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ARTICLE

Local authorities' capacity to advance climate action in the food and farming sectors

Aimee Morse¹  | Daniel Keech¹  | Philippa Simmonds¹  |
 Fahimeh Malekinezhad¹  | Janet Dwyer¹  | Benjamin Dent² 

¹Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, UK

²School of Agriculture and Food Sustainability, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Correspondence

Aimee Morse, Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall Campus, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 4AZ, UK.
 Email: amorse1@glos.ac.uk

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Abstract

The mitigation measures needed in the face of climate change require transformation in the production and consumption of food. This paper examines local authorities' role in driving practical transformation in the food and farming sectors at the local level, reflecting on the complexity of these sectors and the implications for the effective sub-national delivery of climate goals. A policy review identified food and farming-related actions occurring in a two-tier local authority in England. Local authority staff were invited to one of four workshops to reflect on ongoing activity and to identify actions that have implementation potential and those that are beyond the remit and/or resource of local authorities. The workshops demonstrated participants' ambition to support mitigation measures that foster resilient food systems and deliver co-benefits to local residents. We argue that, despite their constrained capacity, local authorities are well-placed to develop innovative climate solutions relevant to local need. This capacity to deliver climate action should continue to be supported, including through national recognition of the innovative delivery approaches examined in this research.

KEYWORDS

capacity, climate mitigation, England, food systems, local government

1 | INTRODUCTION

Human-caused climate change is a product of modern, high-carbon lifestyles, including our patterns of food production and consumption, which the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food, 2023) argues have been overlooked by national governments across the world. Changing patterns of consumption have also contributed to an increased burden of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (Willett et al., 2019), with recent reports

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highlighting the stark social and economic costs of unhealthy diets in England (House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, 2024; Jackson, 2024).

In its Seventh Annual Carbon Budget for the UK, the Climate Change Committee (CCC, 2025, p. 20) states that ‘action needs to accelerate to meet existing targets’ for net zero emissions: this is a call for action across all emissions sectors in the UK. This paper will focus on the potential contributions of the food and farming sectors to the transition in England. The paper acknowledges that the measures needed in the face of climate change require transformation in the production and consumption of food. It recognises, too, that policy coherence across sectors, such as public health and land use, is required to support this transition (CCC, 2025; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023; Lang et al., 2025).

The CCC (2020) suggests climate action should be decentralised, noting that in the UK municipalities (hereafter, local authorities [LAs]) can play a significant role in driving practical action at the local level (Evans, 2020). Suggested actions relating to food and farming include local procurement, promoting government’s healthy eating guidelines, and working with farmers who rent farms from the LA (County Council [CC] farms) to adopt sustainable farming practices (Evans, 2020). Lang et al. (2025), commenting on the same challenges, call for a reinvigoration of local democracy for food resilience, highlighting a key role for LAs.

Notwithstanding these positive agendas and claims, successful local approaches also require appropriate national leadership to support their implementation. Local food economies have been studied for over three decades, but the constraints on local food sector development identified by Holt (2005), such as irregular and inconsistent supply of produce, persist today (Headings et al., 2025). Workshop participants in Headings et al.’s (2025) research commended a local approach but recognised a need for state/market intervention for the approach to be successful. The perceived need for national leadership on food systems transformation is reflected in UK citizens’ call for ‘coordinated leadership at the highest level’ (Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, 2025, p. 1).

1.1 | The rhetoric–action gap

The role of local governments in climate action is recognised at the global and national level; however, the extent of their autonomy and responsibility to deliver action varies by nation (Kastelein, 2024; Ladner et al., 2023). LAs in England are not currently compelled by a statutory responsibility to deliver climate action and there is no clear framework for sub-national delivery of climate goals. Although the majority of LAs have climate plans (Garvey et al., 2023), the complex relationship between national and local government hinders delivery of climate action (Evans, 2020; Garvey et al., 2024). Porter et al. (2015) suggest that a lack of national political support, and budgetary constraints, often lead to long-term climate vulnerabilities being set aside, as statutory responsibilities and short-term risks are prioritised. These weaknesses led Howarth et al. (2021) to conclude that there is a rhetoric–action gap regarding climate issues in the UK.

The challenges to effective climate action are reflected in both the production and consumption of food in the UK, where, nationally, there has been limited political will to address issues in the food sector. However, a need for government support for change in the food system has been highlighted in several recent reports (Lang et al., 2025; Sustain, 2022; Taverner, 2025). Taverner (2025, p. 4) argues that the rules of the game must be changed by political leaders, ‘so that growing healthy, sustainably grown food in ways that build food security and resilience is properly rewarded’.

The complex relationship between levels of government again complicates the delivery of innovative activities in the food system. In some territories in England, two tiers of government,¹ a CC and District Councils (DCs), have responsibilities for different areas of the food system. In England, DCs have duties around food safety and CCs have responsibilities for food standards and procurement in education, health, and social care venues (Keech et al., 2025). Some CCs retain a county farm estate on which steps can be taken to support environmentally friendly farming (Graham et al., 2019). However, there are no statutory requirements relating to food resilience or emergency provision at the local level, as distinct from the responsibilities placed on local government elsewhere in Europe, including in Sweden and Latvia (Kidd & Reynolds, 2024; Lang et al., 2025). This results in a tension between the aspirations of LAs and the budgets available, with the result that statutory duties become prioritised while food actions become cancelled or postponed (Kidd & Reynolds, 2024). To ensure LAs are appropriately funded for action in the food system, Lang et al. (2025, p. 196) suggest that the UK should ‘embrace food as a collective and multi-level responsibility’, calling for clear food governance responsibilities for LAs, reported under a distinct budget heading in the national accounts. If Willett et al.’s (2019) suggestions for healthy diets and sustainable food systems are embedded in LAs’ actions, then this could simultaneously be a driver for climate action and improved population health at the local level.

1.2 | The research

This paper examines the reasons for, and barriers to, LAs taking actions that address the climate impact of food, in the changing political context following the publication of the Devolution White Paper in December 2024 (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [MHCLG], 2024a), an English Land Use Framework Consultation (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra], 2025a), and the establishment of a UK Food Strategy Advisory Board (Defra, 2025b). It explores the opportunities and barriers LAs currently face implementing food and farming-related actions and reflects on a sustained need for national recognition of the value of food in times of political change, to ensure the sectors' contributions to climate mitigation are better recognised and supported.

To examine the impacts of complex intra-government relationships during a period of local government reorganisation (LGR), this research examined a two-tier LA in England in which one CC sits above six DCs. Specifically, the paper explores the actions of DCs, and how these are enabled or hindered by this organisational structure. The research also supported planning and prioritisation in the food and farming sectors ahead of LGR. The objectives of the research were to:

- review LAs' existing policies, to identify activity in the food and farming sectors;
- examine food and farming actions that have implementation potential, and
- identify those actions beyond the remit and/or resource of DCs and analyse the reasons for this.

Although the focus here is on the potential for action that supports the transition to net zero, we note the importance of co-benefits described in Food for the Planet's (n.d.) Every Mouthful Counts (EMC) Toolkit,² which was identified as a key tool for this research. Climate action may generate multiple benefits, including for people's health and wellbeing, local economies, food resilience, and nature recovery (Sustain, 2022; IPCC, 2023; Lang et al., 2025). Actions that are shown to deliver multiple benefits may address challenges associated with LAs' resource constraints by demonstrating good value (Kidd & Reynolds, 2024) and therefore support them to create enabling environments for change (Park et al., 2023).

2 | METHODS

Using the EMC Toolkit, the research assessed the actions already taken, or committed to, by DCs and the CC as detailed in key documents that guide local government activity. This included review of all the documents listed in Table 1, which are publicly available. Document names have been generalised for confidentiality.

Each document was reviewed for mentions of the 38 actions included in the EMC toolkit. Additional actions and existing collaboration between councils were also noted.

A two-mode Social Network Analysis (SNA) was used to examine connections between two types of nodes: actors and actions. Where actors indicated that they were working on one of the 38 actions, a value of 1 was assigned, while a value of 0 was assigned when actors had not referenced the action. This binary matrix provides a structured representation of

TABLE 1 Policy documents reviewed.

Actor	Documents reviewed
DC1	Local Plan, Climate Change Strategy, Food Strategy
DC2	Local Plan, Climate Emergency Action Plan, Economic Strategy, Procurement Strategy
DC3	Local Plan, Master Plan, Economic Strategy, Procurement Strategy
DC4	Local Plan and update, Climate Emergency Strategy, Ecological Emergency Action Plan, Economic Strategy, Procurement Strategy
DC5	Local Plan, Climate Emergency Strategy, Procurement Strategy
DC6	Local Plan and update, Economic Strategy, Procurement Strategy
CC	Food and Farming Action Plan, Climate Change Strategy, Economic Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Strategic Estate Plan

the actions that actors have referenced in their policies. It serves as the foundation for the two-mode network, which will be analysed further in Section 3.1.

The subsequent stage of this research comprised hosting four workshops in March and April 2025. Teams from across the DCs were invited to attend one action-focused workshop; participants' areas of work are presented in Table 2. Facilitators guided participants through a series of activities, using the EMC toolkit to identify actions that were already happening in their district, and those that were beyond their remit; then to explore areas of potential collaboration; and, notably, to identify two or three actions that they would progress following the workshop, drawing on examples from other local authorities for inspiration. Workshop 2 presented an opportunity for predominantly urban LAs to identify areas of collaboration, while Workshops 1, 3, and 4 were opportunities for the county's rural LAs.

Facilitators recorded the discussion in handwritten notes, and participants were invited to add their own notes to copies of the toolkit. The actions identified for further discussion and implementation are ongoing and thus will not be examined in detail here.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 | Policy review

Figure 1 shows the results of the SNA created from the policy review. Each action in the EMC toolkit was allocated a number, from 1 to 38, with 1 being the first action listed in the toolkit ('Declare a Climate and Nature emergency'), and 38 the final action ('Cut the vehicle emissions from food deliveries').

It is possible to identify which actions receive the most attention in these documents, as represented by the size of the squares in Figure 1. The CC and all DCs have declared a climate and nature emergency, with all but one DC having a publicly available climate emergency strategy. Other actions commonly cited in policy documents included increasing the amount of land for community food growing, and increasing the amount spent on food grown locally. However, these policy commitments disguise the generally low-profile of food in the climate strategies, where transport and energy consumption, for example, take a more prominent role. As we explore further in section 3.2, this belies a range of practical net-zero innovations and activities already ongoing across the county.

The policy review revealed some existing collaborations, such as three districts contributing to a cross-boundary, strategic planning document to ensure a competitive economy and sustainable development. In the workshops that followed the policy review, participants discussed areas of potential collaboration related to food and farming activity.

3.2 | Current action

Participants considered the workshops a positive opportunity to dedicate time for discussion of food and farming in the county and corroborated the areas of action identified in the policy review. Participants in all workshops highlighted actions that had been introduced since the documents were published, such as the provision of community fridges in DC2, and council landholdings being mapped across all councils.

However, participants recognised Howarth et al.'s (2021) rhetoric–action gap in their own work, acknowledging that a greater focus on delivery is required to ensure local climate targets are met on time and residents can access affordable, healthy, and sustainable food. There was consensus that the value of food and farming to the county, both economically

TABLE 2 Workshop participants.

Workshop	Participants' areas of work
Workshop 1 (DC5)	Climate; Communities; Health and wellbeing
Workshop 2 (DC1 and DC2)	DC1: Climate; Communities; Economic Development; Health and wellbeing. DC2: Climate; Communities; Economic Development; Environment; Food
Workshop 3 (DC3 and DC4)	DC3: Climate; Communities; Environment; Health and wellbeing. DC4: Communities; Economic Development; Environment; Heritage
Workshop 4 (DC6)	Climate; Communities; Economic Development; Environment; Planning

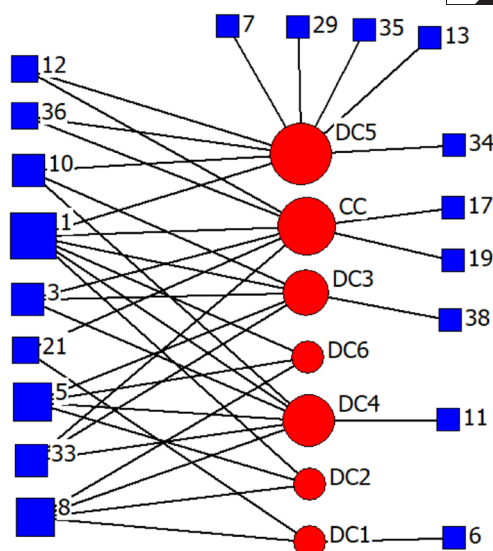


FIGURE 1 The results of the social network analysis. Prepared by the authors, from the policy review.

and environmentally, is overlooked. Participants in all workshops suggested that its potential to solve challenges around health, poverty, climate, and livelihoods should be better understood at the local level, as this could help overcome barriers to delivery, including, as Kidd and Reynolds (2024) suggest, the issue of limited resources across teams. In Workshop 3, participants suggested it would be beneficial for the councils to have a climate duty, to justify resource allocations, and to ensure that the work of climate teams is not at-risk during times of LGR.

3.3 | Areas of potential action

Participants in all workshops recognised that other food and farming actions provided in the EMC toolkit had limited mention in current iterations of their climate strategies. In Workshops 1 and 2, an opportunity to better include these in updates of local plans and climate strategies was identified, but in the other workshops, participants referenced the difficulty in the limited timing of opportunities to influence local plan development. In all cases, officers discussed the evidence required to support policy inclusion in the documents, and the need for more engagement with Councillors on food and farming actions. In Workshop 4, participants noted that respondents in the public consultation process tend to highlight local facilities and education as key areas of concern, and that these concerns must be addressed in the local plan. This reflects Porter et al.'s (2015) findings that short-term, often statutory, issues, which focus on intervention rather than prevention, take precedence.

Several participants noted examples of other local authorities using planning as a lever, such as in Brighton and Hove, where supplementary planning guidance is designed to support local food growing. However, officers in Workshop 3 noted that although such guidance may exist, it is difficult to promote, and housing developments cannot be refused if supplementary guidance is not followed. Planning officers in Workshop 4 noted the significant increase in land area required to meet their 5-year housing supply targets. They explained that the new National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2024b) has implications for the preservation of good quality land, especially where it is sold on the open market. Participants in Workshop 3 suggested that green infrastructure policies may offer a solution that can protect peri-urban growing areas at risk from development.

Procurement was another area in which participants felt they could implement changes, recognising the potential for change brought about by the new national Procurement Act and a county-level carbon reduction procurement strategy. Kidd and Reynolds (2024) suggest that a lack of interest in making changes to procurement can be a barrier in key sectors such as education and adult and children's social care. However, this research found that barriers to change at the local level emanate from a lack of specific remit, as most public sector procurement is the responsibility of the CC (Keech et al., 2025). DCs instead identified local organisations and events that they could influence. One council referred to a Green Events Guide that they are currently developing for council-organised events. Interest in a similar guide was expressed by all other councils, as it was clear such an approach would help colleagues identify more sustainable

food options. The potential for DCs to support more low-carbon events outside of their own hosting is also significant. Participants in Workshop 2 discussed the sustainability goals for a regular programme of events held in their town, which includes guidance for food businesses at the events.

Some DCs run programmes that support those on low incomes to access healthy, nutritious, and sustainably produced food. Garvey et al. (2021) highlight the need for caution in addressing this issue, as ill-conceived policies can exacerbate disparities in food access and health. This research found positive examples of programmes that received local political support. For example, a council that participated in Workshop 3 made use of national funding to support community hubs in providing free or pay-as-you-feel cafes and pantries, in addition to vouchers for supermarkets. Participants in this workshop reflected on the potential of such mechanisms, as they align with the council's remit and allow them to change narratives around food consumption, while also encouraging an equitable transition. Participants in all workshops reflected on the potential to scale pilots that exist in some areas of the county, such as community growing initiatives. There was significant support for the idea of LA funding for such initiatives, as participants recognised several co-benefits of this activity in addition to supporting a transition to lower-carbon diets.

Participants were divided on actions which related to consumer behaviour change, recognising, as Garvey et al. (2021) suggest, that food and dietary choice are sensitive issues. Some suggested that it was not the DCs' responsibility to lead on this, while others commented that the campaigns required for behaviour change are within their remit but not resourced. Communications teams are busy, and campaigns require long-term planning. Participants in Workshop 2 suggested co-designing campaigns with non-governmental partners, to pool resources and ensure consistency of messages across the county. The terminology used in campaigns was also a contentious topic, with some participants suggesting that the terms 'climate-friendly' and 'sustainable' were not suitable as there is currently no clear definition to which individuals can refer for guidance on such diets. Communicating the benefits of a healthy diet that is also sustainable, such as the universal healthy reference diet suggested by Willett et al. (2019), was considered a better approach. Participants suggested that communicating a diet that meets the requirements of the UK Government's EatWell plate also held the potential to engage with NHS colleagues and leverage further funding. Nevertheless, we note a need for caution with this approach, given the rising daily adult cost of this diet from £7.48 in 2023 to £9.07 in 2024, with a 'baseline diet' based on typical food purchases now costing £8.27 (Jackson, 2024). Cooking classes funded by the Integrated Care Board and the CC Adult Education Team were seen as mechanisms to encourage behaviour change through not only improving participants' knowledge of the impact of food waste but also equipping them with the skills required to continue eating healthy and sustainable meals.

Finally, better coordination was considered a key area of potential across all topics explored above. Most participating DCs did not have a named officer working specifically on food and farming, so there is a risk of initiatives and areas of collaboration with better-resourced teams being missed. Participants in Workshop 3 suggested making use of existing mechanisms in the county to liaise on food and farming, such as the Local Nature Partnership or the Health and Wellbeing Board, as opposed to creating another forum. They identified that this would avoid duplication, could allow conversations across existing siloes, and potentially create pathways to funding through working with teams that have statutory responsibilities. There is a need for better vertical coordination, too, notably to ensure relevant officers can demonstrate the value of food to colleagues across their organisation, as Kidd and Reynolds (2024) suggest. Participants in Workshop 2 explained their ambition to ensure senior colleagues and Councillors recognise the value of food and farming action; currently, this is considered beyond their remit as urban authorities. Participants in Workshop 3 recognised the potential influence of the CC's Director of Public Health's reports in raising the profile of issues in the county, suggesting that an annual report that focuses on food could ensure its economic and environmental value is recognised across the county.

3.4 | Challenging actions

The reasons that participants suggested for not currently implementing actions were commonly related to issues of remit, resources, and perceived effectiveness. Participants expressed concern over signing additional declarations, recognising limited resource to take any further action. There was concern in Workshop 3 around actions that were perceived to have limited impact, with participants noting it is difficult to justify actions that lead to small changes in carbon emissions when actions in other sectors, such as energy and transport, can lead to greater emissions reductions.

Agroecological farming actions were also deemed unviable at the current time. Participants expressed uncertainty around the level of government at which farming policy and support should be provided. Farming knowledge and limited opportunities to network with local farms were also perceived as challenges, particularly in Workshop 2. Most agreed

that they could advocate for agroecological practices and support local organisations that assist farmers in changing their farming practices. In each workshop, participants also discussed their relationship with the CC's farm estate. They suggested that DC officers could work more closely with the CC's rural estate manager to explore how tenant farms may become demonstrators for a variety of interventions to support climate mitigation and to consider DCs' role in supporting these interventions. In all workshops, participants identified existing central government allocated funds, such as Lead Local Flood Authority funding and the Rural England Prosperity Fund, which they could leverage to support activities relating to farming.

4 | CONCLUSION

The potential for local government to play a transformative role in climate action is widely recognised in the literature (e.g., Evans, 2020; IPES-Food, 2023; Park et al., 2023; Sustain, 2022). This research found that the EMC Toolkit is a useful tool to capture the extent of English DCs' current activity in the food and farming sectors, with the actions prompting comprehensive discussions on the enabling and limiting factors for transformative change in local food systems. The participatory workshops in this research could be replicated at local government level across Europe, to support the development of the governance architecture required to deliver food system transformation under the EU legislative framework for sustainable food systems (Fesenfeld et al., 2023).

The workshop discussions demonstrate that DCs have an ambition to address food and farming issues, to the extent that their powers and resources allow. This paper demonstrates the incremental changes that DCs are achieving and the interest of officers in further developing this agenda, creating positive momentum and raising the profile of food and farming across the county. The findings also support climate campaigners' and food scholars' calls for national recognition of the value of positive action at the local level, to ensure such activity develops, and that it is equitable and appropriately resourced.

However, the challenges acknowledged in previous work (e.g., Garvey et al., 2024; Kidd & Reynolds, 2024; Porter et al., 2015) regarding local governments' capacity and capability to address issues beyond the statutory were also reflected here, in addition to more recent concerns around the place of food, farming, and climate in the LGR proposed by the MHCLG (2024a). We argue that LGR should be seen as an opportunity to learn from existing activity, to define clear roles and responsibilities for all levels of governance, and to create coherence across levels of government and urban–rural divides, as suggested by Lang et al. (2025). The momentum described above will be important in ensuring DCs' food and farming activities are retained during the LGR process and their implementation continued in resulting unitary authority/ies. Here, we support Fesenfeld et al.'s (2023) suggestion that implementing actions to support the transition in the food and farming sectors now may trigger positive feedback loops and ultimately lead to fewer political, social, and economic barriers to changes in the food system during LGR. Lessons may also be learnt from European countries in which local government has greater capacity to influence the food and farming sectors (Lang et al., 2025).

The current economic situation requires us to be realistic about the extent of LAs' contributions to climate mitigation in the UK and, we argue, reinforces a need to ensure that the burden is not placed solely at the local level. Despite their constrained capacity, LAs are well-placed to develop innovative solutions relevant to local need and this capacity to deliver climate action should continue to be supported, including through national recognition of some of the innovative delivery approaches discussed in this research. There must be continued recognition, at all levels of government, and across all departments, that transition to net zero must include addressing emissions in the food and farming sectors, and that local government can play a key role in fostering resilient food systems.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research received ethical approval from the University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee.

ORCID

Aimee Morse  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5574-6040>

Daniel Keech  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4112-9030>

Philippa Simmonds  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3929-4934>

Fahimeh Malekinezhad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2774-3384>

Janet Dwyer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2332-9832>

Benjamin Dent  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6167-5717>

ENDNOTES

¹ In England, the county is equivalent to the EU territorial scale of NUTS 3, or International Territorial Level (ITL) 3. A district is the equivalent of a local administrative unit, or municipality. A County Council (CC) oversees the whole ITL3 area, with District Councils (DCs) in charge of its constituent districts. CCs are responsible for social care, transport planning, highways and public health. DCs are responsible for local tax, housing, planning, and waste collection (National Audit Office, 2017).

² The Every Mouthful Counts toolkit was developed by Food for the Planet, to help LAs identify where they can make emissions savings through actions related to food production and consumption. The full toolkit is available at: <https://www.foodfortheplanet.org.uk/toolkit/>.

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