

# A force for good

A vision, models, and  
pathways for a local food  
sector which transforms  
lives, livelihoods and  
landscapes.

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# Executive summary

This report communicates the ambition of the local food system to be a driver of transformation.

This ambition can be summarised as follows: local food systems aim to embed good food and good food work in communities to transform lives, livelihoods and landscapes. The local food sector plays an important role in ensuring the resilience and security of the UK food system. In spite of this, it is continually side-lined or ignored in high-level policy debates on the future of UK food systems.

This report aims to strengthen the public and policy understanding of the local food sector by describing its ambition. It was developed through a collaborative visioning process with key stakeholders in the UK's local food sector.

This report is future-oriented. It is not a description of what the UK's local food systems are today, but of where they want to get to, and how they can get there.

The Vision, Models, Definitions, and Narrative section illustrate how local food systems can become an engine of societal, economic, and ecological transformation.

The Strategies section indicates three main arenas for action to make this transformation a reality.

*Let's make food  
a force for good.*



Anna Krzywoszynska



Damian Maye



Stephen Jones

# Why local food systems? Food as a force for good.

Food is an inescapable human need. Whatever social, environmental, or political situation we may find ourselves living in, we all need to eat to survive.

Food shapes our environments. The way that food is grown, processed and distributed forms urban and rural landscapes, the places we live in and the places far away. Food shapes ecologies, neighbourhoods, and cities, from fields to highways to the local store.

Food makes our societies. The way we prepare and eat food is central to our everyday and traditional cultures. Whether having a ready meal in front of the telly, sharing a home-baked muffin at the office, or raising a toast to the New Year with a glass of Prosecco, food connects with one another and with those far away.

Food shapes the world we live in today. The way we grow, produce, distribute, consume, and dispose of food in the UK today is overall societally and environmentally destructive. Many eaters go hungry while good food is wasted; many food workers struggle in jobs with bad working conditions while their companies make huge profits; many environments and waterways are destroyed while the importance of nature to our wellbeing and survival is clearer than ever before. In today's food systems, humans and ecosystems both in the UK and elsewhere are suffering. Because these food systems are so complex and all-pervasive, it can feel like we are trapped in a bleak tale where someone else is writing the plot.

We, the stakeholders who contributed to this report, believe that food can change the shape of the future. Food can be the engine of thriving local economies and communities. We can grow, produce, and distribute food in ways which enliven ecosystems and enrich people's lives. We can use food to create just and fair relationships between growers and eaters within communities, and between communities.

This report tells that story.



# Introduction

## 1

### Setting the scene: local food systems and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a test of the UK food system's capacity to deal with emergencies and crises, events which are likely to become more frequent and more intense as climate change further disrupts ecological and social resources and structures<sup>[1]</sup>.

The images of empty food shelves at supermarkets during the first wave of the pandemic have become iconic, while the effects of disruptions continue to affect many supply chains. For some observers, the food system proved to be highly resilient, adapting quite quickly after initial shortages to key everyday commodities (pasta, tinned tomatoes, flour)<sup>[2]</sup>. Others draw attention to how Covid-19 highlighted and exacerbated societal inequalities in food access, throwing many (further) into poverty<sup>[3]</sup>. How the UK food system will respond in the long term remains uncertain<sup>[4]</sup>.

Local food systems are a frequently missing element of conversations about the future of the UK food system.



This report grows out of the ESRC-funded project “COVID-19: the local as a site of food security resilience in the times of pandemic”, which specifically addressed the role that local food systems did play and can play in such moments of crisis.

### What are local food systems and why are they important?

Local food systems include food production, processing, and provisioning activities which do not depend on their relationships with the dominant retailers. Some aspects of local

1. Dimpleby, H. (2021) *National Food Strategy: The Plan*, available at [www.nationalfoodstrategy.org](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org)

2. FSA, & Demos. (2021). Food in a Pandemic report. *Renew Normal: The People's Commission on Life after Covid*. Retrieved from [www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-food-in-a-pandemic-march-2021.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-food-in-a-pandemic-march-2021.pdf)

3. Sanderson-Bellamy, A., Furness, E., Nicol, P., Pitt, H., & Taherzadeh, A. (2021). Shaping more resilient and just food systems: lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic. *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment*.

4. Duckett, D., Rivington, M., King, R., Juárez-Bourke, A., Lorenzo-Arribas, A. (2021) *Scenarios for UK Food and Nutrition Security in the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, available at <https://zenodo.org/record/4966627#.YVbhcX3TVPZ>.





food systems are 'local by default', in that they are rooted in practices which existed in the pre-industrial and pre-colonial period (e.g. traditional local knowledges; town markets). Others are 'local by design', and came into being as a reaction to the industrialisation of and corporate control over our food systems. These emerged several decades ago around concerns around food's environmental impacts (e.g. reducing food miles, ensuring environmental sustainability in farming), consumers' concerns around the health impacts of foods (e.g. antibiotics use, GMOs), and the economic struggle of agricultural and food system workers. A key feature of local food systems is an emphasis on proximity and transparency as a source of trust. The local food 'ecosystem' is diverse and includes initiatives such as community supported agriculture, direct sales, food hubs, or small-scale 'local' food businesses (e.g. artisanal baking). These businesses and organisations have worked in different ways to produce and distribute produce which is perceived to have a higher social, ecological and health value.

In the public eye, local food initiatives have become associated with the green-ish and health-conscious middle and middling classes. Over recent years, however, local food sector actors (henceforth local food systems) in the UK have become much more than a source of high quality food. A number of third-sector organisations and groups have formed relationships and collaborations with local food systems to achieve wider social objectives. Going beyond environment and health, these groups have started to utilise local food economies as mechanisms through which to address the growing inequality and precariousness of economic life in the UK. Food banks, food hubs, food re-use organisations and others have become part of the local food landscape, connected through local partnerships and networks to provide emergency food services as well as to use food to achieve wider social and ecological transformations. The societal role and transformative ambition of local food systems became especially pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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### **The Covid-19 pandemic as a watershed for local food systems.**

Our research found that the local food sector was crucial to mitigating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on citizens' food security, especially during the first wave in 2020 and the associated strict national lockdown<sup>[5]</sup>. Local food businesses and organisations responded and adapted to new levels and types of consumer demand at a time when the centralised supermarket-dominated food distribution system struggled. Even more importantly, these organisations and businesses were at the forefront of community care, providing emergency food, supplying those unable to leave their homes, and helping local authorities direct action in appropriate ways <sup>[6], [7]</sup>.

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5. Jones, S., Krzywoszynska, A., Maye, D. (2022) 'Resilience and transformation: lessons from the UK local food sector in the COVID-19 pandemic', *The Geographical Journal*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12428>.

6. Thompson, I., Laughton, R., Little, T. (2021) *Vocal for local: Why regional food systems are the future*, Landworkers Alliance, available at <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Vocal-for-Local.pdf>

7. Checkland, P., & Poulter, J. (2006). *Learning for action: a short definitive account of soft systems methodology and its use for practitioner, teachers, and students* (Vol. 26). Chichester: Wiley.

Local food systems were able to play this crucial role largely because of the great personal commitment of individuals working within this sector. This, however, has come at a cost. Our research found high levels of self-exploitation, stress, and over-work as people struggled to sustain their livelihoods in a rapidly changing market and regulatory landscape while responding to the urgent need to care for others through food in their communities. At the same time, the UK national and regional policies continue to focus on supporting the centralised food system, in particular the five main supermarkets which hold the lion's share of the UK's food market. Our review of key UK food policies shows that the role local food systems play in the UK's food system is still largely ignored [8].

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the value of diversity, community embeddedness, and agility which the local food system represent [7]. From a food security perspective, there is thus growing evidence that local food systems are valuable in a variety of ways. Even more importantly, however, local food systems wish to move beyond resilience to transformation. This report sets out this ambition of the local food sector.

## 2

### The origins and purpose of this report

The local food sector played and continues to play a big role in the UK's Covid-19 pandemic experience. In the light of this, our project "COVID-19: the local as a site of food

security resilience in the times of pandemic", asked: What can we learn from the Covid-19 experience to strengthen the local food sector? What future might be envisioned for local food systems? What strategic pathways may help to turn this vision into reality? And how might local food system actors be supported in gaining stronger political and cultural capital?

This report builds upon the outcomes of a series of 3 workshops in which we start to answer these questions. The workshops were held in Spring 2021, with a group of representatives from 13 key local food businesses and organisations. A system-level visioning process was used in order to clarify how local food systems function, what societal outcomes they produce, and what strategies can be used to strengthen them for the future (see methodology section for further details). This report utilizes and expands upon the material developed in the workshop process.



8. Black, J.E., Maye, D., Krzywoszynska, A.D. and Jones, S. (2022) The framing of local food in the Covid-19 pandemic: a policy review of mainstream and sustainable UK food system reports. Report 3 of the ESRC-funded project COVID-19: The local as a site of food security resilience in the times of pandemic. February.

This report puts forward a vision of a food system which is a force for good: a food system which regenerates lives, livelihoods and landscapes.

A range of different illustrations, narrative styles, and graphic aids are used in order to achieve this. While these different resources are clearly underpinned by a shared set of values, the range of representations allows for different entry points, and activates different concerns. You can therefore read the report as a whole, or use sections of it independently.

This main section of the report starts by introducing the vision and models for change that emerged from the scenario exercises described above, followed by three pathways to support a local food system transition. This final section is critical to encourage reflections about where future action (policies, financing models, capacity building, etc.) needs to be targeted. The report aims to:

## 1 Support cooperation.

The local food systems are diverse, and different actors articulate their own visions and values. This report can be used to help build dialogue between different actors by recognising shared objectives (the Vision, the Definitions, the Narrative), by clarifying where different groups' efforts are situated in relation to the overall system (the Models), or for providing a framework for exchanging knowledge around transformation strategies (the Pathways).

This report can further be used to build cooperation with other organisations or businesses who are not working in the food sector. As the vision and the models illustrate, the objectives of the local food system go beyond food itself. The vision and the model can help to clarify where collaborating with non-food specific actors can create win-win situations.

## 2 Enhance visibility and public image.

As this report makes clear, the ambition of the local food sector is to be an engine of community and environmental regeneration, and to enhance and enrich people's lives in a number of ways: to revive livelihoods, landscapes, and life experiences, and bring security, connectedness, and joy. As local food systems continue to be side-tracked and ignored in national and regional policies, this report can help to communicate the range of the local food system's ambition. For organisations and businesses, the report can also help to communicate their values and objectives to policymakers, customers, members, and the wider public.





# What can local food systems do?

## The Models

We can think of a local food system as a cluster of linked activities which together make a purposeful whole. Such a model-based representation allows us to look at key relationships between the different elements of a local food system, trace its key dynamics, and better understand what outcomes it generates.

This section presents two models of the local food system co-constructed with key stakeholders from the local food sector.

**Each of these models illustrate local food system actors' understanding of how a local food system would ideally function and what it would achieve.**

The **Ecosystem Model** offers a detailed description of the various activities a local food system consists of and the relations between them. The **Six Rs Model** is a synthetic representation of a local food system. It presents a powerful vision of a local food system as an engine of societal and ecological regeneration. Please see the Methodology for more information on how we developed these two models.

## The Ecosystem Model

What should be the elements of a local food system which regenerates lives, livelihoods and landscapes?

A local food system can be thought of as an ecosystem of elements and activities.

**The Ecosystem Model illustrates what components and activities would allow local food systems to achieve their transformative ambition.**

The centre of the Ecosystem model is the **local production and consumption of food.** This presents a hub for a number of virtuous activity cycles which make a local food system an engine of resilience, decent livelihood opportunities, and lively communities.

**These cycles are:**

**Building a fair local food economy:**

more food is produced and consumed locally > which enables an equitable and transparent local food chain > which ensures a fair distribution of surplus > which weaves a resilient economic fabric > which enables further local production and consumption of food.



# What can local food systems do? The Models

## Creating a vibrant food community

more food is produced and consumed locally  
 > which deepens the community around food  
 > which allows people to develop skills and solidarity  
 > which ensures a fair distribution of surplus  
 > which weaves a resilient economic fabric  
 > which enables further local production and consumption of food.

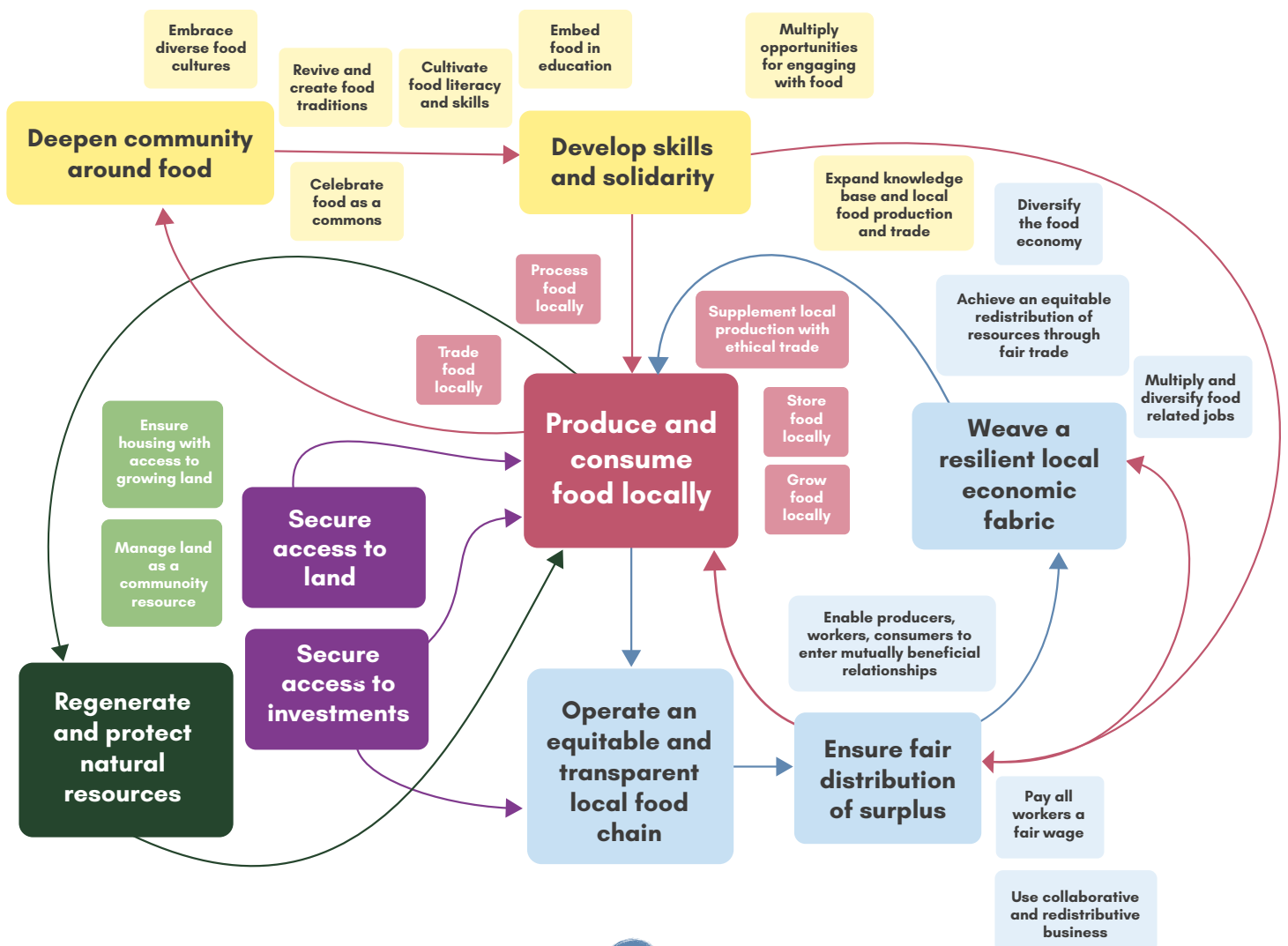
## Regenerating nature

more food is produced and consumed locally  
 > which regenerates and protects local natural resources  
 > which enables further local production and consumption of food.

For these cycles to exist, the following **enabling conditions** must be met: people in the local food system must have access to land, and access to investments.

Additional comments which surround the key building blocks of the Ecosystem Model are used to give further information about the content of the blocks (e.g. the 'developing skills and solidarity' block may include activities such as embedding food in education, cultivating food literacy and skills, etc.).

## The Ecosystem Model



# What can local food systems do? The Models

## The Six Rs Model

Today, local food systems support the local production and consumption of food. But they also do much more than that. And their ambition is to do more still: to be an engine of regeneration of landscapes and of communities.

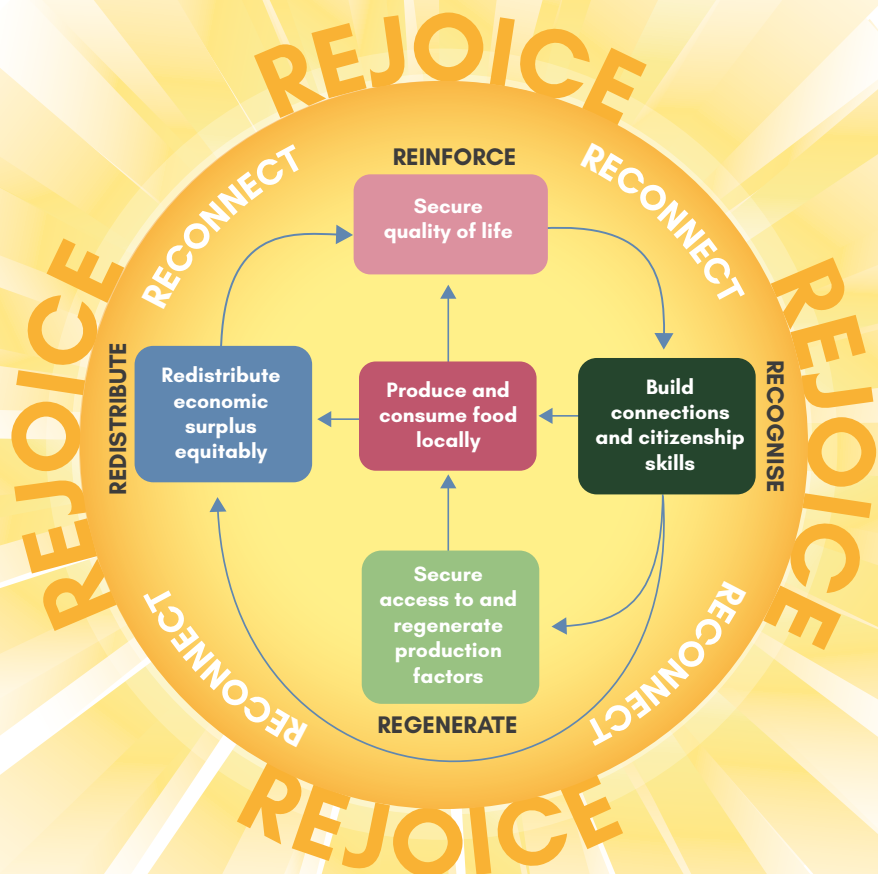
**The Six Rs model illustrates the societal and ecological values that local food systems aim to achieve.**

An ideal local food system is founded on a *reconnection* with the world in both its ecological and societal dimensions. This is a reconnection which a local food system nourishes in turn through its linked and positively reinforcing activities:

- **Reinforcing** members of the community. The system secures their quality of life by providing basic existential safety.

- **Recognising** shared humanity. The system reconnects different actors in the food system and creates skills to build better cooperation which benefits all. By being embedded in a community, it rebuilds human capacities.
- **Regenerating** resources. The system protects and improves soils, water, and ecosystems by growing appropriate crops using environmentally friendly growing methods.
- **Redistributing** economic surplus. The system ensures that more people can benefit from the food economy by using business models based on cooperation and redistribution rather than individual profit accumulation, and by creating more good quality employment opportunities.

The emergent property of this series of relations is founded on reconnection and a deep sense of joy (*rejoice*), which enlivens everything that goes on in and also beyond the community. An ideal local food system is thus a nested system of virtuous cycles that, on an ongoing basis, spins out health, belonging, security, livelihood opportunities, joy, and abundance.





# What can local food systems do? The Vision



## The Vision

This illustration conveys the vision of a community-embedded food system, which we developed with local food stakeholders. At the heart of the vision is the sharing ethos symbolised by the table at which everyone is welcome. Connecting urban and rural environments, the local food system supports and contributes to both urban and rural livelihoods. It enhances urban and rural landscapes by improving ecological conditions in both.

It connects to other locales through fair and transparent trade. This vision conveys the overall regenerative ethos of local food systems.



# What can local food systems do? The Definitions

## The Definitions

**Everyone working with food is rewarded in a fair way and has security.** Producing, processing, distributing and exchanging food uses mainly local natural and human resources, and produces sustainability and health. It is easy for producers and consumers to enter mutually beneficial relationships. This allows us to restore and protect our cultural, human and natural resources for current and future generations.



**Our local food system helps us to be a resilient community.** We use food-related activities to protect basic resources for life, and to support our society to thrive. This means we can deal better with crises now and in the future.

**Our local food system is made up of many interconnected activities which respond to the rhythms of nature and in which we can all participate.** We have re-claimed food practices, and our encounters with food make us enthusiastic about and committed to our community and place. We are in touch with the character of our place through its produce. We experience the joy of communal activities around food. By working together, we embrace the benefits of sufficiency and seasonality. We are shifting our mindset from treating food as just a commodity, to using food to build a relationship with nature and one another. As a result, our food system regenerates people and nature - we build mutually beneficial relations with our place and with one another.

# What can local food systems do? The Narrative

## The Narrative

This section is written as a 'tale from the future'. The Narrative presents a fictional future interview with local food system actors and activists who were working at the coalface of local food systems transition in 2020. In the Narrative, they describe a world in which local food systems have achieved their ambition, and reflect on how they got there.

The Narrative is built from materials developed with local food system actors in our project. Please see the Methodology for more details.

“Well, you know, in the 2020s in the UK, food poverty and insecurity were really bad. And food production was environmentally and societally destructive. So ensuring access to healthy and sustainably produced food was the first objective of local food systems. That’s why all of this started...





...but we realised that we can achieve much more than food access, much more even than better conditions for food related work. We saw that we can use the power of food to regenerate places and communities. Starting from the local, we could do something really big."

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# What can local food systems do? The Narrative

...we achieved this essentially by localising and diversifying the food economy. The food system was really centralised back then. But you didn't have to go very far back in time to find that the idea of disconnecting your community from your food production system was just unthinkable. So re-embedding the food economy in a place and in a community was the first step.

That meant building a local food economy where more people could get access to good, meaningful jobs - whether that is in growing, processing, transporting, preparing, selling, or re-using food. When we looked at the food system as it was in the 2020s, we saw all this money ending up in supermarket headquarters, and what good was that doing? In all areas, we were being choked by corporate interests.

The money needed to be where the power is and the agency was to create a better food system, that is close to the place where it is produced.

*So we built business models that were redistributive; when we make a profit, we redistribute it and reinvest it into the system.*

We keep capital and profit in the community to create jobs and improve people's life security.

Reclaiming food as an inherent part of community life made all sorts of other things possible. All the goods that our local food systems produce - good employment, good food, food security, skills, mental health - it all comes from this food economy-community connection. Our local food system is like a thread that runs through all of the community life.

*community*



## What can local food systems do? The Narrative

I mean, a local food system is complex, it is big, you know. Growing, processing, transporting, cooking, selling, trading, consuming, processing wastes and surplus... And then there is the infrastructure – the seeds, the fertilisers, maintaining machinery, building polytunnels, managing the online platforms, and all the skills and training that this requires – these are all such important jobs. And they need to be good jobs, where wages are attractive, and there are good living and working conditions. And producers need some sort of a guarantee that their produce will be bought, so there have to be contracts in place, as well as trust, so that people can be sure that the food they have made, using good, environmentally sound practices, that they can sell it. We had to find ways to keep these jobs in the communities, to support them. For example, we created shared investment and capital funds to help people build their businesses. That kept the capital in the community.

Yes, today the food system is really woven into community life. It both holds the community together, and creates it. At different points in your life, you can 'hook up' to the local food system in different ways – like you did when you were at school, and you worked at the community supermarket during the Christmas crunch-time.

*Good food lives in the daily life. And it's always doing more than just feeding people. It is upskilling, and helping people be physically active, it's making cities greener and more resilient, it's making it easy to connect to your neighbours – like when we do that kimchi festival in autumn, and we all make it together, I mean that is literally buckets of fun.*





# What can local food systems do? The Narrative

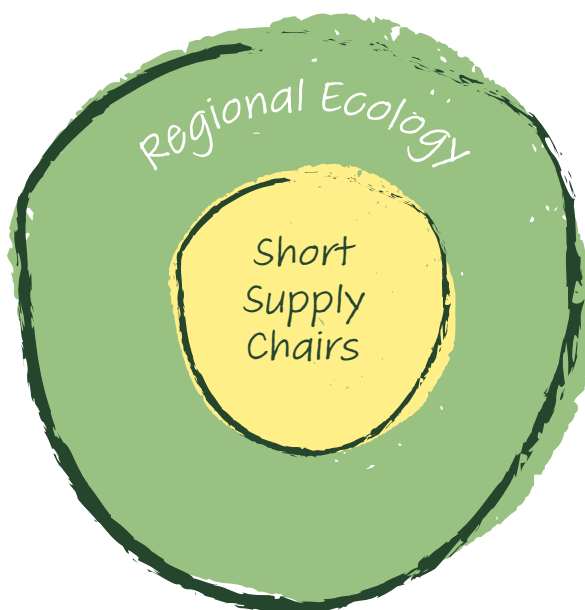
*It's easy nowadays to participate in the food system, as a worker, or as a learner, or as a volunteer. And because of this our local food system makes our communities richer, and our people healthier and more economically secure. I think that's pretty neat.*

I think people used to really worry about the exact geography of the 'local', because one of the big things when this all started was food miles. And geography is very important, but it does not have straight-forward 'cut off points'. Closing finance loops, and nutrient and resource loops, that is best accomplished within regions. We do prioritise building direct links between local producers and consumers. That's because more direct food chains are a way for both consumers and producers to retain more power, and to make more informed choices. It also produces transparency and helps maintain communication.

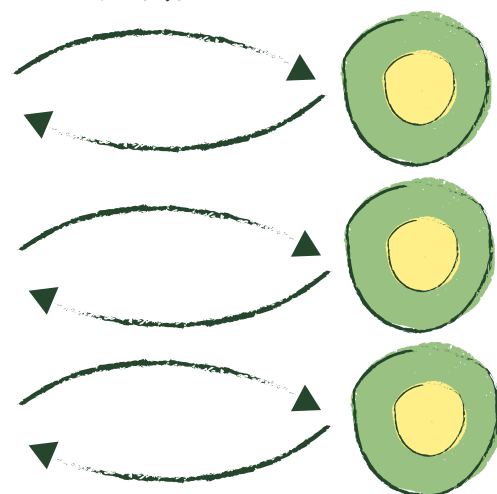
But we are careful to keep the focus on how this local scale of food systems supports communities, embedded in ecologies. If you just focus on a short supply chain, that could be a massive company supplying directly to a supermarket, you know. Or if you just look at carbon there is no reason why local food is necessarily better. But if you start thinking not from the scale or geography, but from the point of view of community, all these other things that you want just seem to kind of flow quite naturally.

It's also a communication between communities. We're not self-sufficient in food, although we are much more self-sufficient than we were before. But no-one wants to just eat turnip for months on end! Of course we trade with other communities. But we do it through arrangements that are fair, just, and transparent. Our trade does not create water debt or carbon debt, or feed into horrible working conditions, or create other costs.

Here, I can draw what I mean for you... That's how it works - local systems, but interconnected.



Fair &  
Transparent  
Trade



# What can local food systems do? The Narrative

*Where the scale of local is really important is in relation to nature. Local food systems are what is called "ecologically embedded".*

That means that nature is an equal member of our community. They respect the ecological and environmental boundaries in terms of access to and use of resources. I like to think of that as a creative limitation. It's a limitation which forces us to be better at what we do. Do you know how few varieties of vegetables were being grown in the UK in the 2020s? How few grain cultivars? Did you read how the farmland birds were disappearing, because the landscapes were so homogenous? It was really bad. By working within the limitations of ecologies, we have actually made the landscapes much more diverse, and more attractive to wildlife. And that's also where our cultures come from, the local cultures we have now.

Food was always about sociability, but that sociability is now extended beyond just families. We are more in touch with the geographies and with the seasons, and that is a limitation, but it's also a gift. We draw from our creativity, and from the creativity of your community, we collaborate more. So our lives feel rich in a completely different way. You know we nearly lost the harvest festivals? I know, hard to believe.

*We feel a passion for seasonality now, we look forward to seasonal treats, we know what foods are coming down the line and we enjoy them when they come.*

We've learnt when we need to capture the abundance and when we can benefit from it – even from jars! And we have all these new, local traditions around food. When we get the mutton from the uplands, we recognise that connection, we recognise their contribution as much as their food, it's a feast. And when they get our apples, that's a feast too. Something special. Something to look forward to.

*How do we know we are doing well? Well, the fact that health has improved in our communities is a big signal. People are well-nourished. No-one goes hungry. I think that is a pretty great achievement.*

Greater self-sufficiency is an element of this, for sure. And the fact that much more of the local pound stays here, in the community. We have more control now over the basics which support our lives, and over how our lives are organised. So when we get bad global harvests, and you know this is happening all the time now, we are not as vulnerable. We have greater security, overall. And we are much happier."



# Pathways to a local food systems transition

The previous sections of this report showed the ambition of the local food sector to be an engine of societal and ecological transformation.

How to bring about this future in which local food systems can achieve their full potential? Where should we focus our activities and energies? What tactics could help us along the way?

In this section of the report, we present three key arenas for action which we identified by working with local food system actors. You can hear their voices in the speech bubbles.

- **changing the conditions;**
- **building new infrastructures;**
- **using pragmatic strategies.**

**Top-down action from governments is needed to change the systemic conditions in which food systems operate. Action within local food systems is needed to build physical, digital, and legal infrastructures to actualise the values of the local food systems sector. Action from within local food systems and reaching out to other arenas of societal life is needed to build strategic alliances with the objectives of other actors.**

As the visioning materials in the previous sections illustrate, local food systems have the potential to be deeply inter-connected with all arenas of social, economic, and political life. Therefore, action in any of these arenas, when motivated by values associated with local food futures, can connect to and reinforce efforts to build up local food systems which fulfil their potential as engines of community and landscape regeneration. Whether through advocacy, normalisation, or pragmatic strategizing, organisations and individuals can contribute to building a change in meanings and habits and grow local food futures.





# Pathways to a local food systems transition



## Changing the conditions

**Orientation:** top-down.

**Mode of action:** advocacy.

*“You need to really create the conditions that allows local food systems to develop, and that big change has to come from government (...) I think it’s really hard to see how we can go forward without this systemic change”*

Today, local food systems operate in an indifferent or even a hostile legal, financial, and policy environment. Changing these operating conditions through appropriate policy and legislation is a necessary component of the transition to local food systems.<sup>[1]</sup> Lobbying and advocating for policy changes is indeed a long-standing objective of local food movement organisations. In particular, the following issues require a policy-level change to remove barriers to access and ensure a level playing field for local food system actors.

## Land access

A lack of access to land in both urban and rural settings is one of the key obstacles for UK local food systems. Land in the UK is incredibly expensive, its use is limited by tax and subsidy policy which encourage people to treat it as a speculative asset and as a result much of it is owned by a tiny percentage of the population<sup>[2]</sup>. Key areas of focus include prioritising land access and affordability for community-oriented and environmentally regenerative food growing in planning policies and reforming policy related to agricultural subsidies and taxation. This would remove a major barrier to local food initiatives that have the potential to deliver significant social and environmental benefits.

An example of addressing this issue is a Welsh Government funded partnership led by Social Farms and Gardens called Resilient Spaces. Resilient Spaces is piloting a range of community led models for managing greenspaces and food production. This includes creating new allotments, using public land for food production, setting up local food hubs and a new training scheme for agro-ecological growers. See this website for more information, with partners including LWA and Shared Assets: [www.farmgarden.org.uk/resilient-green-spaces](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/resilient-green-spaces).

You can also see great examples of land access success stories on the website of Shared Assets, a community interest company which develops and promotes new models of communal land use: [makinglandwork.wordpress.com/case-studies](http://makinglandwork.wordpress.com/case-studies).

1. For a further review of the potential of localised policies for supporting just local food systems, see Food, Farming and Countryside Commissions' 2021 report *Food Builds Community* <https://ffcc.co.uk/assets/downloads/FFCC-LT-Food-Builds-Community-July-2021.pdf>

2. Shared Assets. Access To Land & Land Reform. Policy Areas. Retrieved from <https://sharedassets.org.uk/policy-area/access-to-land>

# Pathways to a local food systems transition

## Fair and supportive market conditions

In the dominant food system, it is possible for companies to operate to very low standards in relation to labour, trading practices, and environmental performance. This can include employing staff on minimum wage and zero hour contracts. It can also include taking advantage of a lack of legislation on for example environmental performance, or food chain transparency. It can even include benefiting from the weak enforcement of existing legislation, such as that concerned with controlling environmental damage on farms, or with preventing unfair trading practices. Large companies are able to use power imbalances to exploit such gaps and weaknesses, to benefit financially while passing the real costs of their operations on to the society at large.

In contrast, companies and organisations in the local food sector who proactively improve their labour conditions, ensure fair trading practices, and minimise environmental harm internalise these costs. The higher costs of operating for environmental and societal benefit means these companies struggle to compete on price, size, and reach.

Changes in policy are needed to address this imbalance, and to support the growth of local food systems through both push and pull tactics.

On the push side, raising the legal standards and enforcing existing legislation around labour, trade, and environmental impacts would level the playing field while allowing local food systems to grow. Key areas of focus include raising the pay for everyone working in the food system to a living wage, enforcing and strengthening environmental legislation on-farm, and preventing companies from using unfair trading practices.

On the pull side, policies can create conditions which make it easier for local food system actors to access the markets and to grow. Aligning public procurement towards local food system actors is a long-standing objective.

Beyond ensuring demand, dynamic public procurement should be accompanied by a range of investment and upskilling measures directed specifically at local food system actors. Targeted financial instruments such as lower taxation, and government grants and loans would further help stimulate the local food economy.

In addition, policies need to address the disparity in research and development funding available to the dominant food system and to local food system actors. The status quo in production practices and business organisation is supported by a large government and private investment in research and development. In contrast, research into farming, technological, and societal innovation which aims to transform this status-quo is severely underfunded. For example, a 2020 report by the CIDSE found that only just over 2.7% of funds channelled by the EU through the “Rome-based agencies” (FAO, IFAD and WFP) between 2016 and 2018 had an agroecology component, and that in the UK financial support for transformative agroecology was non-existent. While investment into technological innovation such as agricultural robotics keeps growing, funding for research into regenerative and ecological farming practices is still lacking. Making more funding available to research into agroecological growing methods, alternative business models, and linked socio-ecological issues would be a huge boost to a local food systems transition.

One way of addressing this issue is through public procurement. In Wales’ Carmarthenshire county, anchor institutions are being used to create an inclusive local economy supporting short value chains and local food production.

See more here:

[www.thecarmarthenshirewewant.wales/media/cklllowf/cles-food-procurement-feb-2021.pdf](http://www.thecarmarthenshirewewant.wales/media/cklllowf/cles-food-procurement-feb-2021.pdf)

# Pathways to a local food systems transition



## Building new infrastructures

### Orientation:

networked between local food actors.

### Mode of action:

normalising (embedding and routinizing).

Part of the success of the current food system lies in how deeply it shapes what is considered to be the 'normal' or habitual food experience, be it for consumers or for businesses. The dominant food sector operates through well-embedded and routine infrastructures of food production, distribution, and consumption. These infrastructures are both physical, such as the combination of cars, parking lots, and supermarkets, and habitual, such as 'the weekly shop'. At the same time, these infrastructures lock all actors into producing ecological and societal damage.

The transition to local food systems can be supported by creating a new form of 'normal', underpinned by different values and giving rise to different futures. This means constructing alternative infrastructures, based on and productive of the values of the local food system. These infrastructures can both compete with the dominant ones, as well as thrive in the areas omitted by the mainstream food system.

Beyond their functional usefulness in building up the circulation of local produce and connections between local food system actors, these infrastructures can serve as powerful normative tools, exemplifying the kinds of livelihoods and customer experience which can be achieved through value-based market mechanisms. Creating these infrastructures requires a cooperation between local food system actors.

## Online platforms

*"When you shift everything to the online sphere, we can actually compete well with the supermarkets – if the food system no longer depends on having a conveniently placed metal box, what we can compete on is values"*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, online sales of food have grown significantly. The growth of online food shopping can be an opportunity for the local food sector, as it levels the playing field in terms of customer experience. Indeed, local food system actors have already been very active not only in enhancing their individual online presence, but also making use of existing online platforms (e.g. the Open Food Network, Better Food Traders).

To compete with and differentiate themselves from dominant food sector providers, local food sector actors need to clearly communicate their values and demonstrate how those values are operationalised through the online infrastructure. This may include communicating the inclusion and exclusion criteria for being able to sell on an online platform, or highlighting the non-monopolistic structure of the platform itself (e.g. open source software).



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An example of such action is the Open Food Network, which provides open source software to help small producers connect directly with customers and with one another. All members adhere to a co-created set of values and a community pledge.

To learn more about the Open Food Network, see <https://about.openfoodnetwork.org.uk/>



An example of such change is the company Riverford Organic, an organic farm and vegetable box delivery company. Since 2018, Riverford is majority owned by its employees, and shares are held in trust for all staff equally.

To learn more, see [www.riverford.co.uk/ethics-and-ethos/employee-ownership](http://www.riverford.co.uk/ethics-and-ethos/employee-ownership)



## Fair contracts and agreements

Some of the infrastructural elements of the current food system, such as supermarkets and wholesalers, work well in terms of aggregating produce, creating efficient distribution, and ensuring a dependable flow of goods. They are, however, typically built on agreements and contracts which centralise power and profit.

Local food system actors can reclaim those elements of the food system which work well, but underpin them with legal and financial governance mechanisms and structures which build fair relations and allow for an equitable distribution of surplus. Changing the mode through which such elements of the food system operates while retaining their functional elements means minimising the barriers to entry for customers, and normalising a different food reality.



# Pathways to a local food systems transition



## Using pragmatic strategies

### **Orientation:**

networked beyond local food actors.

### **Mode of action:**

linking and appropriating.

The previous visioning materials indicate that the food element of a local food system is an engine of larger societal transformation. This means that through food activities, a local food system connects in and transforms multiple ways with all areas of societal life, such as skill acquisition, community development, maintenance of health, creation of good livelihoods, improvement of ecosystems, and others (see the Models).

This societally embedded nature of local food systems means that there is no one 'correct' starting point for a transition. People can use a variety of schemes and initiatives ostensibly directed at non-food related areas of societal life to grow the local food sector. Examples may include delivering upskilling through food growing, enhancing health through green prescribing of physical activity on allotments, greening of urban environments through food-producing planters, etc.

Such opportunistic 'piggy-backing' uses all sorts of pathways to strengthen and embed food related activities in communities. It is a strategy for operating within a context in which local food is still largely invisible and does not attract direct funding or policy attention.

An example of such pragmatic strategy is linking funding for social prescribing to food growing. Health professionals in the UK can use social prescribing to connect a patient with a community organisation in order to improve their mental and physical well-being. Organisations which offer people an opportunity to exercise and connect with others around food growing are good candidates. In Leeds, the charity Groundwork linked mental health social prescribing funding with local food growing to develop a community garden whose produce are fed into local food banks.

For more, see [www.groundwork.org.uk/green-social-prescribing-in-yorkshire-the-north-east](http://www.groundwork.org.uk/green-social-prescribing-in-yorkshire-the-north-east).



**Food is a need  
we have three  
times a day.  
Why not use  
that to enable  
good things  
to happen?**



# The methodology behind this report

This report was produced as an outcome of a visioning and backcasting process conducted with representatives of 13 key local food businesses and organisations. The objective of this process was to conceptually explore the untapped potential of local food systems through visioning, and to help local food system actors to reflect on pathways and strategies to mine that potential through backcasting. In addition to the research team, the visioning and backcasting processes was designed and guided by an expert facilitator, Philippe Vandebroek from the consultancy shiftN.

The visioning and backcasting process constituted of a series of three online workshop sessions of 2,5 hours each (organised in April, May and June of 2021), and additional short writing tasks between the workshops. Workshop 1 supported the visioning element of the process. Workshop 2 developed a functional blueprint of a future local food system. Workshop 3 examined the contextual factors that enable or hamper the working of a future local food system, as well as the outline of a transition path that connects the present to the future through a set of actions (a strategy) that work on a range of leverage points (backcasting).

## Soft Systems Methodology

Our visioning and backcasting methodology was informed by Soft Systems Methodology (SSM, Checkland and Poulter 2006). SSM is an action learning approach developed to structure a process of inquiry into a situation considered as problematic by a 'would-be improver' of that situation. We are careful to stress that our visioning and backcasting process does not amount to a full-fledged soft systems analysis.

Arguably, it is somewhat difficult to define what a full-fledged analysis is, given that is intended to support an open-ended process of tinkering with(in) a complex challenge.

A SSM starts with the appreciation of a problematic situation and of the context in which the inquiry into that situation unfolds. A debate is then organised about feasible and desirable change. Conceptual models relevant to the problematic situation (not of the problematic situation) are developed to support that sense-making process. The gap between these models and the real world provide clues about possible interventions into the real world that seek to improve the situation<sup>3</sup>. Once accommodation is reached between participants in the inquiry and action is taken, the cycle of inquiry can start all over again.

In the case of this project, the starting point of the process was a concern that the local food system were not currently fulfilling their ambitions and potential. Other areas of this research project pointed to a deep disconnect between the dominant image of local food systems as an exclusionary sphere of consumption for the health- and environment-conscious middle class, and the much richer and more complex reality of local food system actors (ref paper). We hoped that deepening our understanding of the local food systems' ambition and trajectory will support local food actors in addressing this disconnect between public perception and the transformative potential of local food systems.

The objective of the process was to create a vision of a local food system that realises its full potential.

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3. The gap assessed in a strategic gap analysis is therefore a special case of the more generic gap between conceptual model and real world that is at the heart of SSM.

# The methodology behind this report

## Summary of the workshop process

**Workshop 1** ('visioning') was devoted to the question 'What constitutes a desirable local food system? What are the attributes and values which local food systems express and embody?'. The workshop was designed to help participants to articulate the purpose, attributes and values of a future local food system. The aim was to envision a local food system that reflects the hopes and ambitions of the participating stakeholders, and in doing so revealed perceptions on underlying values and desired performance.

In the workshop, the participants were split into three subgroups, facilitated by members of the research team. The groups, firstly, were asked to describe an appealing, well-functioning local food system in 2030. This visioning step was guided by a thinking tool named CATWOE, which is part of the standard Soft Systems Methodology toolbox<sup>[4]</sup>. The emerging visions were then compared to detect patterns of alignment ('dimensions'). Then, the participants developed a free-flowing, narrative description of a local food system to give more texture to each of the identified dimensions of a local food system (named 'liveliness', 'resilience' and 'political ecology'). This material provided the basis of the Narrative element of this report.

**Workshop 2** ('functional blueprint') took as a starting point three 'root definitions', constructed by the research team from the three narrative descriptions in Workshop 1. A root definition is a staple ingredient of an SSM analysis. It is loosely defined as 'a core way to describe a system' by answering the what, why and how questions about a human activity system.

In three self-selecting groups, participants worked with the research team to amend or reword the root definition in a way that would reflect their thinking more closely. This material provided the basis of the Dimensions element of this report.

Following this definitional work, the participants worked to translate the root definitions into diagrammatic representations, called 'activity models'. An activity model consists of nodes and connections between nodes, where each node represents an activity (something that needs to be done), the connections between the nodes are logical connections (something that needs to be done before something else can happen). Together, the activities ensure that the local food system achieves the purpose expressed by the root definition. The modelling highlighted not only the differences, but also the connections and overlaps between the three perspectives.

The research team consolidated and refined the activity models into more synthetic representations of the local food system, which were then commented on by participants in **Workshop 3**. This material forms the basis of the Models section of this report. This was followed by a backcasting exercise which used the Three Horizons framework to facilitate discussion about different levers of food system transformation<sup>[5]</sup>. This material forms the basis of the Pathways section of this report.

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4. Checkland, P. ; Poulter, J. (2006). Learning for action: a short definitive account of soft systems methodology and its use for practitioner, teachers, and students (Vol. 26). Chichester: Wiley.

5. Sharpe, B., A. Hodgson, G. Leicester, A. Lyon, and I. Fazey. 2016. Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation. Ecology and Society 21(2):47. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-08388-210247>.

