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What constitutes food system resilience? The importance of divergent framings between UK mainstream and local food system actors

Food system
resilience

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines how key actors in the UK food system (FS) understand the role of the local food sector in relation to FS resilience.

Design/methodology/approach – Discourse analysis was used to assess and compare the framings of the UK FS in 36 publications released during Covid-19 from alternative food networks (AFNs) actors and from other more mainstream FS actors, including the UK government.

Findings – The analysis shows that AFNs actors perceive the UK FS as not resilient and identify local FSs as a route towards greater resilience (“systemic” framing). In contrast, other food actors perceive the UK FS as already resilient, with the role of local food limited to specific functions within the existing system (“add-on” framing). The two groups converge on the importance of dynamic public procurement and local abattoir provision, but this convergence does not undermine the fundamental divergence in the understanding of the role of “the local” in resilient UK FSs. The local food sector’s messages appear to have gone largely unheard in mainstream policy.

Research limitations/implications – The paper presents an analysis of public sector reports focused on the UK FS released during the Covid-19 pandemic years 2020–2021. The corpus inclusion criteria mean that

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Ethics statement: No human or animal participants were needed for this study and therefore no ethical approval was needed to undertake the research for this paper.

Plain language summary: This paper assesses how different UK FS actors talk about local food in relation to the resilience of the UK FS in publications that they released during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis shows that there are clear differences between actors in the AFNs and other actors. These relate to different overarching narratives of how the FS is organised and how it should progress. Although there is a general agreement that local food should be more present in public procurement, and that local abattoirs are desirable, overall, there is a disagreement. While AFNs actors argue for a systemic change, other actors, including the local government, perceive no such need for change. The local food sector prepared several reports and manifestos calling for a re-design of the UK FS, but mainstream policy seems not to have recognised these messages. This raises important questions about food policy in the UK and particularly how local food movement actors can organise in future to influence transformative change.



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publications during this period which focus on other food sector issues, such social injustices, climate change and health, were not included in the analysis, although they may have touched upon local food issues. The authors further recognise that Covid-19 had a longer lasting effect on FSs than the years 2020–2021, and that many other publications on FSs have been published since. The time span chosen targets the time at which FSs were most disrupted and therefore aims to capture emerging issues and solutions for the UK FS. The authors' insights should be further validated through a more complete review of both public reports and academic papers covering a wider base of food-related issues and sectors as well as a broader timespan.

Originality/value – A comparison of how different FS actors understand the importance of local food, especially in relation to resilience, has not been undertaken to date. The findings raise important questions about the disconnect between AFN actors and other actors in the framing of resilience. Considering the need to ensure resilience of the UK FS, this study's findings raise important insights for UK food policy about the "local food blindspot" and for food movement actors wishing to progress their vision of transformative change.

Keywords Covid-19, UK food system, Food policy, Alternative food networks, Local food system, Framing theory and discourse analysis

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

How to ensure the resilience of food systems (FSs) continues to be a key question for food studies, especially how best to organise supply chains to mitigate risk, manage disruption from external shocks and concomitantly ameliorate negative sustainability impacts. This question is highly pertinent to the UK, where the FS has been exposed to several shocks, including climate change (Wheeler and Lobley, 2021), Brexit (Hubbard *et al.*, 2018; Vigani *et al.*, 2020) and recently the Covid-19 pandemic. Within this, what role *local* FSs may play in enhancing FS resilience is a live area of debate. The Covid-19 pandemic in particular brought local FSs back into the spotlight, as local producers, retailers and distributors "plugged the gap" in mainstream FS provisioning (Jones *et al.*, 2022). A review of 13 countries showed that during the pandemic local and alternative FSs not only saw an increase in demand and support from consumers (Food Foundation, 2020), but were also able to react swiftly, in socially just ways and with citizen solidarity, by, e.g. providing fresh food for free to those with lower incomes (Nemes *et al.*, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic shock showed, therefore, that the local FS "question" is far from closed but has a renewed relevance. However, how different FS actors approach the question of "the local" in debates about resilience has not so far been examined. This paper addresses this important gap through an analysis of a comprehensive selection of reports published by a range of UK FS actors during the initial period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Using framing theory, we assess how different FS actors perceive the role for local food in overall FS resilience. Kirwan and Maye (2013) aptly describe frames as the "conceptual tool that helps to establish a boundary within which actions take place" (p. 92). Our analysis shows a significant divergence in the understanding of the sphere of action on the question of "the local" between actors who already belong to local and alternative food networks (AFNs), and those who are outside of those networks. For those outside of AFNs, "the local" is often invisible, and, when evoked, is seen as an add-on to the existing FS. In contrast, actors from AFNs propose a systemic perspective on the local as a complete alternative to the status quo. We note that this divergence is underpinned by different understandings of the resilience of the UK FS. Overall, we argue that a more complex perspective on FS relocation is needed, one which sees it not as a simple replacement of one dominant FS with another, but as a diversification of the overall foodscape.

1.1 Literature review

AFNs emerged several decades ago in the UK as a counter to mainstream centralised food provisioning, with an emphasis on proximity, transparency and community embeddedness signified through a range of initiatives, including community supported agriculture (CSA),

direct sales and small-scale artisan food businesses. Public interest in local food in the UK links directly to crisis events: “Mad Cow” disease in the 1990s and Food and Mouth Disease in 2001, the outcome from which created a strong policy case for shortening food chains and reconnecting consumers to local producers (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2021; Morris and Buller, 2003). These events spurred AFN growth, but enthusiasm for localism then waned significantly; the relocalisation message lost its voice, if anything becoming an object of social and environmental critique, with local FS perspectives often absent in conversations about the future of UK FSs (Jones *et al.*, 2022).

As Kirwan and Maye note (2013), critiques of FS relocalisation tend to focus on the question of national self-sufficiency. Currently, the UK’s FS is indeed highly dependent on imports (46% of the overall food in circulation (DEFRA, 2021), and there are ongoing debates about the extent to which this dependence could, or should, be decreased through UK-based production (Lang, 2020) [1]. While important, an exclusive focus on self-sufficiency tends to underplay other documented benefits of AFNs: the creation of social capital, new services for local communities, connectivity between businesses and increasing local employment (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013), the enhancement of local ecology and biodiversity (Altieri, 2004; Lampkin *et al.*, 2021; Martinez-Torres, 1994), the support for different forms of production (Clapp and Moseley, 2020) and greater equality in access to healthy food (Sanderson Bellamy *et al.*, 2021).

Several studies now document how AFNs responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly to manage the sudden exponential market demand experienced in early lockdowns. These studies characterise local FS adaptations and resilience capacities, including Jones *et al.*’s (2022) analysis of social capital, Low *et al.*’s (2021) study of local chain dynamics and proximal connectedness, and Marusak *et al.*’s (2021) account of nimbleness capacities. These and other studies (e.g. O’Connell *et al.*, 2021; Schreiber *et al.*, 2022) identify diversity and the collaborative nature of AFNs as critical assets. Covid-19 community food studies also recount inspiring stories of innovation, often via citizen-led place-based responses that territorialised community food economies through diversity and mobilisation of physical, social and digital infrastructures (Moragues-Faus, 2020 p. 583). AFNs also used these diverse structures, although some studies caution that the “local food pivot” was not as widespread among consumers as initially reported (see DuPuis *et al.*, 2022). Beyond local and community food studies, several studies reported innovative practices, notably the shift to online food shopping (e.g. Alaimo *et al.*, 2020, 2022) and responsible consumption behaviour changes (e.g. Šimanskienė *et al.*, 2022).

These are a snapshot of a now extensive corpus of papers on innovative food chain practices during the pandemic, particularly local FS resilience, including links to food security (Béné, 2020). There is consensus regarding the importance of short chains/circuits, local food and small farms for FS resilience because of associated diversity, connectivity, sociality and flexibility. However, as Nichols *et al.* (2022) argue, with greater social embeddedness also comes socio-emotional and economic “costs” of resilience. The underlying moral economy of local food makes producers susceptible to self-exploitation. For instance, whilst local food was indeed able “to shine” during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nichols *et al.*, 2022, p. 187), this increased interest was absorbed by producers and workers through increased work, stress and moral responsibility (cf. Jones *et al.*, 2022). Policies focused on strengthening regional and local FS resilience must therefore account for the wider well-being of producers and workers. Moreover, resilience is not just a question of persisting and adapting through system shocks. It is about transforming systems into more desirable states (Hodobod and Eakin, 2015; Nichols *et al.*, 2022). This raises several analytical prompts for this paper, not only in terms of how UK FS resilience is framed in different texts and by different constellations of actors, and the extent to which transformation is enacted or not through localism, but crucially also the composition and fairness of those re-valourised, re-imagined local food futures.

2. Methods

The Covid-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to examine how “the local” is framed by a range of key actors in the UK FS. The pandemics’ impacts on the FS were readily apparent and attracted large media attention (e.g. the widely circulating images of empty supermarket shelves during the first lockdown in 2020). Consequently, the period 2020–2021 saw the publication of many reports and statements by different FS actors, as well as the planned publication of The Plan (the second part of the UK’s National Food Strategy).

To understand how local food was being framed by different FS actors in the context of resilience concerns spurred by Covid-19, we built a corpus of relevant reports and publications for analysis. Inclusion criteria for the corpus were as follows: the text was an official and publicly available publication of an organisation active in the FS (for example a report, a response to a government inquiry, or a policy document); the text concerned the state of and/or transformation of/to the UK FS, particularly in relation to resilience and/or the Covid-19 pandemic; the text was published during the main pandemic period (between May 2020 and December 2021); the text concerned the UK FS as a whole (as a result, we omitted publications whose scope was limited to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland).

In building the corpus, we, firstly, sought the advice of the members of our projects’ expert advisory board, which included key organisations within the UK AFN sector [2]. The advisory board not only recommended specific reports and publications from within AFNs, but also indicated key relevant government reports. In addition, we searched for national policy publications from Defra and other relevant branches of the UK government, as well as reports published by research and industry groups. The corpus was further expanded with additional relevant publications following peer review of this paper. All the texts of the resulting corpus are listed in Table 1.

The corpus was shared out for thematic analysis between the co-authors. Each co-author prepared an analytical summary of the publications, focussing on the following themes: the resilience of the UK FS during the pandemic, food security, the role of local food (impacts and responses) and future visions. Analytical summaries were then coded in NVivo, with first-level coding identifying key themes and messages across the corpus and second-level coding identifying areas of consensus and divergence.

We used frame theory in our analysis, as this approach can highlight oppositional discourses, but also helps to go beyond binary oppositions and analyse relations *between* discourses. Kirwan and Maye (2013) used frame analysis to highlight the areas in which different groups in the UK FS were in alignment with each other (i.e. a “consensus frame”), but also to uncover a “fractured consensus” on the actions and meanings of food security. Similarly, Grivins and Tisenkopfs (2015) used frame analysis to show the dialogues and overlaps between the “intensification discourse” and an “alternative discourse” in the Latvian FS, with attention paid to partial affiliation to the opposing discourse, the use of language from the opposing discourse and the borrowing of ideas, while Candel *et al.’s* (2014) analysis of food security frames in relation to the CAP reform revealed conflicting and intersecting issues within the frames. In the following sections of the paper, we also use frame analysis to describe both divergencies and convergencies in discourses on local food in relation to the overall question of UK FS resilience.

2.1 Limitations of the study

The paper presents an analysis of public sector reports focused on the UK FS released during the Covid-19 pandemic years 2020–2021. The corpus inclusion criteria mean that publications during this period which focus on other food sector issues, such social injustices, climate change and health, were not included in the analysis, although they may have touched upon local food issues. We further recognise that Covid-19 had a longer lasting effect on FSs than

Alternative food networks publications

[Soil Association \(2020a\)](#). *Grow back better – A resilience route-map for post-Covid-19 food, farming and land-use*

[Soil Association \(2020b\)](#). Response to Covid-19 and food supply chain inquiry

[Soil Association \(2020c\)](#). Response to public procurement inquiry

[Soil Association \(2020b\)](#). Shortening supply chains – roads to regional resilience

[Sustain \(2020\)](#) response to the EFRA inquiry on food supply during the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic

[Sustainable Food Places & Sustain. \(2021\)](#). Good food enterprises adapting to the pandemic, one year on

[Sustain & RSPB \(2021a\)](#). The case for local food: building better local food systems to benefit society and nature

[Sustain & RSPB \(2021b\)](#). The case for local food: Using shorter, farmer-focused supply chains to restore our towns and natural landscapes

Food and farming countryside commission – [FFCC \(2021\)](#). Food builds community – from crisis to transformation

[Landworkers Alliance. \(2021\)](#). Vocal for local: Why regional food systems are the future

[Food Foundation \(2020\)](#). COVID-19 UK Veg Box Report

[Food Foundation \(2021a\)](#). Covid-19 and the convenience store sector

[Food Foundation \(2021b\)](#). The Broken Plate 2021

[Food Foundation \(2021c\)](#). Veg Voice Report: Covid Veg

Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board – [DFPNAB \(2020\)](#). Manifesto for a resilient, adaptable and sustainable UK food system fast lessons from COVID-19

Brighton and Hove food partnership – [Griffin and O'Brien \(2020\)](#). Food Buying Habits during Covid-19 in Brighton and Hove Survey

[Farm Retail Association, \(2020\)](#) Farm retailers hope new shopping habits will stick

Other actors' publications

[House of Lords \(2020\)](#) Hungry for Change: fixing the failures in food

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – [DEFRA \(2020\)](#). The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology – [POST \(2020\)](#). A resilient UK food system

House of Commons, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – [EFRA \(2021a\)](#). Moving animals across borders

[EFRA \(2020\)](#). COVID-19 and food supply First Report of Session 2019–21 Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

[EFRA. \(2021b\)](#). Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply. Seventh report of session 2019–21

National Food Strategy (NFS) - [Dimpleby \(2020\)](#). The National Food Strategy – Part One

National Food Strategy (NFS) - [Dimpleby \(2021\)](#). The National Food Strategy: The Plan

[DEFRA \(2021\)](#). UK Food Security Report 2021

[National Farmers Union \(2021a\)](#). British food leading the way

[National Farmers Union \(2021b\)](#). Levelling up rural Britain

[Waitrose, \(2021\)](#) Food and drink report 2021.

Food Standards Agency – [FSA and Ipsos MORI. \(2021\)](#). Covid-19 Consumer Tracker Waves 1 and 2

[European Institution of Innovation and Technology EIT Food, \(2020\)](#) Covid-19 impact on consumer behaviours in Europe

[Global Food Security \(2020a\)](#) Exploring the resilience of the UK food system in a global context – policy brief

[Global Food Security \(2020b\)](#) Building back better for increased resilience of the UK food system to future shocks

[SCAR Expert Group \(2020\)](#). Resilience and transformation Report of the 5th SCAR Foresight Exercise Expert Group Natural resources and food systems: Transitions towards a “safe and just” operating space

[Mitchell et al. \(2020\)](#) The impact of Covid-19 on the UK fresh food supply chain

[Parsons and Barling \(2021\)](#). Food Systems Transformation: What's in the Policy Toolbox?

Total publications 36

Table 1.
Alternative food
networks and other
actors' publications

the years 2020–2021, and that many other publications on FSs have been published since. The time span chosen targets the time at which FSs were most disrupted, and therefore aims to capture emerging issues and solutions for the UK FS. Our insights should be further validated through a more complete review of both public reports and academic papers covering a wider base of food-related issues and sectors as well as a broader timespan.

3. Results

Across the reports, we saw some key divergences and two main convergences in the framing of “local” between those actors who already operate primarily within AFNs and other actors (including the national government). For AFN actors, the local is framed as an alternative system. For other actors, the dominant framing, in contrast, is that of an add-on; notably, for some actors the local is not visible as a dimension of the FS at all. We show that the divergences can be traced back to the underlying differences in the way the two groups understand UK food security and resilience, while the convergences occur around specific issues which can function both within the “alternative” and the “status quo” framings, namely local food in public procurement and larger numbers of small abattoirs as a key enabling material infrastructure for direct and local meat channels.

3.1 Divergences in framings of local food: “system” vs “add-on”

We find that during the Covid-19 pandemic, AFNs organisations articulated the importance of local food to the overall UK FS system in a coherent and relatively consistent way. This contrasts with a previous analysis by [Hunt \(2015, p. 19\)](#) who found “high segmentation by sector, issue, and organisation” in local FS messaging. The AFN actors are centrally concerned with local food as a *sector* and present a framing of local food as a *system*. In the reviewed publications, all parts of the food and supply chain are considered, from food growing (including production methods and their social organisation), through processing, to distribution, consumption and waste, bringing together social and environmental aspects. For example, in “The Case for Local Food” by Sustain, local food is defined as food, which is produced, processed, sold (by independents or non-multiples) and consumed locally. The report is typical in its systemic perspective, which encompasses a discussion of food production practices (highlighting local food’s beneficial environment and biodiversity outcomes), as the contribution to overall economic resilience, impact on jobs markets and on the wider society [\[3\]](#).

The AFN reports also evidenced the growth in demand for local food in the UK during the pandemic, from increased farm-gate sales, to longer waiting lists for vegetable boxes and CSAs. For example, The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership noted that “57% of people are spending more in local, independent shops” and “42% of people are spending more on food deliveries from local independents, e.g. veg boxes, small grocery shops and food markets”, with 69% wanting to continue these habits (see also [Griffin and O’Brien, 2020](#)). The Food Foundation released four other relevant reports which touch upon local food. In their “Veg voice report: Covid veg” and “Broken Plate” report, the Food Foundation also puts forward local provision as a way to address the unequal accessibility and availability of healthy food during Covid-19, noting an increased use of local shops and vegetable box schemes, as well as home growing ([Food Foundation, 2021b, c](#)). Their “Covid-19 and the convenience store sector” report notes the potential to use of convenience stores to sell more local produce whilst boosting the local economy ([Food Foundation, 2021a](#)).

In the AFN reports, the local FS’s ability to be flexible and adapt to an abrupt change in demand is seen as evidence of its resilience (e.g. “The Case for Local Food” ([Sustain & RSPB, 2021a, b](#)), “Food Builds Community” ([FFCC, 2021](#)), “Shortening Supply Chains” ([Soil Association, 2020d](#)), “Response to Covid-19 and food supply chain inquiry” ([Soil Association, 2020b](#)), “Sustain response to the EFRA inquiry on Food Supply during the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic” ([Sustain, 2020](#)). Equally, local FSs that did not undergo significant disruption are also seen as resilient, such as the CSA schemes which were able to “carry on more or less as usual” due to their close producer-consumer relationships and pool of volunteers ([Food Foundation, 2020, p. 7](#)).

In addition, “The Case for Local Food” by Sustain and the RSPB brings a useful historical perspective on the issue of framing of local food in policy debates. Its foreword by Lord Curry notes that already his 2002 “Curry Report” highlighted the need to re-localise food chains (Sustain & RSPB, 2021b). This earlier publication clearly did not have the desired effect, and across the reports we find critiques of a lack of the recognition of the systemic nature of local FSs in UK food policy. For example, the report by the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board (DFPNAB) states that SMEs “have been left exposed with no route to market. The barriers to entry for serving the retail grocery market for most of these SMEs are too great to overcome” (DFPNAB, 2020, p. 2).

We do not find the framing of local food as a system used by actors who do not already operate within AFNs. Conversely, in these publications, we find the overall focus is on preserving and improving the status quo of long-chain national and global supply chains. Local food is framed as an *add-on* to these existing systems. Often, local food is entirely absent. When mentioned, it tends to be referred to in a fragmented and often indirect way, and with a tendency to focus on single issues. For example, DEFRA’s (2020) “Agricultural Transition Plan” briefly mentions local food actors in relation to new entrants to farming, Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Protected Landscapes. Whilst the call here is for local actors to provide opportunities for new entrants, however, it is not clear that the food which they produce will be consumed locally. In terms of Local Nature Recovery and Protected Landscapes, respectively, the report alludes to local food and its distribution by “address[ing] market failures that have led to farmers having a weaker position in the supply chain” (DEFRA, 2020, p. 17) and in order “to help grow businesses, create green jobs, enhance biodiversity and invest in infrastructure to attract more diverse visitors to support local economies” (DEFRA, 2020, p. 44). However, there is no discussion of how these gains could be achieved without more profound systemic changes.

Similarly, the House of Lords “Hungry for Change” report only mentions local food in so far as “[a food strategy] must involve active engagement with SMEs and the catering sector” (House of Lords, 2020). In their report “A resilient UK food system”, POST recommends addressing “the balance between international trade strategies and local food production”. The word “local” is in fact used to refer to the scale of the nation, with calls for supporting UK-based growing (POST, 2020, p. 3). In the EFRA Committee’s “Public Sector Procurement of Food”, there is a call for greater government support for domestic producers to EFRA (2021b).

The National Food Strategy (2021) also reflects this fragmented and indirect approach to local food. The report suggests government support for SMEs against larger retailers and recommends that local authorities should create local food strategies with communities and invest in local infrastructure and facilities. However, historical examples and modelling are used as a warning against a reliance on local food, and in order to justify globalised trade and imports as a food security strategy. For instance, the Irish potato famine and a future scenario of climate change-induced harvest failures are brought in as evidence of the need to build food security on globalised trade.

While the National Farmers’ Union’s “British food leading the way” report (National Farmers Union, 2021a) includes a call for more local consumption, the overall framing is redolent of the local-as-British frame identified by Kirwan and Maye (2013). The focus is on strategies to support more British consumers to eat British food, such as by embedding British and seasonal food in Public Procurement (PP) for schools and hospitals, or by introducing “British products” filters in online shopping. In their “Levelling up rural Britain” report (National Farmers Union, 2021b), the NFU provides little mention of local food, only that the public needs to connect with where food comes from through tourism and leisure.

Of the science reports reviewed, such as the SCAR Foresight report, there is no mention of local food at all. The report instead points to the importance of science and technology to building a fairer and healthier FS (SCAR Expert Group, 2020, p. 107).

Overall, we find that beyond those actors who are already in AFNs, local FSs are seen as a stop-gap for Just-in-Time (JIT) systems; a “buffer the system in case of future shocks” (POST, 2020, p. 3). In contrast, for those already within the local food sector, relocation is framed as a fundamental basis of UK’s FS resilience, as we discuss further below.

3.2 Divergencies in the perceptions on UK FS resilience

Linked with the aforementioned systemic vs add-on frame divergence is a fundamental difference in the perception of UK FS resilience amongst the local food actors and other actors. Table 2 highlights some of the key differences in their understanding of FS resilience, and in their visions of the future UK FS.

We note an overall preoccupation with the question of resilience in many of the reports issued in the AFN sector, including by the Soil Association (SA), Sustain and the RSPB,

	Framing of resilience	Recommendations for the future UK food system
AFN actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “... diverse, mixed farming systems designed according to organic principles” and agroecology (Soil Association, 2020a, p. 9)• “Our food supply chains have become highly specialised and efficient. Unfortunately, this makes them less adaptable and resilient to challenging external events.” (DFPNAB, 2020, p. 2)• Local food systems address market failures and have “benefits ranging from economic and environmental resilience to cultural diversity and social connection.” (Landworkers Alliance, 2021, p. 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Framing recommendations as a “ten-year transition to agroecology” through increasing organic, farmer-led innovation, reducing ultra-processed food, improving education, increasing UK horticulture and soil carbon (Soil Association, 2020a)• Aimed at local and national governments (Sustain & RSPB, 2021b)• Targets for increasing local food production and distribution• Areas for support include: funding, short supply chains and SMEs (Soil Association, 2020a), community wealth building, create local infrastructure (incl. small scale abattoirs), increase local partnerships (FFCC, 2021; Landworkers Alliance, 2021; Sustain & RSPB, 2021b), planning policy and local business rates for independent food retailers (Landworkers Alliance, 2021), PP via DPS etc. (DFPNAB, 2020; Landworkers Alliance, 2021; Soil Association, 2020c)
Other actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Overreliance on one geographical area and dependence on particular supply sources makes food supply more vulnerable, while diversity of sources makes it more resilient.” (DEFRA, 2021, p. 83)• “The Secretary of State told us that ‘our lesson from this [pandemic] is that our food supply chain is remarkably resilient’ He stated that ‘generally speaking, we are more confident than ever that we need not worry too much about the end of the transition period.’” (EFRA, 2020, p. 44)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Technology to improve JIT system (House of Lords, 2020; POST, 2020)• Farmer support through training, land access, improving “market failures” (DEFRA, 2020)• Increase PP through DPS (EFRA, 2021b; National Farmers Union, 2021a, b)• Strengthen incentives and regulations on diet (FSA and Ipsos MORI, 2021; House of Lords, 2020)• Recognises the potential of agroecology (Dimpleby, 2021)• More investment in agricultural technology to create greater productivity, tackle climate change and reduce water and chemical use (National Farmers Union, 2021a)

Table 2.
Differences in
resilience framing and
recommendations for
the future UK food
system between the
two groups

Sustainable Food Places, the Food and Farming Countryside Commission (FFCC), Landworkers' Alliance (LWA) and the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board (DFPNAB). These publications present the UK FS as lacking resilience and suggest that this is due to the over-reliance on just-in-time commodity chains, economies of scale and centralised structures [4]. The reports instead argue that local FSs possess resilience characteristics. Sustain and the RSPB find smaller, local enterprises to be more resilient due to greater flexibility and so better potential for adapting to changes and shocks. The FFCC and LWA echo this, commenting on the importance of existing strong partnerships within regional and local food work. The Food Foundation also talk about such existing relationships of support providing resilience in CSA schemes.

In contrast to AFN actors, other actors present the UK's FS as largely resilient. For example, Defra's UK Food Security report states that "the UK is resilient to potential shocks in the food supply chain" and that Covid-19 did not cause major problems with food supply, highlighting that although there were port closures, food was still imported (DEFRA, 2021, p. 149). The EFRA Committee cite the Secretary of State in saying "our lesson from this [pandemic] is that our food supply chain is remarkably resilient" owing to the size, geographic diversity and competitive nature of the industry, and an adaptable and sophisticated JIT system (EFRA, 2020) [5]. There is a limited focus on resilience in both "Part One" (2020) and "The Plan" (2021) of the National Food Strategy. The author quotes Tim Lang's "Feeding Britain" book to draw attention to the need for resilience in all parts of the FS and notes that "foreign imports underpin our food security [...] having a diverse food supply creates resilience" (Dimbleby, 2021, p. 137).

It is particularly pertinent here to highlight the difference in the use and understanding of "diversity" between the two groups. Whereas actors in the AFNs group perceive diversity in multiple areas of the FS (the variety of food grown, different models for food producers, diverse and shorter supply chains, diverse markets etc.), other actors refer to diversity only as in relation to diverse countries from which to import food.

We therefore observe a distinct divergence on the question of UK FS resilience. Actors from within the AFNs diagnose the current system as inherently unsustainable and lacking resilience, with systemic changes needed. Other actors perceive the FS as largely resilient, only needing minor adjustments ("add-ons") in order to increase resilience further.

3.3 Convergences: local food system "solutions"

While much of the discourse discussed above is oppositional, we also note two key areas of convergence in the debates on the role of local food in UK FS resilience. These convergences emerge around specific solutions: reinstating local, small-scale abattoirs and the rolling out a dynamic procurement system (DPS) for PP of food (particularly concerning hospitals, schools and other public services). While for the AFN actors these solutions are part of the aforementioned systemic perspective, for others they present additional supports to the FS status quo.

Local abattoirs are seen as an important element of resilience for government actors. In their report "Moving animals across borders", EFRA recognise the need for more smaller-scale abattoirs (EFRA, 2021a). They quote the Sustainable Food Trust in saying "the national network of small local abattoirs is rapidly declining", causing long journey times and reduced animal welfare (Sustainable Food Trust and Campaign for Local Abattoirs, 2020, p. 1). EFRA also quote the UK Abattoir Network in saying that Defra "should recognise ... the smaller-scale abattoirs ... vital to an adequate local network, as a strategic national asset and integral to their future visions for sustainable farming and food resilience" (The UK Abattoir Network, 2021, p. 1). Further, EFRA suggest that the Future Farming Resilience Fund could support smaller slaughterhouse businesses and propose that Defra establish a working group on small and medium sized abattoir regulations (EFRA, 2021a). POST (2020, p. 3)

recommend that “re-establishing small local abattoirs could increase resilience by reducing the current reliance on a few large abattoirs and buffer the system in case of future shocks”. Whereas this does show support for a certain aspect of local infrastructure, the latter quote confirms the add-on frame discussed previously.

The AFN actors do not explicitly outline recommendations for small scale abattoirs (the exception being the Sustainable Food Trust). Instead, and in line with their overall systemic approach, they recommend increasing and strengthening local food networks and infrastructure across all food and farming sectors. For example, the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board (DFPNAB) state that, especially in light of Covid-19 effects, “a regional food supply chain infrastructure needs to be established for the UK as an immediate priority to mitigate against future crises” (DFPNAB, 2020, p. 6). Similarly, the [Soil Association \(2020a, p. 24\)](#) assert that “The UK Government should invest in regional supply chain infrastructure to bring renewed diversity and resilience to routes to market.”

A similar convergence is noted in calls for DPSs from governance actors. The National Food Strategy references a trial of a DPS for local food suppliers as working “extremely well” and recommends that the government “accelerate the roll-out of this dynamic procurement scheme and use its new procurement standards to encourage caterers to try a broader range of suppliers” (Dimbleby, 2021, p. 161). The NFU asks the government to support PP for schools and hospitals (National Farmers Union, 2021a), and EFRA recommends setting mandatory PP standards and for local seasonal British produce, supporting SMEs in using DPS, disposing of exemptions on meeting quality and welfare standards for UK PP, and setting higher standards for procurement. [Parsons and Barling’s \(2021\)](#) POST report identifies some gaps in policy relating to local FSs, including the need to increase PP, and the measuring and monitoring of it to make it more effective.

Amongst AFN actors, the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board (DFPNAB) argue in their “Manifesto for a resilient, adaptable and sustainable UK food system”, that Covid-19 showed the need for DPS to support food related SMEs. They advocate more government support of a DPS roll-out as part of a wider a regional food supply chain infrastructure to mitigate against future crises (DFPNAB, 2020, p. 6). Similarly, the SA points to DPS as a way to support local retailers and farmers by giving better access to markets. It also promotes the Food for Life programme and praises the Sustainable Food Places initiative which “develop cross-sector partnerships of local public agencies, businesses, academics and NGOs” (Soil Association, 2020a, p. 28). In the same vein, Sustainable Food Places and Sustain’s “Good Food Enterprises” report asks for a DPS expansion to 33% of the country to support SMEs (Sustainable Food Places & Sustain, 2021).

We therefore highlight two key points of convergence between AFN and other actors: the need to reinstate local abattoirs and to roll out DPS systems for PP across the country. This convergence is, however, underpinned by and indeed strengthens the previously discussed divergence between systemic and add-on framings of local food. While AFN actors include specific solutions within a wider frame of more fundamental FS changes towards localisation, the mainstream FS group is targeting specific individual solutions or innovations within the status-quo.

4. Conclusions

This paper analyses the framings of “the local” in publications by key UK FS actors during the acute period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Using framing theory, the analysis has highlighted divergent framings between the publications issued by actors who already operate in AFNs, and who advocate for investing resources in the local FS as a whole, and other actors, who frame the local FS as supplementary to the existing Just-in-Time supply chains, and as limited to specific solutions. The analysis reveals then a divergence in

framings of “local food” (“system” compared to “add on”) and UK FS resilience (largely resilient compared to a current system that is unsustainable). We find that while actors within AFNs frame local food as part of a systemic transformation of the UK FS, other actors, including the government, envisage local as an “add-on” to the status quo. While the two groups converge on the importance of Dynamic PP and local abattoirs, they imagine a very different role for these in line with the overall “systemic” or “add-on” frame. Publications from AFN actors provide detailed strategies for how targeted government support could transform the UK FS to enable a more relocalised food future based on increased capacities of local food producers, suppliers and retailers. In contrast, while the government and science and industry publications recognise the fragilities of global systems, they identify research and technology as front-line solutions.

What the analysis reveals then is a local food sector that is no longer a single-issue campaign, but the diagnosis of resilience and what needs to be done to bolster it differs significantly from mainstream frames (cf. [Kirwan and Maye, 2013](#)). Our findings contest [Hunt’s \(2015\)](#) critique of the messaging from the local food sector in the UK as fragmented, and too focused on environmental impacts. Instead, we find that local food movement organisations promote a united, systems view on changes needed for greater resilience in the UK FS. That said, convergent framings have been identified between the different actors in relation to individual solutions that potentially increase the capacity of local food networks. These include reinstating small-scale abattoirs and rolling out public procurement through DPSs.

Highlighting these convergences matters for the wider project of embedding local food networks into community resilience ([Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013](#)), because it further reveals a narrow reading of transformative action. We find it important that other innovative models of local FSs are not so widely acknowledged or understood by government bodies. Examples include better trading platforms and open networks, buying group models and distribution hubs. These innovative models could provide further “add-on” solutions and address the challenges the UK FS is facing on a variety of scales: e.g. the farm-scale; the town/district scale; the regional scale; the virtual scale. Such initiatives are additional to existing local food structures, such as public procurement, CSAs, street markets and vegetable box schemes, which were similarly omitted from government and other non-AFN actors’ perspectives, but which could achieve multiple gains with further government support.

AFNs actors have long argued that these place-based mechanisms could help to revitalise local economies, create meaningful jobs, healthier lives and above all a more sustainable, resilient FS for the UK. We show that for this to be achieved, a more holistic view of local FSs would have to be recognised amongst actors such as the UK government. For local food actors interested in furthering this perspective, our analysis therefore raises important questions about advocacy and strategy as tipping points to trigger change (cf., [Moragues-Faus, 2020](#); [Béné, 2020](#), [O’Connell *et al.*, 2021](#); [Jones *et al.*, 2022](#); [Nichols *et al.*, 2022](#)). Considering the persistence of the “add-on” frame, we suggest social movement alliances are needed to challenge dominant understandings of resilience of UK FS. Achieving these next steps (visioning and alignment with wider movements) will be essential to allow local food actors to overcome both the divergences and the narrowly focused but converging solutions of mainstream FS actors if it is to realise intended transformative ambitions.

Notes

1. While the UK is largely self-sufficient in grains, meat and dairy, it relies on 46% of vegetable imports and 84% of fruit imports ([DEFRA, 2021](#)).
2. This project’s expert advisory board was made up of representatives from the following organisations: Open Food Network, Soil Association, Sustain, Better Food Traders, Pasture-fed

Livestock Association, Sustainable Food Places, The Land Workers' Alliance, Farm Retail Association, Royal Agricultural University and Social Farms & Gardens Wales.

3. In terms of employment, the report states that "local food outlets create a job for every £46 k turnover, which is three times the return on investment of supermarkets ... smaller independent outlets could provide a further 200,000 jobs" (Sustain & RSPB, 2021b, p. 19).
4. The FFCC, for example, notes that "nine supermarkets control 95% of the food retail market" (FFCC, 2021, p. 11).
5. However, the report acknowledges that others think differently; Prof Tim Benton quoted: "our food systems are fragile" (Benton, 2021).

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