

# Learning from Local Food Partnerships



HEALTHY SOIL  
HEALTHY FOOD  
HEALTHY PEOPLE

The H3 project (Healthy soil, Healthy food, Healthy people) seeks to transform food systems 'from the ground up'.

This is one of a series of policy and practice briefs summarising the findings of the H3 project in accessible language and drawing out their implications for government, business and civil society.



ShefFood members celebrate Sheffield's silver SFP award © ShefFood 2024

## Background

Local Food Partnerships are cross-sector organizations that bring together the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. There are more than 90 member organizations in the national Sustainable Food Places (SFP) network aiming to create and implement a food strategy or action plan for their local area.

- Working with experienced Local Food Partnerships in Birmingham, Bristol, Rotherham and Sheffield, the H3 project wanted to learn more about good practice and to explore how this might be 'scaled up' to achieve transformative impact at a national level.
- These partnerships are at different stages of development as measured by the [SFP awards system](#). Bristol holds the highest Gold award, Sheffield holds Silver, Birmingham holds Bronze and Rotherham is currently working towards a Bronze award.

---

***"The collaborative work has been useful to the SFP members in a very practical way – but also valuable to the SFP programme for evaluation, strategic planning and fund-raising purposes"***

---

Email from SFP programme manager,  
26 January 2024



## Method

The policy documents, action plans and websites of the four Local Food Partnerships in the project were reviewed and the SFP database of actions taken by member organizations across the UK was analysed.

- **Three workshops have been held:**
  - » Rotherham (August 2023) – focusing on governance and funding issues
  - » Bristol (October 2023) – exploring issues of equity, diversity and inclusion
  - » Sheffield (January 2024) – discussing the relationship between Local Food Partnerships and the wider food system (specifically food system resilience and disaster preparedness).
- **When asked about the value of this research to their ongoing work, participants reported a number of benefits:**
  - » Sharing ideas with other organizations who are ‘grappling with the same issues’
  - » Translating research evidence into practice on the ground
  - » Contributing to an evidence-based case for food system transformation at local and national levels based on shared experience
  - » Providing the opportunity for less structured discussion (reflective learning) compared to their hectic day-to-day experience (described as ‘firefighting’)
  - » Identifying gaps and future needs (e.g. preparing disaster management plans)
  - » Applying food system thinking in translating knowledge into policy and practice.



## Key findings

- The work of Local Food Partnerships is constrained by a post-COVID financial environment and the current cost-of-living crisis. Despite this, they have produced some exemplary work including local action plans and food strategies.
  - Local Food Partnerships take several different forms, with some embedded in their local authorities while others are independent of them. This has important implications for governance and funding, including their ability to apply for grants and engage in campaigning work.
  - Partnerships recognise the value of a 'food systems' approach, as in SFP's six key interconnected issues: food governance and strategy; good food movement; healthy food for all; sustainable food economy; catering and procurement; and food for the planet.
  - The SFP framework can develop Local Food Partnerships based on local embeddedness and lived experience, building a consensus from the ground up and a shared vision among members.
  - 'Scaling up' to regional or national scales may present a challenge to maintaining these close connections to the locality.
  - Other models are being explored. These do not assume that 'bigger' is always 'better' and include 'scaling out' (replicating successful initiatives in other localities) and 'deep scaling' (making fundamental changes to cultural norms, behaviours and practices at the local, regional or national scale). Further work on these models is needed.
  - SFP has [a range of resources to guide the development of Local Food Partnerships](#). To add value to these, the H3 project targeted specific issues such as governance, EDI and disaster preparedness.
- In particular, we analysed SFP's database of more than 1000 actions by Local Food Partnerships across the UK. [This database is fully searchable and publicly available](#). With SFP's support, we focused on race, equity, diversity and inclusion, producing a synthesis of about 50 reported actions.
  - SFP members can [read the evidence report](#) based on these findings.
  - Our analysis of equity and diversity issues can also be used as a model when reviewing other areas of SFP's business.



## Implications for policy and practice

**For government:** Our research supports the positive value placed on Local Food Partnerships in the National Food Strategy. It is in line with the Government's 2023 Procurement Act, which calls for all public sector commissioning to consider economic, social and environmental wellbeing (with a specific focus on the role of SMEs) and the Public Services Act (2012), which emphasises 'social value' in procuring public services. Our latest research on public procurement takes this work forward, in collaboration with six 'anchor institutions' in Sheffield and a range of local food providers who are committed to supplying healthier and more sustainable food to local schools, hospitals and other institutions.

**For business:** Our research highlights opportunities for SMEs and other businesses to work with Local Food Partnerships to find new markets for their products and to share data and experiences via initiatives such as ShefFood's 'growing and composting' and 'economy and procurement' working groups.

**For civil society:** Our research recognizes the excellent work by Local Food Partnerships under the auspices of the national Sustainable Food Places network. These organizations are fragile, relying on short-term funding and the work of a dedicated group of volunteers, many of whom are unpaid or on the national minimum wage. To avoid the dangers of burn-out and financial insecurity, longer-term funding is needed to increase job security across the sector and to ensure that Local Food Partnerships are socially sustainable and economically viable.

## Key references

- Feenstra, G. and Hardesty, S. 2016.** Values-based supply chains as a strategy for supporting small and mid-scale producers in the United States. *Agriculture* 6 (3): <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture6030039>
- Ostrom, M., de Master, K., Noe, E. and Schermer, M. 2017.** Values-based food chains from a transatlantic perspective. *International Journal of the Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 24 (1): <https://doi.org/10.48416/ij saf.v24i1.112>

## Acknowledgements

This work was produced in collaboration with colleagues from the H3, FixOurFood and Mandala consortia via a Synergy grant from the '[Transforming UK food systems](#)' programme.

---

For further information [visit our website](#) or [watch our film](#).

