

Strengthening local food systems governance to support Defra's Good Food Cycle

Summary

The UK food system faces rising food insecurity, environmental pressures, and widening health inequalities that undermine Defra's ambition for a healthier, more affordable, sustainable and resilient food system.

Research conducted by the FixOurFood programme in Sheffield shows that local food partnerships can play a critical role in delivering Defra's Good Food Cycle priorities by strengthening food security, supporting healthier diets, and enabling more environmentally sustainable supply chains.

Recommendations:

- Embed local food governance within Defra's food strategy delivery architecture
- Invest in long-term local coordination capacity
- Integrate local food action plans into local and regional policy frameworks.
- Support the development of local food action plans, closer coordination of local, regional, and national governance and metrics, and more inclusive approaches to food systems governance.

Description of the problem



Defra's food strategy recognises that the UK food system must simultaneously deliver food security, environmental sustainability, and improved public health outcomes. However, these objectives are increasingly under strain. Food insecurity is rising due to climate impacts, inflation, and supply chain disruption, with vulnerable households disproportionately affected.

At the same time, the food system contributes significantly to environmental pressures, accounting for a substantial share of UK greenhouse gas emissions (Defra 2025). Diet-related ill health also remains a major challenge, with over 60% of adults considered overweight or obese (NHS, 2026). Defra has emphasised the need for a 'whole system change' and coordinated action across government, industry, and civil society. However, delivery remains fragmented across levels of policy and governance.

Local food partnerships have been recognised for their substantial contributions to delivering local food systems change. However, they are often not well integrated with national policy frameworks; are reliant on short-term funding and volunteer capacity; and do not have the capacity or authority to drive local food systems change. While local food partnerships help develop local food policies and strategies across the country, the lack of accompanying action plans limit their impact. These gaps constrain how local food partnerships can contribute effectively to Defra's core priorities on resilience, sustainability, and equitable access to healthy food.



Research Findings

Key findings:

Local food action plans support the delivery of Defra's Good Food Cycle. The development of the plan strengthened coordination across healthcare, community food provision, food production, and public sectors, enabling progress on food access, healthier diets, and community resilience, directly contributing to Good Food Cycle outcomes on health, sustainability, and food security. The local food action plan supports the delivery of the vision for Sheffield's food system described in the local food strategy.

Local food partnerships provide critical 'delivery infrastructure' but are under-resourced. Partnerships act as convening platforms linking policy, practice, and communities. However, their effectiveness depends on sustained coordination capacity, which is currently inconsistent and often short-term.

Current approaches to local food systems governance risk reinforcing social inequalities. Participation from underrepresented communities remains uneven due to structural barriers, limiting progress towards equitable access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. Local food action plans represent an opportunity for meaningful participation of underrepresented communities in decisions what foods are available, celebrated, and distributed.

Policy integration across scales is weak. Local food plans operate alongside, but are not formally embedded within, Defra's food strategy, land use planning, or environmental policy frameworks, limiting their visibility and contribution to national policy priorities.

Policy Recommendations

Embed local food governance within Defra's food strategy delivery. Defra should formally recognise local food partnerships as delivery mechanisms for the Good Food Cycle and wider food strategy. Defra should integrate local food action plans into national implementation frameworks and reporting mechanisms. This would support improved delivery of food security, health, and sustainability outcomes at the local and regional levels.

Invest in long-term local coordination and capacity. This integration of local and national food systems governance should be supported by a long-term funding settlement for local food partnerships, which require sustained funding to act as system convenors and delivery platforms. This would ensure that local food systems have the capability to contribute to national food policy priorities.

Build upon and scale local food systems approaches to integrating social, economic, and environmental food systems outcomes. Local food action plans and local food policy are delivering impacts across multiple policy areas that are harder to coordinate across national level departments, such as supporting the development of sustainable local supply chains and procurement practices. Every local authority in England should have a local food partnership to lead the development of local food policy supported by national government, see for example the Community Food Strategy in Wales.

Expand inclusive food systems governance. Food systems impact the lives of every community, population, and group in the country. However, many groups are underrepresented in policymaking processes. Defra should develop national guidance and reporting to support more inclusive and representative forms of local food systems governance across the country. This will enable more equitable approach to local food systems governance as well as measurement of progress towards this aim.

ShefFood's LOCAL FOOD ACTION PLAN FOR SHEFFIELD: 2025 UPDATE



Priority Actions

Defra: Establish a national framework linking local food partnerships to the Good Food Cycle delivery plan.

HM Treasury (Spending Review): Commit multi-year funding for local food system coordination, including local food partnerships.

MHCLG & Local Authorities: Embed local food action plans within statutory planning and levelling up programmes.



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).

The work was conducted in partnership with ShefFood, the local partnership for Sheffield and focused on the development and implementation of a Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield.

The research involved sustained collaboration with nearly 100 organisations across local government, health systems, civil society, and businesses, providing robust, practice-based evidence on food system governance from 2022-2025.

References and further reading

Defra (2025). *Agri-Climate Report 2024*. Updated 2025. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agri-climate-report-2024>

NHS Digital (2026). *Health Survey for England, 2024*. Available: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2024>.

Jackson, P., Yap, C., Parsons, K., Treuherz, S., & Roberts, G. (2024). Values-based food systems: the role of local food partnerships in England. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 42: 1379-1393.

Treuherz, S. Leather, L., Yap, C., & Wells, R. (2025). *ShefFood's Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield: 2025 Update*. ShefFood-FixOurFood.

Treuherz, S., Yap, C., & Rowson, S. (2023). *ShefFood's Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield*. Sheffield: ShefFood-FixOurFood.

Yap, C., & Treuherz, S (2025). Emerging processes of territorial food systems governance: lessons from a local food action plan in Sheffield, UK. *Local Environment*, 30(8): 1020-1035.

Authorship

Corresponding author: Christopher Yap at christopher.yap@citystgeorges.ac.uk

Authors: Christopher Yap, Rebecca Wells, Ferne Edwards

Editors: Christopher Yap, Rebecca Wells, Ferne Edwards, Rebecca Newman