sustain collaboration and coherence across the system.
- **Distributed governance structures support cross-system action.** Partnerships need structures that enable self-organisation while maintaining system-wide alignment. In the [Food for the Future](#) partnership, this led to a governance model comprising self-organising clusters, cross-connected action groups, and a convening core group responsible for coherence, learning, and adaptation.
- **Governance capacity is essential infrastructure. Transformation depends on relational work** such as convening, coordination, facilitation, and learning. Yet these functions are rarely resourced. Without investment in governance capacity, partnerships struggle to sustain momentum, integrate diverse perspectives, or adapt to changing conditions.

Research Findings

This research was conducted through the [FixOurFood](#) programme in partnership with the [Food for the Future](#) initiative in North Yorkshire (Everson et al., 2025).

Policy Implications for local authorities and food partnerships:

1. Adopt a transformation-focused governance approach in cross-system partnerships.

Work with partners to intentionally design governance around transformation rather than improvement. This means establishing shared values that orient collective purpose, embedding relational decision-making practices that support dialogue and creating enabling conditions that sustain collaboration and coherence. Doing so will help partnerships move beyond fragmented activity and short-term delivery, enabling coordinated action across sectors and scales. Progress can be assessed through evidence of shared purpose, strengthened relational practices, and improved alignment across initiatives.

2. Establish governance structures that support distributed, cross-system action.

Adopt governance structures that enable distributed leadership and self-organisation while maintaining system-wide alignment. Structures such as self-organising clusters, cross-connected action groups, and a convening core group were shown in North Yorkshire to support coherence, learning, and momentum. These structures allow partnerships to respond to emerging opportunities, integrate diverse knowledge, and maintain direction under uncertainty. Impact can be measured through increased cross-sector collaboration, reduced duplication, and evidence of adaptive decision-making.

3. Invest in governance capacity.

Resource the relational and coordination functions that underpin transformation. This includes convening, facilitation, partnership development, and learning processes. These functions are essential for sustaining cross-system collaboration but are often unfunded. Investment will strengthen partnership resilience, improve decision-making, and support long-term change. Progress can be assessed through improved partnership functioning and reduced emphasis on short-term project cycles.

4. Embed transformation-focused governance into local strategies.

Integrate transformation-focused governance into food strategies, health and wellbeing plans, climate and nature recovery strategies, and economic development frameworks. This ensures governance becomes a core enabler of long-term change rather than an add on. Impact can be assessed through alignment between governance arrangements and strategic priorities ie. critically reflect on whether governance enables the desired outcomes of the partnership.



Priority Actions for local authorities and food partnerships:

- Map existing governance capacity and invest in convening, facilitating, and learning functions that enable transformation.
- Establish distributed governance structures, such as self-organising clusters and a convening core group, to support coordinated action across sectors.
- Update local strategies, including food, health, climate, and economic plans, to embed transformation-focused governance as a core enabler of long-term change.

FixOurFood

This brief draws on action research conducted through the FixOurFood programme which focused on transforming the Yorkshire food system. It was funded through the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems programme (2021-2026). This work was delivered in partnership with regional stakeholders across public health, environmental agencies, farming networks, utilities, and the voluntary and community sector.



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