

Food builds community

From crisis to transformation



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1.

Summary



BUTTERNUT SQUASH
28 Jun

1. Summary

... food always brings people together

Newington, Ramsgate

*So food in itself is just something that we find that's universal.
And we've been able to sort of help our residents with different
ways of connecting through food ...*

Elthorne Estates

The mainstream food system is succeeding in providing food but is currently doing so at a very high cost to our health, climate, nature, livelihoods and communities. Food challenges at the 'local level' are not independent from global or national food system challenges – and include social and environmental impacts, uneven distribution of power, pressure on people working in and with the system, and lack of diversity and representation of food cultures and production methods.

We approach our work with a belief that power and decision making should sit at the most appropriate level, and that with good information and evidence communities are best placed to know what is going to work in their community. Government hold many of the key levers to fixing the food system – through policy in agriculture, trade, wage/benefits and public health – and they also need to create the enabling conditions that allow communities to take the lead on how and what food is produced and eaten in their community. The ability of communities to utilise their power is constrained by the broader systems they operate in, such as decision-making power and governance structures, planning decisions, and availability of land, funding and other resources. Many communities are already taking significant action on food, as we found with Big Local areas in this research, but with the right support and power to access the right levers, communities could be at the forefront of the food systems transformation that we need, and benefit hugely themselves.

Through this research, and the example of the Big Local programme, we wanted to understand *What do communities prioritise around food when given a chance to do their own thing? And what does that mean for food system transformation and community resilience?* To answer these questions, we undertook analysis of Big Local documents and websites, conducted a survey with Big Local reps, and interviewed 18 Big Local areas. The research was conducted from December 2020 to March 2021.

The food work of Big Local areas is a testament to a locally led approach to food. When given the chance to shape their own agenda, 143 of the 150 Big Local areas decided to work on food, or to use food to help bring their communities together. Big Local areas are providing many essential, and powerful, food-related services and projects – which are meeting immediate needs and bringing their

When speaking to Big Local areas about their food-related activity, we heard repeatedly about the important role that food plays in encouraging community engagement and participation, and in creating a positive community culture.

communities together. Largely this is focused on emergency or free food provision, whether that be through food parcels, a food pantry or meal deliveries. Gardening or growing activities were also prominent.

When speaking to Big Local areas about their food-related activity, we heard repeatedly about the important role that food plays in encouraging community engagement and participation, and in creating a positive community culture. The food work of Big Local areas also speaks highly to the resilience of their partnerships and their communities. When the pandemic hit, Big Local communities were able to switch gears entirely or step up their food provision in response to increasing food poverty and need for support. They were able to do this because of their existing structures, networks of volunteers and the links and trust they've built within their communities.

I guess we were looking actively for things that could bring people together. And that could act as a foundation for lots of different areas of delivery. And food really hit that mark.

Selby Town

The food work of Big Local partnerships is largely operating within, or responding to challenges caused by, the current food and broader policy systems – especially the emphasis on emergency food provision across Big Local areas – rather than working to fundamentally change what and how food is produced and eaten in their community. When we asked participants to imagine a different food future for their community, the answers were often revealing in their simplicity, and centred on people in the community being able to eat good/healthy meals together every day – a fairly basic need. Some areas mentioned wanting to encourage community growing or allotments – in contrast to the waste or surplus food that areas are currently using in their food programmes.

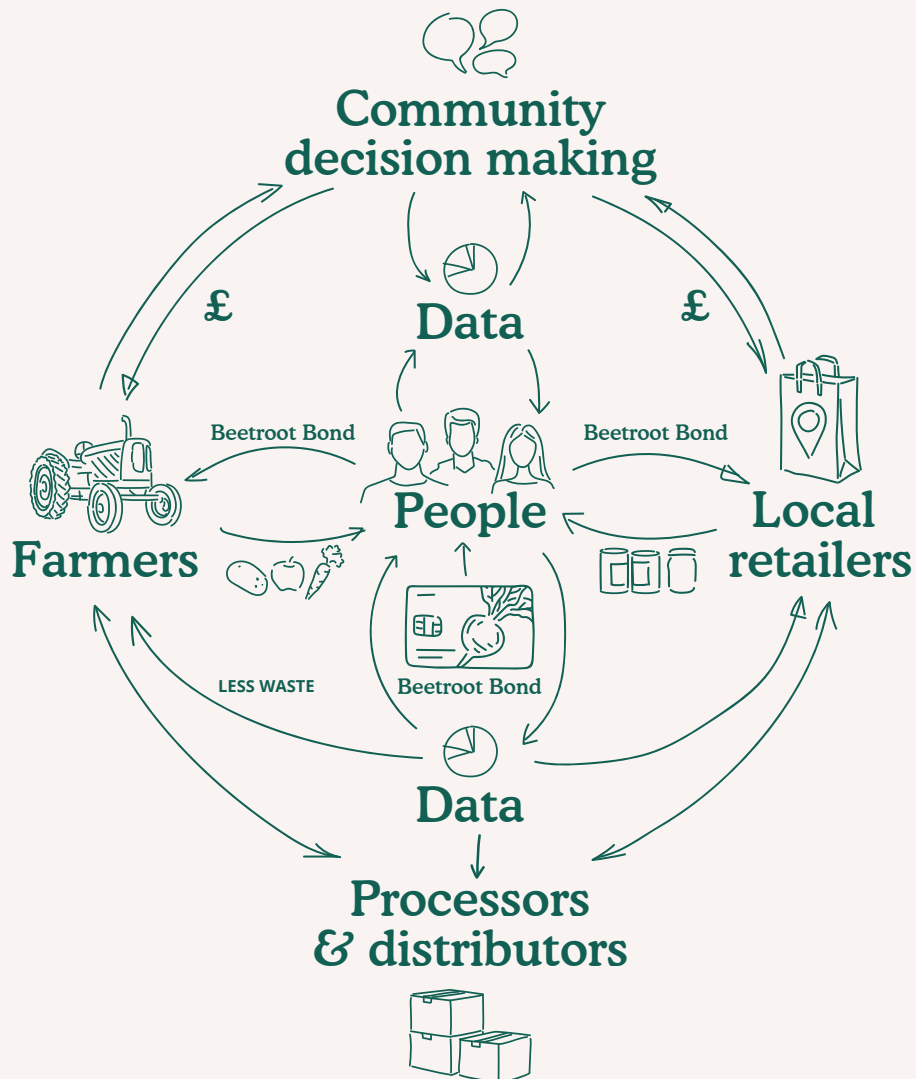
I'm doing food deliveries all across Peterborough, and we're doing again, hundreds and hundreds a week. So definitely it's showing that there's a real need for various different reasons around food poverty. I think that post Covid that need is not going to go. And I think it's then looking at how we enable people rather than just constantly rely on free food.

Ravensthorpe and Westwood

There is a huge opportunity for Big Local areas, and similar communities, to change and improve their local food system off the back of what they're already doing. Food is an issue that affects everyone and this research has shown that food has the power to bring communities and groups together. That power could be harnessed to help shift the UK towards food systems that are more equitable and healthier, less environmentally damaging, and which promote closer relationships between those of us who are eating the food and those who are producing it.

Communities are stuck in a system where surplus or waste food is the least expensive way for them to meet the immediate food needs of their residents. Not only is food waste damaging for the environment, but this approach does not solve the problem or its underlying issues, and does not treat people with the dignity they deserve. Much of the food system (and housing, benefit and development systems) lies beyond the control of community partnerships, which can lead to feeling trapped and unable to change things. A new approach is needed, which puts power in the hands of communities and enables them to respond to their specific food needs while supporting a more equitable and sustainable food future. There is a clear role for government and funders to support communities in undertaking this work, and as we heard in this research, communities are keen to do so. At FFCC, we believe a universal community food bond, which we call the Beetroot Bond, is one way to do this.¹

Beetroot Bond System



The community leaders we spoke to had immensely creative and energetic ideas for a different food future in their community, and knowledge of the context they were working in. The food system could look entirely different if communities, like those within Big Local, had the resources and power to enact their versions of our food future – and this is something that government, funders and others can help with. This food future would be possible if:

it's ridiculous coming from an agricultural county and not being able to get a field to grow some food is ludicrous. You know? Actually, that's my vision. Just help us clear those, those barriers, and let us do some real simple decent stuff.

Harefield, Midanbury
and Townhill Park

- **Communities were allocated the resources they need to make change but were not alone in making that change:** For communities like Big Local areas to deepen the impact of their work on food, they need to be supported through policy frameworks and information that enables them to act – and there are issues like poverty which should not be falling to communities (and charities within them) to solve.
- **Communities were at the heart of our response to the climate crisis:** Food system strategies and plans would focus on helping communities to create healthy and agroecological food systems and to create shorter routes to market for food that is fair and fresh.
- **Every community across the UK could access land for community food projects and food growing:** Communities need access to land not only to grow their own food or set up community spaces for sharing food, but to form strong connections and resilience.
- **Solutions to challenges in the food system were driven by relationships and connection:** Focusing on relationships and connection and putting real decision-making power in the hands of communities will create new community-driven food systems with more flexibility and resilience. These would not be in competition with the 'mainstream' food system, but would be there to supplement it and meet needs not currently met by the food system.
- **Funders supported vital and vibrant community food systems:** If we were to ask funders to imagine a better food future, the same question that we asked our Big Local participants, it is unlikely that they would answer with food banks and other emergency food provision. A good question for funders to consider is: what does a vital and vibrant food community look like, and how can your funding help support that?



2.

About this research



2. About this research

Big Local is a unique programme delivered by Local Trust that puts residents across the country in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. Funded by a £200m endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund – the largest ever single commitment of lottery funds – Big Local provides in excess of £1m of long-term funding over 10-15 years to each of 150 local communities, many of which face major social and economic challenges but have missed out on statutory and lottery funding in the past.

Through the example of Big Local, we wanted to understand **What do communities prioritise around food when given a chance to do their own thing? And what does that mean for food system transformation and community resilience?**

The aims of the research were to:

- Understand what is happening on food across Big Local partnerships
- Provide inspiration to Big Local partnerships by documenting the role of local action & community power in food systems transformation
- Build evidence on the connective centrality of food in local wellbeing and resilience
- Understand what is driving or inhibiting change and how this can be further supported now and into the future

Local Trust

ABOUT LOCAL TRUST

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live.

We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long-term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities to make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

ABOUT THE FOOD, FARMING & COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION (FFCC)

FFCC focuses on food and farming, climate, nature and the public's health, for a just transition to a greener, fairer world. With partners in governments, businesses and communities, we generate radical ideas and practical actions to transform

our countryside and our economy. We help convene collective leadership on the difficult questions and resource communities to become more resilient and adaptable for the challenges ahead.

Introduction to the food system and the role of communities



Imagine a future where healthy, nourishing, delicious food is plentiful and affordable for everyone. Where we can choose from more local and UK produce grown sustainably, and where all the food we buy is grown with care for the planet. Where we have reversed the trend on diet-related illnesses. Where eating food together, at home or in our high streets, is convivial and healthy and strengthens our communities. Where all food is valued, and food waste is eliminated.

Our Future in the Land, FFCC

Our current food system does so much more than feed us. It is about what we grow and how we grow it, what we eat and how we eat it. Yet our current system is failing on the basics. In the UK, one of the wealthiest countries, nearly 6 million adults are experiencing food insecurity and 1.7 million children live in households that are food insecure.² This means that they don't have adequate nutrition at all times, may be worried about where their next meal will come from, or are going without food on occasion. In the UK, food insecurity is not caused by a lack of food in the system, but by the inability of people to access and afford that food, especially healthy food.

Much of the food available in UK supermarkets is categorically unhealthy,³ yet it is these unhealthy products that are often the most affordable. When people are struggling to put enough food on the table, because of a lack of financial resources, they are often reliant on these low-cost yet unhealthy foods, or they need to make use of emergency food provision such as from a food bank. And while food in UK supermarkets is generally quite cheap (compared to other similar countries), the true cost is picked up elsewhere in society – with many farmers struggling to make a living, and low job security and wages in much of the food sector, a degraded natural environment, vast quantities of food waste, spiralling ill health and impoverished high streets. The mainstream food system is succeeding in providing food but is currently doing so at a very high cost to our health, climate, nature, livelihoods and communities.

Food challenges at the 'local level' are not independent from global or national food system challenges – and include social and environmental impacts, uneven distribution of power, pressure on people working with the system and trying to

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access the system, and lack of diversity and representation of food cultures and production methods. Nine supermarkets control 95% of the food retail market Great Britain,⁴ and people are largely disconnected from where and how our food is produced. Thinking back to 100 years ago, much of our food would have been purchased or traded from people within or nearby to our community. Times have changed, but there were many benefits of connecting to our community through food: connecting and sharing with our neighbours, knowing the land and how it's used, and seeing the impacts of our food production on our environment. Food systems driven by closer relationships, by their nature, also mean that we do not have to package and process food for long bouts of transport, that there are good jobs located in every community, and that food can be sold at prices that are fair for the local community or even obtained through non-monetary means (trading/ bartering). With the climate crisis hitting us at the same time as the economic crisis from Covid, these benefits are desperately needed.

We approach our work with a belief that power and decision making should sit at the most appropriate level, and that with good information and evidence communities are best placed to know what is going to work in their community. Government hold many of the key levers to fixing the food system – through policy in agriculture, trade, wage/benefits and public health – and they also need to create the enabling conditions that allow communities to take the lead on their own food systems. The ability of communities to enact their power is constrained by the broader systems they operate in. Many communities are already taking significant action on food, as we found with Big Local areas and describe in this report, but with the right support and power to access the right levers, communities could be at the forefront of the food systems transformation that we need.

FFCC has argued in the past for a universal community food bond, which we call a Beetroot Bond, to give everyone a real and practical incentive to participate in and shape a sustainable food system in their communities. Every person in the UK, adult and child, would receive a Beetroot Bond card with a monthly dividend to spend on fresh, mainly locally produced food. The purpose is to support people to buy healthy, affordable food and to empower communities to shape and drive their local food systems.

FFCC also recommends that the government support communities to co-create community food plans, enacted by community partnerships. We believe such plans are essential to any national food policy, as a national strategy is only as good as its capacity for delivery. For many aspects of that delivery, the important actors are in communities and in local food systems. Community food plans would help to shape and influence the whole food environment, including community growing and eating spaces, the type of food outlets on the high street, schemes to encourage local food businesses, and much more. All of these actions are known to improve health and wellbeing, and as we find in this report, community action on food is important for building community connection and resilience.

We recommend approaching these food plans through the Public Value Framework – which sets out how to use funding to effectively deliver outcomes and maximise value through four pillars: clear and ambitious goals, effectively managing inputs, engaging users and citizens, and developing system capacity.⁵ Applying the Public Value Framework would enable more connected and transparent decision making, helping communities to take proactive and democratic control of their local food system and design it to meet their needs.

However, this change at the community level, as vital as it is, cannot transform our food system alone. To back up community action, FFCC calls for a strong and escalating regulatory framework, and a level playing field, so that business activities that deplete public value are curtailed. Businesses also require the right enabling environment to change, with meaningful incentives to acknowledge and regard their innovation and enhance public value. We must make it easy for businesses to do the right thing and increasingly difficult, expensive or illegal to do the wrong things.



3.

Approach to the research



3. Approach to the research

To understand what Big Local areas are doing on food, and what it means for food system transformation and community resilience, we undertook analysis of Big Local documents and websites, conducted a survey with Big Local reps, and interviewed 18 Big Local areas. The research was conducted from December 2020 to March 2021.

DESK RESEARCH AND QUARTERLY REP SURVEY

To get the lay of the land, and gather a view of what all 150 Big Local areas are doing (or not doing) on food, we started with a document analysis of:

- Stories from Big Local communities on the Local Trust website
- The Big Local 'Workplace' account, where Big Local areas and Local Trust share information and updates with each other
- Published findings from the 'Our Bigger Story' and 'Communities in Control' studies – which are ongoing longitudinal research projects in Big Local areas
- Responses to a survey that Big Local reps had completed about their area's response to Covid
- A 2019 list of Big Local area thematic priorities that Local Trust had compiled

In parallel, we designed and implemented a survey to be included as part of the regular quarterly survey that Big Local reps complete about the areas they represent. Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation. The survey asked reps to describe the challenges that their Big Local areas face with regards to food, to identify what food activities the areas they are undertaking (if any), and what other community partners are involved in their food work (if any). We also asked reps to help identify the best contact to speak with about an area's work on food, to help us with recruitment for the interviews. reps for all 150 areas completed the rep survey.

INTERVIEWS

While the desk research and rep survey helped us identify what was happening on food across Big Local areas, we used interviews to help us understand why and how that work was happening, what impact it was having, and what that work means in terms of food system transformation and community resilience. We also asked participating areas to imagine a different food future in their community,

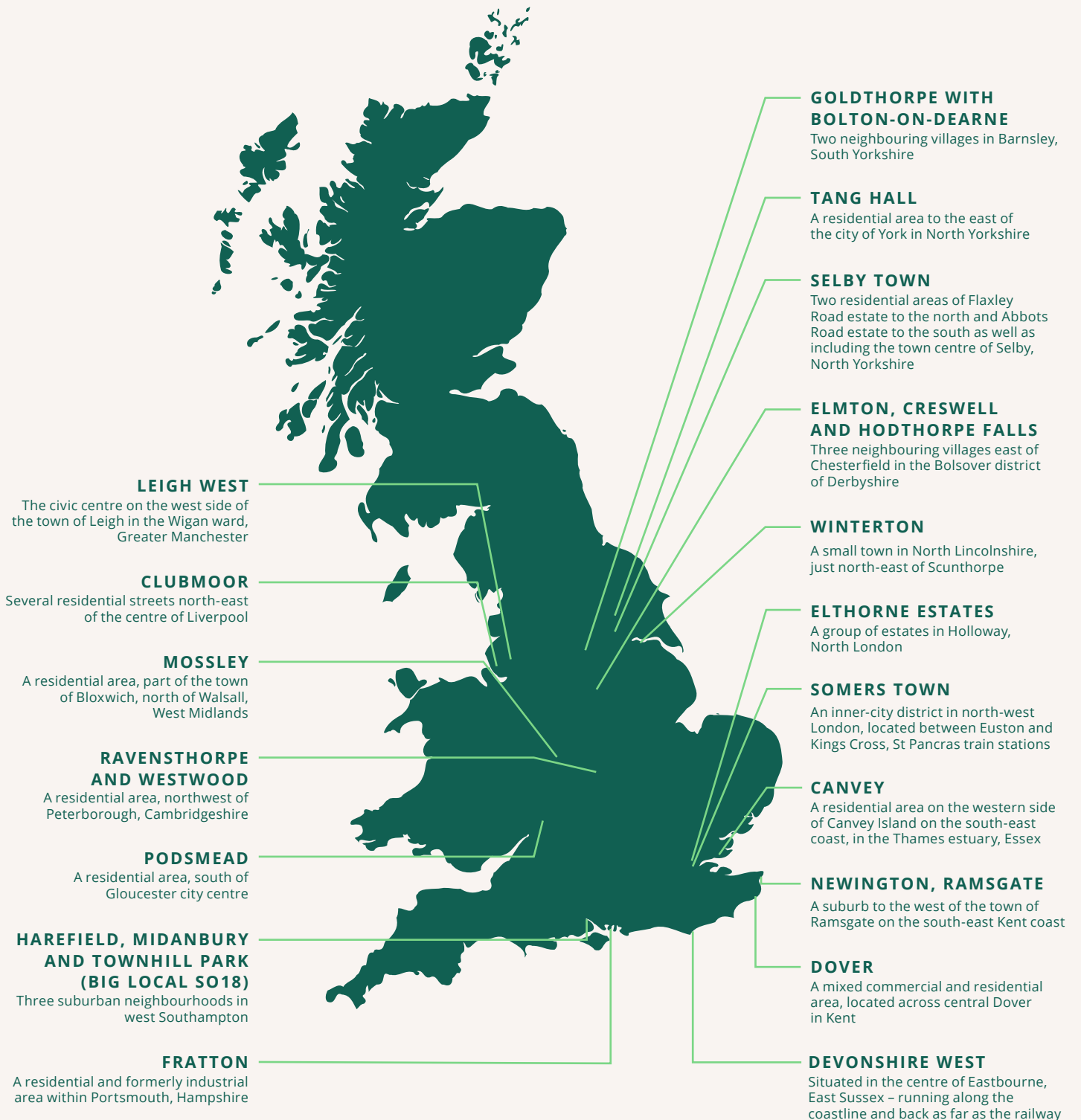


to get a ‘big picture’ view of their hopes and aspirations for their community’s food landscape, and if they would be able to continue their activities on food when their Big Local funding comes to an end. The full list of interview questions is in Appendix 1.

We conducted these interviews through a combination of group and individual interviews, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. The group interviews were designed to allow participating areas to learn from each other, as well as for us to learn from them – and we heard many times that the areas had very much enjoyed hearing from other areas about what they are doing.

We interviewed 18 areas in total, conducted in 10 interview ‘sessions’. 13 areas participated in group interviews, and we interviewed 5 areas by themselves (though often with more than one person from that area). The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to nearly 2 hours, depending on how many areas were participating in the ‘session’. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and we analysed them thematically using NVivo qualitative analysis software. We used a combination of deductive and inductive analysis, where we created a coding framework that captured our key research questions but also allowed codes to emerge as we were analysing. The thematic analysis from the interviews helped us to understand and interpret what we found in the desk research and quarterly rep survey, and to provide in-depth analysis of the motivations, barriers and impacts of the work these Big Local areas are taking on food. We then interpreted these themes and findings through the lens of food systems – and sought to answer the question: how does this work contribute to the change we know we need to see in the food system, or how could it contribute in the future?

The 18 areas we interviewed were spread throughout England, represented a variety of area types (urban, rural, etc. – categorised through previous Local Trust research) and were selected because they are undertaking varying levels of food-related activity, as uncovered in the desk research.





4.

Findings





4. Findings

Big Local food activity: what?

Food-related activity is nearly universal across the Big Local network. Through desk research and the quarterly rep survey, we found that 143 of the 150 Big Local areas are doing some work on food, to varying extents.

This food activity is largely focused on emergency or free food provision, whether that be through a food bank, food parcels or meal deliveries. Food pantries, where people pay a small fee to access the pantry, are another prominent approach, perhaps because this approach has been championed to some extent by Local Trust. Covid has prompted many areas to provide free or emergency food – we found evidence that 99 areas are providing emergency or free food because of Covid, compared to 57 before Covid – which is still a very high number. However, it should be noted that we were not able to do a detailed search for every area, particularly in the early years of their partnership, and we are highly likely to have missed some pre-Covid work on food.

BIG LOCAL FOOD ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF AREAS
EMERGENCY/FREE FOOD PROVISION – COVID	99
GROWING/GARDENING – FOOD – USUAL ACTIVITY	71
EMERGENCY/FREE FOOD PROVISION – USUAL ACTIVITY	57
FOOD TO CONVENE – USUAL ACTIVITY	47
EDUCATION/COOKING CLASSES/COOKBOOK – USUAL ACTIVITY	35
ENCOURAGING LOCAL FOOD SUPPLY AND DEMAND	31
LAND USE FOR FOOD PRODUCTION	22
CAFE/DINNER CLUB – USUAL ACTIVITY	20
CAMPAIGNING AND ADVOCACY	18
SCHOOL MEALS/HOLIDAY PROVISION – USUAL ACTIVITY	17
NO FOOD-RELATED ACTIVITY IDENTIFIED	7
GROWING/GARDENING – NOT FOOD – USUAL ACTIVITY	6
FOOD HUB – USUAL ACTIVITY	5
GROWING/GARDENING – FOOD – COVID	4
SOCIAL SUPERMARKET/OTHER RETAIL – USUAL ACTIVITY	3
SCHOOL MEALS/HOLIDAY PROVISION – COVID	2
FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE TO BUY FOOD – USUAL ACTIVITY	2
BUSINESS GRANTS FOR FOOD – USUAL ACTIVITY	1
BUSINESS GRANTS FOR FOOD – COVID	1
FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE TO BUY FOOD – COVID	1
SOCIAL SUPERMARKET/OTHER RETAIL – COVID	1
CAFE/DINNER CLUB – COVID	0
EDUCATION/COOKING CLASSES/COOKBOOK – COVID	0
FOOD HUB – COVID	0

The interviews reaffirmed what we found in the desk research, with most areas we spoke to engaging in emergency or free food provision, including food pantries, growing or gardening, education/cooking classes and cafes/community meals.

Gardening or growing food is the second most prevalent food activity, followed by using food as a convener (e.g. community festivals with food). Other prominent activities include food education and cooking classes, and cafes or meal clubs. Through the rep survey, 31 areas reported that they are working to encourage local food supply and demand, 18 areas reported campaigning and advocacy work on food, and 22 areas reported doing work on land use for food production. These topics likely mean many different things to different areas and it is hard to know what exactly they are working on from the rep survey. The interviews helped to provide some insights into these topics, including how areas had leased disused land to repurpose it for food production, were supporting local businesses whenever they needed to procure food (e.g. for an event), and worked with their local councils to solve problems in their areas.

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Why?

The areas we interviewed primarily discussed being motivated to work on food because they wanted to respond to a local need, which included responding to poverty/food poverty, a lack of access to healthy food or people eating an unhealthy diet in the area, and a desire to reduce social isolation.

We've been running a Friday lunch club for the last two years for socially isolated residents, and the social isolation project brings the community together.

Devonshire West

As most of the food work is focused on emergency or free food provision; it is not surprising that most areas we spoke to mentioned being motivated to work on food so that they could reduce food poverty or respond to Covid. Many of the interviewed areas described a notable increase in food poverty in response to the pandemic and feeling that they needed to pivot their focus to emergency provision during the pandemic (whereas before the pandemic some had existing or intended activity on food that wasn't emergency provision). Some of these areas wanted to return to their longer-term plans when the emergency need due to Covid decreases but highlighted their concern about the high levels of food poverty that the pandemic had revealed and what that means for the long-term focus of their work on food.

I'm doing food deliveries all across Peterborough, and we're doing again, hundreds and hundreds a week. So definitely it's showing that there's a real

need for various different reasons around food poverty. I think that post Covid that need is not going to go. And I think it's then looking at how we enable people rather than just constantly rely on free food.

Ravensthorpe and Westwood

... because we have a lot of green we'd like in some areas for there to be some provisions to grow your own. One of the very first initiatives that we had was to sort of set up a sort of a mini allotment on the estate where people can grow vegetables. That's had to pause for a number of reasons, around Covid. But that certainly will be kick-started.

Elthorne Estates

Beyond responding to local need, the areas we spoke to clearly saw food as an opportunity to engage and build relationships with residents and other community members. This included seeing food as a “conversation starter”, as a means of engaging residents and as a means of building connection and culture, including food culture, within the community.

... food is a great way of engaging people ... the food is the catalyst, in the sense of [finding out] what is the real need for you needing to access for your food? It gives us a chance with the cafe to be able to engage with these people and look at whether it's you know, they need more support with debt, or housing or employability, or whatever it is.

... at the moment, because of food poverty and the stigmas that are around there's a danger it becomes a divisive thing, rather than having the potential to be something around which people gather. I mean, we've had problems with engagement ... but whenever we put on a food event, invite people to a tea or inviting to a lunch, strangely, they'll turn up and contribute without realising that's what they're doing.

Fratton

So one of the things that partnership sort of identified early on and we had really strong community feedback from was that they wanted more community space. I guess that has given us real focus to think about what the community wants or community needs. And in brutal terms, what gives us a strong foundation for being relevant and sustainable into the future. And I guess we were looking actively for things that could bring people together. And that could act as a foundation for lots of different areas of delivery. And food really hit that mark.

Selby Town

I want residents in Newington to be part of a food culture. And I want that culture to be very, to be very mixed. I want to strike a chord with people that you can eat really, really, really good food. But ultimately you need to do that together.

Newington, Ramsgate

How?

Many areas described looking at what other local organisations were doing on food and trying to fill in the gaps, or to provide food in a different or more flexible way than others provide. For example, areas described not making their emergency food means tested, as other organisations do, that their model was providing a different service to the community (e.g., a pantry versus a food bank), or that they were providing more culturally appropriate foods. A number of areas made a point of describing the uniqueness of the food services or projects they were running, and how this was important in fostering a sense of community and connectedness. In one area, they explicitly spoke about their emergency food provision becoming a “community initiative”, which highlights the community connection that food is fostering in a lot of Big Local areas.

Certainly for the emergency food packs and food distribution that we work with the local authority with, they've got a very strict structure of what's needed ... they have two levels of support based on whether or not somebody's financially insecure, or whether they are on benefits and struggling and also on the size of their family and things like that ... But I, you know, I work on the basis that the food that we're given is free, I don't really want to get to a point where I have to charge or well, I've never turned anybody away, anyone asking for food ... I'm reluctant to say, no, I'm sorry, you don't fit the criteria, you can't have it.

Podsmead

... we've got about 100 members so far in a week. So this is a need ... we've identified the need, like we said about two years ago ... and this is a gap. So we've got food bank, and but we knew ... we needed something else ... And I think one of the good things about the pantry is that those that are becoming members, also, a lot of them have expressed a wish to volunteer. So it's becoming a community initiative.

Dover

We don't operate like a food bank at all. And make that very clear.

Newington, Ramsgate

... it was known as the food hall, as opposed to a food bank, because again, with some people at the time, the whole sort of idea of food bank had its own, you know, connotations that we won't get into. So we worked with a number of local nutritionists, and our communities to have a varied range of foods representative of our community. And, you know, the feedback from that was actually quite overwhelming ... when they came in actually saw foods that were familiar to them, they were actually quite overwhelmed. And they, they knew wasn't by accident. And they were again,

A few areas said they were pursuing a pantry model, where people pay a nominal fee to participate, to help reduce stigma – as well as being preferred because pantries are potentially financially self-sustaining.

extremely grateful that somebody had gone to the trouble of understanding some of the things that they would normally cook that they weren't able to afford, which is really quite important.

Elthorne Estates

Reducing stigma was frequently mentioned as an explanation for why a Big Local area took a particular approach to their emergency food provision. Quite a few areas mentioned that they position their emergency/free food provision as a service to help reduce food waste, as they feel this helps reduce stigma for recipients. Another area had started “community meals” because it was an approach that provoked less stigma. A few areas said they were pursuing a pantry model, where people pay a nominal fee to participate, to help reduce stigma – as well as being preferred because pantries are potentially financially self-sustaining.

Just to add one of the big drivers was around food waste. So when we say nothing about the food club is means tested? No, it is about food waste and supporting one another and coming together.

Newington, Ramsgate

But there is a lot of taboo and basically the people that you speak to if they are even brave enough to tell you that they've got problems with income and paying for food, they are still too proud to go to a food bank, you know, so there's a lot of stigma attached. And we've thought that actually the pantry is probably another way to go to try and do that.

Winterton

It's in partnership with FareShare ... and we focused our attention on reducing food waste. And that's been the way that we've sort of sold it to people, we were shying away from the food bank label, because of the stigma with that.

Podsmead

So there is no stigma in going to a community meal. Everyone was there and just sat down next to each other as equals and nobody questioned why you've come, you just came to enjoy being with people and having a meal.

Fratton

... the research that I've done is kind of showing that actually, just giving away free food perhaps isn't the way to go. And some people don't like it, and they don't think they're worthy, and they have trouble accepting it. So we'd kind of like to perhaps do some sort of exchange. So we're thinking about the food pantry being like a membership scheme, where you'd kind of subscribe to a weekly fee of three, five pound, whatever.

Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park

Most areas used waste or surplus food in their emergency food programmes, usually provided by FareShare (an organisation that redistributes waste/surplus food) or through donation. A few areas that we spoke to are linking their free or emergency food provision to nearby growing schemes or allotments, but this was not common. One area had tried to set up a partnership with a large vegetable grower (so they could accept their vegetables that didn't meet supermarket specifications), but was unsuccessful in doing so because another group had taken 'seconds' from the grower and tried to sell them, and the grower stopped providing them to outside groups.

... We've just had funding for a new greenhouse. And a polytunnel ... it's a greenhouse slash classroom space where we're teaching people about how to grow their own vegetables, doing a lot around gardening for mental health. So teaching people how to grow their own vegetables in their own back gardens, but we're also setting up a low-cost plant nursery, which again, will allow the community to come ... they pay about five pound a box but they actually do a pick-your-own style, so they go and they pick their own stuff their own onions, tomatoes, courgettes, you name it. This will be an all-year round thing because we've now got the greenhouse and in that we'll also be running food projects such as how to grow these things, how to cook these things, etc, etc.

Ravensthorpe and Westwood

So they've got no food waste over there [at a local grower]. Because all their seconds as they call them, you know, the cucumbers that are too bent, they go to the local farm and the animals eat them. Which is heart-breaking. Because there's nothing wrong with it.

Newington, Ramsgate

Challenges, barriers and resources needed

CONTEXT, POLICY AND LAND USE

We asked participants about the challenges and barriers in their current work, and what resources they would need to do more work on food or to do their work on food more effectively. Many areas described larger contextual challenges that prevent them from having as much impact as they would like with their food-based work. Most common of these was a lack of available land, space or buildings for them to do their work, including land for growing food (discussed further below).

But one particular hurdle, which I've got with this [community orchard] ... is trying to find land to do it on. Now we've got the money, we've got a beautiful planned orchard with everything, you know, you could possibly have plums will go there, we'll have benches here, you know, we'll have a water source, [but] we cannot get any land because all of the land around the town that would be suitable for this is just being held on to by people hoping to sell it for housing development.

Winterton

It stopped in September, because that's when the hall closed ... And then, and then they bulldozed it ... we've been governed by our venue's availability as well.

Elthorne Estates

... at that time we were basically in two cupboards, and we were doing everything there. So we were doing counselling and youth work and then the food became a little bit of a problem because you can't store food in that kind of space. And then about two, three years ago, we were offered a WRVS building, which allowed us to do more youth work. So do we had two counselling rooms, but it also provided us with a huge huge kitchen and then space for to do more food. At the same time the need went up.

Canvey

When communities were able to access land, it opened up new possibilities for them. One area described being able to lease disused land from a school and turning it into an acre for community growing and for using as a gathering space, and the food they grow feeds into their community cafe. Another area talked about wanting to explore the potential for using church land to create an allotment to help encourage healthier eating.

we've built we've built an outdoor cooking area, and outdoor pizza oven. We've now got an orchard, which we got supplied through [supermarket], we've got an orchard of about 80 fruit trees. We've just built a new area for fruit bushes. [The land] it was just wasteland there was nothing here whatsoever. And it was it was adjacent to a school, the school owned the land. So the school gave us a 25 year lease. And we've basically just transformed it into a place. I mean, if you could it see, now it's just incredible.

Ravensthorpe and Westwood

I'm responsible in my other job for a rather large churchyard, which has nothing in it, because they removed all the gravestones, etc. So it's a lovely open space. And we can see that you could create in one corner, a little kind of allotment area, which again, would help with that kind of healthy eating and making right choices.

Fratton

A few areas described how the limited power they hold in the food and political system acts as a barrier to their work on food, and that there is value for Big Locals to be at the “table”.

If you're not at that table, where those decisions are being made, if you don't have a voice at that table ... because they are making decisions, what they think is best for you. And one of the great things about a Big Local group is that, you know, clubbed together, we are a huge voice. And we are doing so much good. So we're making those changes on a real local level, which, during the pandemic, it's really come to the fore, you know. It's being noticed.

Selby Town

STAFF AND VOLUNTEER CAPACITY

We heard that areas struggle with human capacity to do the work, especially when it is dependent on volunteers, and about the critical importance of paid staff to drive the work forward. This work is rewarding to those we spoke to, who have genuine passions to help their communities, but they also spoke of feeling under-resourced and described the fragility of their projects. Often, these projects are led by a single passionate resident, placing them in a precarious position in the long term. A few areas mentioned that food projects had been discontinued or weren't as impactful because of this challenge.

It will run as long as I can go. One of the problems you get is bringing all the people on. I keep asking for volunteers and it's all like in house and myself, my wife, and my daughter now comes 30 miles away to help ... I mean I'm 76, so we'll go on as long as we can. But I keep trying to get other people involved because we need to hand it on to keep it going. So it's getting volunteers really.

Elmton, Creswell and Hodthorpe Falls

But the actual human resources of making sure everything's working, making sure you're doing it right you know, checking the fridges and making sure it's correctly then making sure your volunteers are okay. That takes a lot of time ... what we need is somebody to run it.

Canvey

And then we just couldn't find the right person to lead on it. And I generally don't have time to do it ... It needs a person who really believes in it and loves it and wants it to happen.

Dover

But I think that because of the type of area it is because of the, you know, everyone's trying to get funding, everyone's sort of working really hard, everyone's sort of burning out, essentially, it's really hard to do those

proactive things where you try and create those links. And, and if we have those links, we may find out about more people that would benefit from you know, food-related activity or things to do digital exclusion, or trading and development or whatever.

Somers Town

We've done cookery courses in the past ... with families that needed a little bit of extra help. So what we would do is that we would, we had a tutor, we use the community centre ... the adults and maybe some of the older children would actually help cook the food ... and then they would all sit down together ... But we found it was so labour intensive that it was wasn't sustainable. So that's kind of like why we've, you know, gone further down the road of, you know, pantry or community store or, you know, that sort of thing

Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park

Covid emerged as a significant barrier to some food-related work in the areas we interviewed, especially in-person events and activities like community meals and food festivals, but as described above Covid was also an impetus for new or expanded work on emergency food provision.

COVID

Not surprisingly, Covid emerged as a significant barrier to some food-related work in the areas we interviewed, especially in-person events and activities like community meals and food festivals, but as described above Covid was also an impetus for new or expanded work on emergency food provision. One area, who set up a Covid relief fund for residents, described how Covid meant they couldn't fund residents who were asking for money for food because there were people who needed help with other pressing needs, like rent, that other organisations weren't able to help with (whereas there was a food bank operating nearby). One area reflected on the challenging experience of working during Covid, and the need for community work to be seen as "essential" work.

And, I suppose one thing – it's less than now, but especially in the last lockdown – is community work, I suppose that is, it was deemed almost like non-essential. You can't go out to that place, you can't do that, or, and the essential travel didn't include community groups or community work or working together, and or just protecting our mental health in that capacity. So I suppose, deeming it more essential going forward, and to build that resilience, backup is hugely important.

Selby Town

And this, this was a community panel, that resident panel that made this decision. And unfortunately, they decided that they couldn't fund food. Because so many people were asking for money for rent and bills, and laptops, as well because it was when everyone had been told to work from home.

Somers Town

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT NEEDED

The areas interviewed named several resources or additional support they would need to take on further or different work on food, or to enact their imagined future for food in their community. Funding emerged as one of the main resources needed to take on future work once their Big Local funding had ended, especially core funding – including so that areas could employ staff to be able to take on the day-to-day management of a project. They also discussed needing dedicated community member involvement, access to land or buildings, and help from external organisations for “on the ground” implementation support. When areas spoke of the resources they would need, this prompted some discussion of wanting to learn from what other Big Local areas were doing on food.

So that opportunity to meet up and share has been lost this year. But from experience, those things are, it's an opportunity to sort of brainstorm together. So the national stuff would be good. If there was something to come from these conversations that you're having that allowed us to, you know, once a quarter or something like that, I would be happy to be part of that.

Podsmead

I think from our side we've probably sort of said it all, and it would just be really interesting and be great to kind of continue these conversations and know how we could work with partners. You know, whether that's yourself or Local Trust or learn from other kind of projects and initiatives and stuff.

Selby Town

But isn't that the joy of being in with Big Local, though, when you're in conversations like this, you know, I've not met you before [names], but you know, we're all doing, we're all in different parts of England, but we're all doing very similar things with, you know, and it's, it's always a joy, and you always come away with that little nugget and think, 'actually, that's a brilliant idea, we're gonna nick that one as well. We're gonna do it.'

Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park

But in terms of funding, whereas we used to be a grant giver, we're going to be grant seeker now. And it's a big turnaround.

Dover

I don't mean expert support, I mean, actual collaboration on the ground, we know what's needed. We could do with more people who work systems.

Tang Hall

Impacts of work on food

Food activity was described as having waves of impact that go far beyond the food or activity itself, including improving the perception people have of their own community and fostering more community participation and therefore community resilience.

The food work of Big Local areas is often designed to meet an immediate need, and it is clear from speaking to these areas that they are meeting those needs quite effectively. We also explored the more intangible impacts or outcomes of their work on food, which is what we will describe here.

CONNECTION

The areas we spoke to reported their food work as having a range of impacts, from providing much needed food to bringing people together and building trust with residents. Food activity was described as having waves of impact that go far beyond the food or activity itself, including improving the perception people have of their own community and fostering more community participation and therefore community resilience. This was discussed, in varying ways, in all the interviews we conducted. Some areas mentioned that their work on food allowed them to have deeper connections with residents, and to better identify the needs of that person or family and the broader community. For example, when residents come into a pantry or food bank they often describe other challenges they're facing or other needs they have (e.g. they also need nappies or feminine hygiene supplies).

I mean, everything we do in the village has a knock on effect on the whole community. Because if you help one section it has a knock on effect in that, and it's a feel good fact it goes out.

Elmton, Creswell and Hodthorpe Falls

So I suppose that's part of the resilience as well is making sure that everybody from all aspects of our community are involved in those conversations. And so I think that's really important as well. And the fridge definitely facilitates that and other projects going forward as well.

Selby Town

COMMUNITY CULTURE

Related to the connection described above, areas also described the community culture that is generated from the connection they foster through food. One area described how their annual food festival helped to form stronger connections between different cultures within the community, with food as the entryway to understanding different cultures. A few areas spoke of how food helped them to bring different groups together and the value of having different ages come together around food.

So food in itself is just something that we find that's universal. And we've been able to sort of help our residents with different ways of connecting through food ... the International big lunch was sort of one of our big offers, annual offers that we were able to do and engage with residents.

Elthorne Estate

... a suggestion was made by them if that if it can be done as a family so it so you know, you have sort of two generations perhaps you know, doing the same meal together, which was a great thing

Elthorne Estate

But food was very much a natural part of it, and what's good with our diverse culture is that a number of different cultural food stalls that turned up and people were trying each other's. So it's breaking down barriers in a community which, although diverse, doesn't have good inter-community relations sometimes.

Fratton

One area described the impact that learning how to cook had on the youth in their programme, saying their faces light up with their achievement, and another area spoke of the mental health benefits of learning how to cook.

EDUCATION

Areas also spoke of the educational role of their work on food, including teaching healthy eating habits and how to cook different foods, but the benefit of this teaching goes beyond the immediate cooking skills learned. One area described the impact that learning how to cook had on the youth in their programme, saying their faces light up with their achievement, and another area spoke of the mental health benefits of learning how to cook. Another area discussed how their 'grow at home packs' fostered confidence and joy in people who were isolated and struggling financially.

So I think our projects enable us to work in deprived communities, which you know, as we know, have sometimes less outcomes in terms of education, and allows us to inspire them in the same way that quite often they would in a more affluent area ...

Canvey

... I just teach them how to make a basic scone. From there, you can go on from savoury to fruit and it gives them some measuring skills ... And when that tray of buns come out or the scones come out of the oven, their faces, they light up, its unbelievable.

Elmton, Creswell and Hodthorpe Falls

I've developed numerous food education, training programmes; it's become more about the role food plays, as opposed to actually teaching people to cook. So I think at the moment, we're very much on the cusp of mental health and wellbeing and food.

Newington, Ramsgate

Our idea of it was for people not to feel like it's a big scary thing to grow stuff at home. You know you can even put something just on your windowsill by your kitchen. And then you've got something you can all enjoy ... they were all given to people that are experiencing isolation and financial insecurity. I think that even though it was a small thing, it was something that was like, Okay, well, I can, ya know, grow things in my own house if I want to.

Somers Town



Imagining a food future in their community: what and why?

When we asked participants to imagine a different food future for their community, the answers were often revealing in their simplicity, and in their juxtaposition to their current activity. Their imagined futures centred on people in the community being able to eat good/healthy meals together every day – a fairly basic need – and different ways to achieve that.

just knowing that each family has got food to eat every day for every meal. And it's not, I'm not saying that you've got to eradicate junk food because our food club, we make sure there's some chocolate of some sort or something like that going in, because everyone needs to treat and you need that sort of stuff. But they're actually having healthy meals or healthier meals.

Newington, Ramsgate

In some areas they focused on cooking meals together, or people learning how to cook, and the impact that could have on the lives and diets of their residents, including through the potential for intergenerational cooking classes and meals.

... we wanted to saturate the town with cookery lessons, with feeding, with people drop-in things, not formal stuff, where people come along, and they, they join in the session, then we sit and we eat together. And it was

a big social thing bringing people together, different cultures, different age groups, that it could be going on every day around the town that could be feeding, cooking, eating socialising, together, after Covid. But that, that was our vision for the town, that we were going to instil an enthusiasm and passion for good food, and that creating good food from scratch is cheaper, healthier and tastier. And people can actually enjoy cooking, that simple, cheap food can be delicious.

Devonshire West

... we'd like to go down the sort of education of sort of getting people to cook more rather than rely on the takeaways which cost so much more.

Goldthorpe with Bolton-on-Dearne

Some areas that have been doing work on emergency or free food provision mentioned wanting to encourage community growing or allotments – perhaps a nod towards wanting to move beyond immediate food provision and into a stronger community food system and longer-term solutions to food insecurity. Some areas focused on the role that growing can have in bringing communities together, and others brought an element of food culture – and broader community culture – into their food growing ambitions, saying for example that growing food teaches patience and care.

And I think if everyone could spend more time doing this [growing food], I think it could really shape and change communities. I'm not saying that would be, I'm not saying if every person just suddenly started growing carrots in their garden, suddenly, we would all live a happy life ... But people spending more time on the process of food, cooking more, growing more family time more, around the table more, more community groups.

Ravensthorpe and Westwood

So I think we should have the growing, cooking, growing, you know, like, like an urban farm or whatever, where people can grow their own food, to learn how to grow food, to see where it's coming from. So it could be like a small holding or an actual farm. And they can have it grown on their doorstep. So they understand about what it takes to be sustainable, but also talk to other people about food. And different communities. And different cultures have different thinking about food. And it's really enriching when they all talk to each other about and realise what the commonality is. And, I think that could be self-sustaining at one level, if it was invested in properly.

Tang Hall

We've had a vision in Dover to have a kind of garden share thing going where elderly people who can't look after their gardens, have people who haven't got a garden to come in and dig them over and then bring that into it, could be at the hub could be at the pantry, you know, to bring that

produce into community use and then for somehow for that to put money into the system or credits into the system or whatever, where perhaps you know, you're digging somebody else's garden, you split the, split the haul with a third of the community a third to you and a third to the person whose gardens you're digging or whatever. But we just haven't found the right people or organisation to work with for that yet.

Dover

One area described wanting to set up a “community dining space” for people to come together for low-cost healthy meals, but the emphasis was on the coming together part of the meal as a means of “social nourishment”.

I would love to see residents and families comfortable, able to have enough food to cook with their family, a meal that is healthy and nutritional and to develop the skills so that there isn't a food crisis. And to use food to bridge some of the other divides within the community.

Selby Town

And the food aspect of it probably will run through everything that's in there, because even the individual groups, we want to encourage them to share food together. Because I think that's a main thing, as we've said before, food brings people together.

Podsmead

I want to see a community centre that the kitchen is to some extent managed and run by the community in rotation. With guided support, it can produce a daily menu that is subsidised, you know that people pay for it, but it is subsidised ... it's a community dining space ... And in essence that is because ... I talk about social nourishment ... And I say that the real flavour is the sharing.

Newington, Ramsgate

Some areas discussed why they hadn't yet been able to act upon their imagined future for food – if they hadn't yet – which ranged from lacking expertise to not knowing the right partner organisation to much larger structural issues around policy and funding. Notably, many areas discussed how they lacked access to land, buildings or space to enact their dreams for food, particularly for food growing and gardening. For some areas this was to do with having a physical space to enable them to host their work, for others it was about obtaining land so they could change the way people in their community access food, and for some it was about having community space to foster connection.

I think my vision would be for there to not be so many barriers or my hope for there not to be so many barriers in the way because like I said, we've got money now, and we have we have that vision and we know quite a lot of what our vision is around food and everything that that entails ...

but still, there seem to be so many pointless barriers in the way. Like I say it's ridiculous coming from an agricultural county and not being able to get a field to grow some food is ludicrous. You know? Actually, that's my vision. Just help us clear those, those barriers, and let us do some real simple decent stuff.

Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park

So for us, looking towards the future, we want a larger community space that we can bring bigger groups of people together than we can at the moment, we could probably manage groups of 10.

Goldthorpe with Bolton-on-Deerne

So the, the, the vision, if you like, is to do as much growing as possible on a micro level, so that it serves a small community, instead of being heavily reliant on supermarkets. And also, one of the problems we've got here is we've got a lot of concrete, and we've got a lot of shops, disused shops and not a lot of land that you could use.

Clubmoor

How food work connects with a partnership's legacy

Areas felt they would be able to continue their work on food if they were able to secure additional or new funding, if it was self-funding, or if another community partner would be able to pick up the work from them.

When we asked areas if their food activities would be able to continue after their Big Local funding comes to an end, this prompted discussions of their “legacy” – which is reflective of broader Big Local/Local Trust discussion about the end of Big Local funding in 2026.

Areas felt they would be able to continue their work on food if they were able to secure additional or new funding, if it was self-funding, or if another community partner would be able to pick up the work from them. The areas that were setting up or providing a food pantry often mentioned how it would eventually be self-funding, which was one of the appeals in taking forward that model. Likewise, an area that had set up a cafe described it as being self-funding, and thus able to continue. Other areas said they would need to “reinvent” themselves or their projects to be able to apply for new funding – as they perceived that funders wouldn't like to fund projects that are already up and running.

So we'll, I'm sure we'll carry on doing that and still doing food projects. But in terms of anything with any longevity to it, funded projects, they don't like to refund the same project. I mean, that's a huge problem for organisations to do things because you build something up and it's needed and it's great. And then suddenly, you've got to scramble around and try and get funding for it. And people want you to come up with a whole new idea for that

funding. And you inevitably end up sort of sidestepping, or changing project or whatever, just so that you can be doing something.

Devonshire West

But I think foods an easy one to justify for funding, but like you just need to reinvent the wheel all the time.

Tang Hall

Several areas discussed their legacy as being a physical space or building, such as a community hub or a playground. Two areas combined this idea of physical space with the need to create ongoing income, by buying properties to let at affordable rates for their community. But another area described not being able to have their legacy be related to a physical asset, because of lack of space in their area, and so they were looking into other options.

So we bought two properties. And the council has just set up an ethical letting agents. So the ethical letting agency will let the properties for us and for the management and stuff. So we'll get an income stream of those properties, again, which will sit in our legacy fund; plus if we ever need to, if we ever need to borrow substantial sums, we can use those as equity, you know, mortgage against.

Leigh West

... because we're in the middle of London, we can't do what other places do and kind of actually build a community centre ... it may not be a physical space, you know, some kind of literacy project.

Somers Town

In other areas, their legacy was less physical and more about community connection or engagement. Some mentioned that they would like to see the food culture (or general culture) change in their community because of their work, but that this felt unlikely. This could be because, as two areas discussed during an interview, they felt it would take longer than the 10 years of Big Local funding to create a lasting cultural change within the community, or that they felt that ongoing projects or programmes were necessary to reinforce or maintain any culture change that had occurred.

So our legacy bit that we're trying to create, we're hoping that we'll break the barrier down and really engage with people. We're trying to get people to come along to meetings, or trying to come along to bits and pieces, what we're doing is really difficult.

Mossley

So I think we're looking at various small ways, I think. I think for me, the reality is that you will never, 10 years isn't long enough to change a culture. It can begin to kind of plant some seeds. But I think any sense in which we, we think we might, by the end of it have established something that secure I think, is probably a bit a bit optimistic.

Fratton

5.

What does Big Local work on food mean for food system transformation?



5. What does Big Local work on food mean for food system transformation?

The mainstream food system is succeeding in providing food but is doing so unequally and at a very high cost to our health, climate, nature, livelihoods and communities. In the UK we buy 95% of our food from nine supermarkets,⁴ and we are largely disconnected from where and how our food is produced. FFCC believes in an approach to food systems and governance that places power and decision making at the most appropriate level, and often that means a locally led approach to food.

Big Local areas are providing many essential, and powerful, food-related services and projects – which are meeting immediate needs and bringing their communities together.

The food work of Big Local areas is a testament to a locally led approach to food. Big Local areas are providing many essential, and powerful, food-related services and projects – which are meeting immediate needs and bringing their communities together. We heard repeatedly about the important role that food plays in encouraging community engagement and participation, and in creating a positive community culture. The food work of Big Local areas also speaks highly of the resilience of their partnerships and their communities. When the pandemic hit, Big Local communities were able to switch gears entirely or step up their food provision in response to increasing food poverty and need for support. They were able to do this because of their existing structures, networks of volunteers and the links and trust they'd built within their communities.

... we were able to sort of galvanise members of our community, very quickly, especially in supporting those who were shielding.

Elthorne Estates

And instead of saying, who's going to come and help us solve this problem, they've rolled their sleeves out and said, we'll sort it out.

Newington, Ramsgate

The food work of Big Local areas is largely operating within, or responding to challenges caused by, the current food and broader policy systems – especially the emphasis on emergency food provision across Big Local areas. We'd like to see a world where poverty and food insecurity are not problems that Big Local areas felt they needed to solve – one in which the food, housing, employment and benefit systems provided people with the ability to obtain enough healthy and sustainably produced food on a regular basis. Many of the levers to change these systems

sit with governments (local and national), including legislation and regulation to change food system business practices, public procurement, trade standards and tariffs, benefit and wage levels, and mandates/incentives for affordable housing. But there is also a unique and powerful role that communities like Big Local areas can play in their local food systems.

Food is an issue that affects everyone and, as this research has shown, food has the power to bring communities and groups together. That power could be harnessed to help shift the UK towards food systems that are more equitable and healthier, less environmentally damaging, and which promote closer relationships between those of us who are eating the food and those who are producing it. This section of the report will outline some ideas that emerged during the research about how communities like those involved in Big Local could contribute to this food system transformation and towards finding long-term solutions to the food challenges their communities face.

DEEPEN IMPACT: FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION WHILE PROVIDING EMERGENCY FOOD

There is a huge opportunity for Big Local areas to connect with food system change off the back of what they're already doing.

There is a huge opportunity for Big Local areas to connect with food system change off the back of what they're already doing, and a key learning for Big Local areas could be how they can connect with food system transformation while providing immediate food needs. Some of the areas we spoke to are already doing this (to varying extents), and many mentioned it in their 'food visions' for their communities, so it is an idea that seems like it would have support in Big Local areas and could be nourished and supported for even greater impact. But many areas described this as beyond their scope at the moment because they are having to respond to immediate need with finite resources (time, capacity or funding).

We haven't got there yet, but they are looking to build a community building and growing areas and things like that. And at the moment during pandemic, their emphasis has been making sure people have enough to eat.

Canvey

I think we probably need to be doing more work with local producers, and not just FareShare. Which I think [we] would have done if we hadn't had Covid.

Newington, Ramsgate

The emergency or free food being provided by most Big Local areas is currently dominated by surplus or waste food, and nearly every area we interviewed mentioned receiving food from FareShare – an organisation that redistributes surplus food to charities. This means that the food can be accessed by areas at a very low cost, but a few areas mentioned feeling that surplus/waste food wasn't as nutritious or as fresh as they would have liked, that it made it difficult to know

what kind of food they were going to get, and a subscription to FareShare does require some funding.

And then we have our food distribution club in the afternoon, which we ask people to donate a pound to, and the money from the people coming in pays the cost of delivery and so on with FareShare, because they don't do, they don't disperse that food for free, you have to sign up to a deal with them. So, for example, we get 70 kilogrammes of ambient food and fresh food each week from them, that costs us 1200 pounds a year. But what we've got in operation covers its own costs. So, we don't need to worry about that. And we don't have to make any charges.

Podsmead

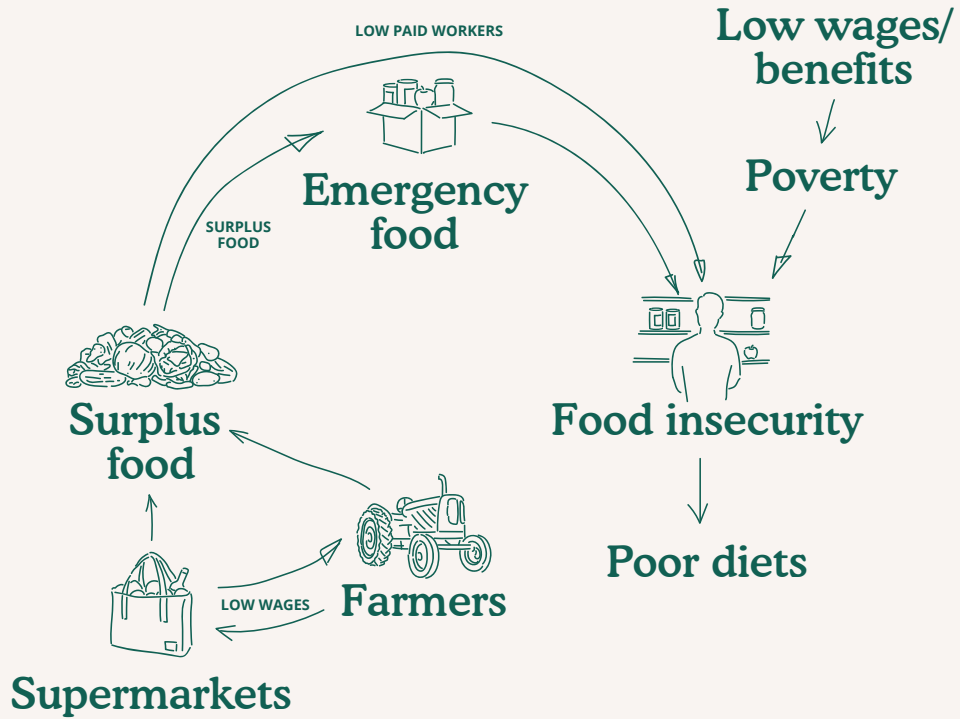
But yeah, we do need to connect more [with local producers]. But at the moment, it's just about keeping costs low using the food through FareShare. But we just don't know what we're going to get. ... So at the moment, I think we've still got a fridge full of bacon ...

Newington, Ramsgate

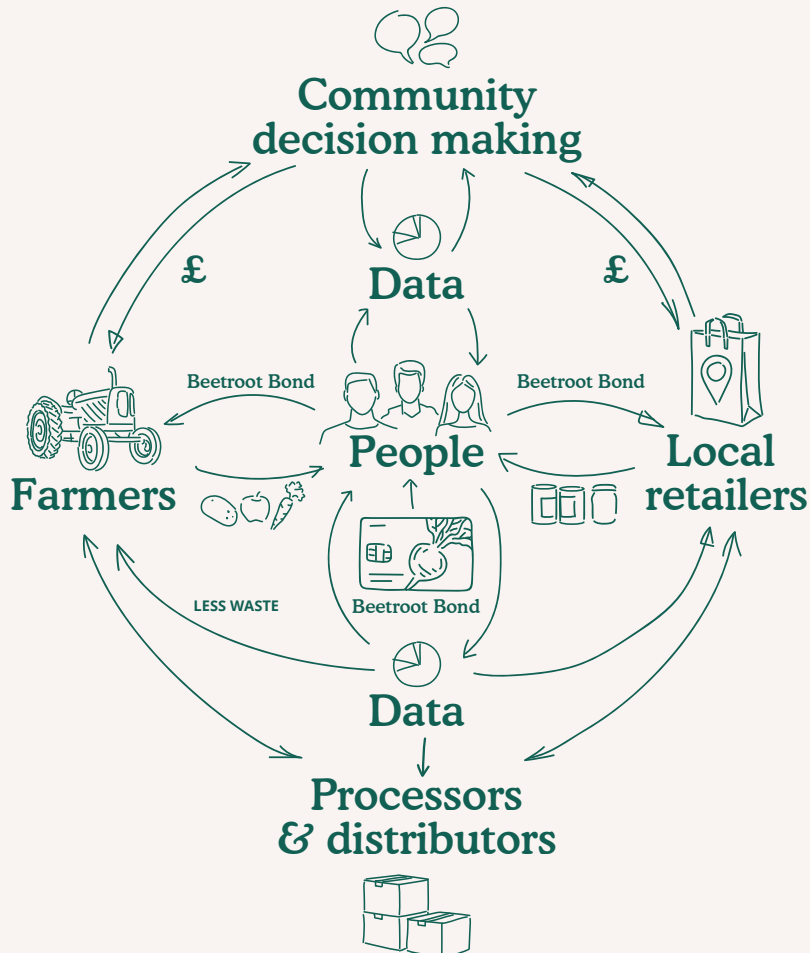
The system being set up here is that:

1. There are high levels of poverty and food insecurity. People on low incomes cannot afford to buy enough healthy food (including people working within the food system).
2. Food is overproduced or wasted in the 'mainstream' food system, including because of the specification demands and contracts that supermarkets and big food companies place on farmers. This comes at a heavy cost to the environment.
3. The waste or surplus food is given or sold at a low cost to charitable organisations like food banks and food pantries, and then given or sold at a low cost to people on low incomes.

Current System



Beetroot Bond System



To get out of this cycle (overproduction–poverty–surplus–charitable food), a new approach is needed and there is an opportunity for communities like those involved in Big Local to lead the way.

Not only is this approach damaging the environment, it also does not solve the underlying issues (unsustainable production and poverty) and does not treat people with the dignity they deserve or provide them with the food they need for a healthy life. It is important to note that our interview participants highlighted that they found people struggling with food insecurity were more likely to accept charitable food when they felt that it was reducing waste – that focusing on the food waste reduction helped to reduce stigma. However, there wouldn't need to be any stigma involved if people on low incomes were able to afford the food in the first place, and the food system was realigned so that healthy and sustainable food becomes the relatively affordable option. The people within Big Local areas are doing great work, but the system that they're operating in is flawed.

... there were two lads working on cucumbers. And all I could see as a lay person at the time was them cutting them in half ... They were ready to go and they were being put into a bin. I thought they were being you know, packaged as half cucumbers. They were being disposed off because they were the wrong length ... I don't warm to then the supermarket saying, well, what we're going to do now is we're going to sell you wonky potatoes, I think that's taking the, extracting the, well I can't say the word about it

Newington, Ramsgate

To get out of this cycle (overproduction–poverty–surplus–charitable food), a new approach is needed and there is an opportunity for communities like those involved in Big Local to lead the way. Big Local areas have community-driven leadership structures that are embedded in the community and they care deeply about finding solutions. These factors are present in many communities around the country, and communities understand the people who live there. But communities are stuck in a system where surplus or waste food is the least expensive way for them to provide emergency or free food production. Much of the food system (and housing, benefit and development systems) lies beyond the control of community partnerships, which can lead to feeling trapped and unable to change things. There are other ways to operate, but any alternative food provision system would need to be equally cost-effective and supported by wider system/policy change, especially on incomes, housing costs and access to land – and the alternatives we propose below are suggested with these challenges in mind.

The most direct way for communities to deepen the impact of their emergency food work, and support food system transformation, would be to explore sourcing that food from nearby farmers/producers or through community growing schemes. We heard that some Big Local areas are pairing their food parcels with information on cooking or cooking classes, and they could also be supporting their local food economy when possible. In more rural areas with food producers nearby this could mean establishing a partnership with a local grower to grow food for their programme or donate any of their surplus food. In urban areas,

communities could fund or partner with urban growing initiatives that can provide food for their food banks or pantries. Or they could work with the local council to obtain land for their own growing scheme, for planting a community orchard, or for people who would be in receipt of food parcels to grow their own fruit and veg (with support from the partnership).

Thinking bigger picture, communities and Big Local areas could help to build the case for a regional or national initiative that supports a more equitable and sustainable food system. With their on-the-ground knowledge, community food initiatives and Big Local areas are in an important position for sharing information about how the food system could better function for their residents – information that is often left out of top-down policy discussions.

As an example of what this change could look like, FFCC is calling for a universal community food bond – which we refer to as the Beetroot Bond. It would give every person a monthly dividend to spend on healthy food purchased directly from local farmers and traders. Eligible traders would be decided on by the community, thereby helping to steer the food system to meet the needs of individual communities, while investing in producers to better serve their local communities. While proposed to be a national initiative, this approach could be scaled to a local level and existing Big Local partnerships would be well placed to provide the governance structure that would need to underpin the initiative. It could be co-developed between many community partners and would be a means of shaping demand and shortening food supply chains, which bolsters farmer incomes – especially for small and medium farmers. It would boost the health of the population, the health of the city and community, and the bonds between the city and the countryside. Most importantly, though, it would help communities and Big Local areas meet the immediate food poverty needs of their community while connecting to broader food system transformation, and it is an approach that treats people with dignity and gives them agency and a means to act.

Local Trust is calling for a Community Wealth Fund that would provide no-strings-attached funding for communities, which could enable communities to implement an initiative like a Beetroot Bond if they wanted to. It could also be funded through taxes on unhealthy or unsustainable food products, which are increasingly being discussed as part of the solution to our environmental and public health crises.

The Community Wealth Fund is a campaign calling for long-term investment in the neighbourhoods that need it most. It is calling for the next wave of dormant assets (from stocks, shares, bonds, insurance and pension policies) to create a new, independent endowment – the Community Wealth Fund to invest in 225 ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods.

communitywealthfund.org.uk

FOCUS ON THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Another way for communities like Big Local areas to influence change on the food system would be to look at, and try to influence, the food environment in their communities. By food environment we mean the businesses, shops, restaurants and cafes that operate in the area, and how and what food they're serving. The food environment in the UK is overwhelmingly unhealthy, and areas with higher deprivation tend to have a higher concentration of unhealthy takeaways.⁶ Big Local areas have an opportunity to be a partner to the council and others in the community in trying to shape their food environment, so it is healthier and more sustainable.

I was brought up with my mom what came home late and stuck, stuck something in microwave cooker ... I had to learn how to cook for my children. Because I didn't know. And it's the same same with everybody, if you, if you've never been taught that, or you'll never know. So if you go in a shop and you work with our young people, they go into shops, and they can get a can of Coke, or the cheap ones. For 25, 30p, they can do that, they're gonna have an energy drink currently to keep them going. And it gives them that buzz that they want and it's nature of young people, they like buzzes, it's just it's, yeah. It's gonna be cheap. Why not? ... But it is it's not just about education. It's also about selling, isn't it?

Canvey

We heard about this unhealthy food environment in a few interviews and how it was working against some of the work that the areas were trying to do. This also links to the businesses and suppliers that areas use to provide their emergency/free food and trying to work with those businesses that are helping to improve the food environment in their community. A few areas that we spoke to make a point of using local food businesses to supply the food for their events and festivals, which one area said was helping to support diverse food cultures in their community. One area we spoke to mentioned that they were partnering with a charity organisation in a neighbouring town that provides a freezer of zero-waste frozen meals for their food pantry.

We're working with other partners – there's a charitable group, you may have seen it on Countryfile the other weekend called The Long Table. And they're in Stroud, which is our neighbouring town. And they produce ready meals which are frozen. And then they ship them out if you like to different organisations and we're about to become one when the pantry opens. They have what they call the Freezer of Love. And it's donated, ready meals that people can have. And the way that that works is you pay as you can afford. With that. So we were incorporating a lot of different things along with our food network, including looking at a zero-waste facility. And so people can buy raw goods in just the amounts that they want rather than in containers.

Podsmead

The role that Big Local areas play in bringing their community together, and the close knowledge they have of their areas and residents, puts them in a unique position to help steer policy in a direction that will benefit their communities.

POLICY ADVOCACY

As discussed above, the role that Big Local areas play in bringing their community together, and the close knowledge they have of their areas and residents, puts them in a unique position to help steer policy in a direction that will benefit their communities. This could be at a local, regional or national level, and is important as the food work of many Big Local areas is responding to the outcomes of decisions and plans that sit in the political sphere (e.g., universal credit increasing food insecurity⁷).

we're all trying to tie the loose ends of supporting people with food, you know, but there are, there are issues that go beyond what we can, what we can do – it's, it's, there's a trying not to sound too political, but there is a political element to it, the number of people that are classed as being in poverty at the moment, the arguments over providing food over the school holidays, you know, we are living in a world where we have to deal with the outcomes of those things.

Podsmead

Numerous decisions about food are made at the local authority level, including how the food environment and landscape is shaped through local plans and planning decisions and food procurement for schools and hospitals. Many of the Big Local areas we spoke to talked of working together with the council on some of their projects, but only a smaller number spoke of engaging councils in an advocacy capacity. This was reflected in the desk research and rep survey as well. Given their existing relationships with councils, Big Local areas could be a powerful voice to advocate for a healthier and more sustainable food policy landscape in their local area.

And I think if we were sort of be more strategic about it, or, you know, from a sort of a, I guess from a policy perspective, it's also, if the food gives us a bit of a platform to sort of shape and shout and influence, you know, there's

not a lot going on in the region around sustainability, food, sustainable food systems, environment, carbon, it's a real kind of, it's probably a bit hard to say a bit harsh to say black hole, but compared to what other regions and local authorities are doing, there's just nothing happening. And perhaps if it's the start of a conversation about the role that those systems play in a sort of resilient communities is that you know, I think.

Selby Town

Likewise at a regional and national level, there is an opportunity for communities and Big Local areas to raise their voices in support of long-term solutions to some of our biggest food challenges, and especially food poverty. Collectively, the 150 Big Local areas would have a loud and respected voice as 'insiders' and front-line delivery providers. This would be especially powerful if paired with the on-the-ground work described above about the need to move beyond surplus/waste food being used in emergency food provision, or indeed the need for emergency food provision at all.

Sustainable Food Places has created a "toolbox of local authority food policy levers",⁸ which communities and Big Local areas can use as a source of inspiration for opening up conversations with their local authority. Many areas already have local food partnerships, and Big Local areas can get involved in those (if they're not already) or could be involved in setting one up. However, it is important to recognise the significant time and resource limitations that community initiatives and Big Local partnerships face, and the limitations these place on their ability to invest in food systems transformation. It may be possible for communities and Big Local partnerships to identify opportunities to advocate for food system transformation in their normal dealings with their local council. Areas may also want to include funding for this type of activity in any future funding bids, and as we discuss below, funders need to become more receptive to funding this kind of activity.

DOCUMENT THE JOY AND CONNECTION THAT BIG LOCAL WORK ON FOOD BRINGS

One of the most important roles that communities doing work on food, including Big Local areas, could play in food system transformation is by continuing to be shining beacons of the connective and joyful role that food plays in communities. This aspect of food is often ignored in policy and funding decisions because it can be hard to capture and report its impact. The collective stories and experiences of Big Local areas speak strongly to the 'softer side' of work on food, and its power in forming the bonds that make communities vibrant and resilient. This research went some way in uncovering these impacts through the example of Big Local areas' work on food, but there is much more that could be done and learned – and, importantly, conveyed to people in decision-making positions, be that policy makers, businesses or funders.

I think the value we see around some of the things ... around community and coming together ... We're not about educating the community to address their unhealthy eating habits or anything like that. We're just using it as something that everyone does and that we can enjoy.

Newington, Ramsgate

This could also relate to the 'policy advocacy' section above, in that community food projects and Big Local areas could help to advocate for regional or national support for food projects that will foster this connection. A number of the Big Local areas we spoke to are (or were) conducting community meals, and one area spoke of a vision for a community dining space. These ideas and activities are important and could be fostered in every community across England if supported by funding and policy. For example, the forthcoming National Food Strategy in England could recommend national community dinners that showcase food from the area's region (potentially supported by a central fund for areas that need additional funding).

Implications for policy and funding

I think what Covid has done is it's accelerated some of the narrative around the need for proper community development, and strong communities.

Newington, Ramsgate

Food challenges at the 'local level' are not independent from global or national food system challenges – and include social and environmental impacts, uneven distribution of power, pressure on people working with the system and trying to access the system, and lack of diversity and representation of food cultures and production methods. The community leaders we spoke to are aware of the broader context they are operating in but are constrained by the limited power they have to influence that system. When we asked them to imagine a different food future for their community, we found their ideas were filled with immense creativity and energy, and knowledge of the context they were working in. The food system could look entirely different if people like those working with Big Local areas had the resources and power to enact their visions – and this is something that government, funders and others can help with. We'll outline here some questions and ideas about what that support and change could look like.

WHAT IF COMMUNITIES WERE ALLOCATED THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO CHANGE THEIR FOOD SYSTEM – BUT NOT ALONE IN MAKING THAT CHANGE?

Communities with strong bonds and enabling resources and structures are able to respond to the needs of their community. We saw this in the research we present

For communities like Big Local areas to deepen the impact of their work on food, they need to be supported through policy frameworks that enable them to act – and there are issues which should not be falling to communities to solve.

here, and this is an underlying tenant to arguments for governance to become more localised. However, the communities we spoke to are responding to a host of problems – such as poverty, food insecurity, loneliness, and poor education and housing – that have deep root causes that lie outside of their immediate influence. Through speaking with Big Local areas, we heard about the ability of these communities to get things done, to meet local needs that weren't being met, and to help bring their community together through food. For communities like Big Local areas to deepen the impact of their work on food, they need to be supported through policy frameworks that enable them to act – and there are issues which should not be falling to communities (and charities within them) to solve.

I think it's just that there's a worry isn't there with all these kind of projects and initiatives, they rely on project funding, local passion, and somebody essentially a person who's passionate about something to do it. And ... if there's no policy framework, it's very hard to kind of say, look, we should be doing this, and other places are doing this.

Selby Town

Most Big Local areas are providing programmes to meet immediate food needs, and are therefore responding to underlying poverty and inequalities. Imagine what these communities could be doing if they didn't have to respond to that need. To support communities to move beyond the need to provide emergency food, to move "beyond the food bank",⁹ governments, funders and others could:



- Require local authorities to establish food strategies and establish community-led food partnerships to enable their delivery. This would give a strong impetus for including food proactively throughout local plans – an essential element to creating thriving communities. The Sustainable Food Places partnership has played an important role in enabling cities and places around the UK to adopt and enact community food plans, and this approach could be extended. For this to work effectively across communities, residents would need to be equipped properly with the skills and knowledge to participate.



- Enact initiatives like universal basic income or the Beetroot Bond (described above), which provide for the basic level needs of everyone. In May 2021, Wales announced a trial of a universal basic income, a model which could be replicated across the UK.



- Support communities – through funding, training and connections – to set up food enterprises which focus on long-term solutions to challenges of food insecurity, such as food cooperatives, food hubs, and local food businesses that meet community needs.



- Provide increased support through safety net programmes such as by making free school breakfast and lunch universal, including during the school holidays, and increasing the value and eligibility criteria of Healthy Start/Best Start vouchers.



- Enact a real living wage and index benefit payments to a realistic cost of basic needs (such as the Minimum Income Standards).



- Support a community wealth model like that being enacted in Preston.¹⁰



- Fund a Community Wealth Fund as argued for by the Local Trust (see box on page 43). The Community Wealth Fund would guarantee long-term hyper-local investment in 'left behind' communities.



- Enable communities and charities providing emergency food through the waste/surplus food model described above to explore different models, perhaps through a peer-to-peer learning network.

WHAT IF COMMUNITY FOOD WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF TACKLING THE CLIMATE CRISIS?

When we spoke to Big Local areas, we didn't hear much about the potential connection between their work and solutions to the climate crisis. This is in contrast to the global forums happening on climate, food and farming in 2021, including COP26 being held in Glasgow, where "locally led solutions" are high on the agenda. However, to make these solutions truly locally led, community partnerships – like those in Big Local and argued for above – need to be at their centre.

Communities like those involved in Big Local, will be affected by climate change, but often don't have a say in how their community will adapt to protect themselves. The food system is a major contributor of global greenhouse gas emissions, and is therefore a key component of climate change action, and the is the primary driver of biodiversity loss.¹¹ We know through this research and others that food helps bring communities together to solve their collective challenges. We also know that innovation sticks when people have a stake in the design of it, and community-led work on food gives people the incentive to reduce their collective carbon footprint. Together these facts highlight the potential power of putting community-based food initiatives at the heart of action on climate change.

If community food were an integral part of tackling the climate crisis, food system strategies and plans would focus on helping communities to create healthy and sustainable food systems and to create shorter routes to market for food that is fair, fresh and future-proofed. It would focus on agroecological approaches to growing and producing food, and community-led food systems would provide many opportunities for green, stable jobs into the future. Communities would be enabled to test and learn at the local level to discover what adaptations and innovations work in their community. The potential for innovation in local-level food systems is hugely untapped, and the blockages are mainly in governance/

power, financing and planning. As discussed above, local authorities could have a duty to create food strategies, and planning and land use decisions should enable communities' access to land and other resources to create a more sustainable food future (discussed further below). Financing this work could to the Community Wealth Fund described above and could also relate to the Agroecology Development Bank¹² as argued for by FFCC – a new financial institution to accelerate a socially just and low carbon transition by providing sustainable finance for innovative UK food and farming systems.

WHAT IF EVERY COMMUNITY ACROSS THE UK COULD ACCESS LAND FOR COMMUNITY FOOD PROJECTS AND FOOD GROWING?

We heard repeatedly that Big Local areas were lacking land, space or buildings to be able to progress their work on food, and that these decisions were largely out of their hands.

Fostering resilient communities and empowering communities is built on a connection to place – including how land in that place is used. We heard repeatedly that Big Local areas were lacking land, space or buildings to be able to progress their work on food, and that these decisions were largely out of their hands. Communities need access to land not only to grow their own food or set up community spaces for sharing food, but to form strong connections and resilience. We cannot separate land use access, rights and distribution from community participation and the conditions for sustainable food systems.

FFCC is calling for a national land use framework in England that would guide better decision making on land use, by mediating competing pressures and encouraging multifunctionality to enable land to provide multiple benefits for public value. Part of what a land use framework does would be recognising what differing types of land are best suited for and recognising different governance arrangements that exist on land. A framework would consist of a set of agreed principles and practices that are embedded across local, regional and national organisations.

This is not a new idea. Scotland has a Land Use Strategy that renews every five years. The current strategy, *Scotland's Third Land Use Strategy 2021-26: Getting the Best from Our Land*, resulted from a public consultation on land use priorities, showing how a broad range of voices can be convened to make better land use decisions. Similarly, Wales has the *Planning (Wales) Act 2015* which lays out their 20-year national development framework: *Future Wales: The National Plan 2040*. Wales also has *The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, which legally obligates public bodies to act in the interests of future generations by considering the long-term social, economic and environmental impact of their decision making. England is yet to make its own arrangements on land use.

This is a recommendation that is echoed by others including Sustain, who recommends that councils support food growing by increasing access to land for food growing and by embedding food production into public health and climate/nature strategies.¹³ In Wales, the Green Recovery Task and Finish group made

this part of its recommendations for the incoming government, and the 2021–2026 Welsh Government Programme for Government includes plans that would increase green spaces and support community land ownership. It also includes plans to develop a Wales Community Food Strategy.¹⁴

WHAT IF SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES IN THE FOOD SYSTEM WERE FOCUSED ON RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTION?

Resilience in the simplest form is to bounce back, right. And I suppose Covid has given such a huge – I don't want to say opportunity, because that makes it sound really positive and it's not a greatly positive thing. But there's definitely that scope that is needed. Communities need to bounce back.

Selby Town

This research has shown that Big Local areas responded well, and quickly, to emerging food needs during Covid because they had existing partnerships and structures in place and were deeply embedded in their communities. These structures are essential to community resilience, recovery from Covid and developing the green economy. Covid has also shown the importance of flexible and adaptive food systems, but these need to be supported and nurtured, and tailored to the communities they serve.

If solutions to food system challenges focused on relationships and connection they would put decision-making power in the hands of communities, where those relationships are forged. Local authorities would see food as a way to build community, which would enable them to do their other work with more trust, collaboration and communication. This research has shown that food is a powerful convener and encourages citizen engagement, which can be used to identify other needs of individual citizens and the community. Community meals, cafes, growing spaces and other community food projects all encourage community connection and resilience, and if integrated within local authority food strategies they could also open up opportunities for the local authority to engage with residents and better identify their needs – across the whole of their work. Community leaders, and the efficiency of the local authority's work, will benefit from leading these community food events and programmes.

Focusing on relationships and connection and putting real decision-making power in the hands of communities will create new local food systems with more flexibility and resilience. These community-supported food systems would not be in competition with the 'mainstream' food system, but would be there to supplement it, to meet other needs not currently met by the food system and provide necessary diversity within the system.

Funders could help facilitate work that explores and promotes long-term solutions to food insecurity (and indeed poverty), rather than addressing symptoms.

WHAT IF FUNDERS SUPPORTED VITAL AND VIBRANT COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS WITH LONG-TERM FUNDING?

Funders could help facilitate work that explores and promotes long-term solutions to food insecurity (and indeed poverty), rather than addressing symptoms. Food banks and food pantries are an interim solution to people going hungry, but they don't help to address the underlying drivers of that hunger – and funders have a huge role to play in helping facilitate that deeper work. This doesn't need to be done in place of providing funding for emergency food, as there is clearly high demand for these services, but can and should run alongside it.

If we were to ask funders the same visioning question that we asked our Big Local participants, it is unlikely that they would answer with food banks and other emergency food production. So perhaps a good question for funders to consider is: what does a vital and vibrant community food system look like, and how can your funding help support that?

Responding to emergency need is important, but it can't stop there. Where possible, funders should allow and encourage community food initiatives to build in funding for staff time to investigate, advocate for and implement local food systems transformation work. The Big Local areas we spoke to highlight their ongoing challenges with staff time and capacity, and this is certainly a problem that will be universal to community or charitable initiatives. Funders should also value the 'softer side' of food work which fosters community connection and resilience and support funded organisations to document and evaluate that work.

Funders also have a role to play in the type of funding they provide. The long-term core-funding model of Big Local has helped communities prioritise and act on difficult issues related to food, and core funding is of course fundamental. This research also found that participants feel they won't be able to apply for new funding for their food work unless they "reinvent" their projects, as there is a perception that funders won't fund existing work. This has the potential to significantly hamper the progress that these Big Local areas have made on food issues, and the trust and connection that they have made with their communities.



6.

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7.

Appendix



7. Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. If a friend asked you to sum up your community and your big local partnership in just a few sentences, what would you say?
2. Can you tell us about any work your partnership has done on food and what motivated you to do that? (Or if you haven't done any work on food, can you tell us why that was the case?)
3. If you had a vision for your community in terms of food, what might that look like?
4. What difference do you think your work on food is making to your community?
5. Do you think your activities on food will be able to continue when the Big Local funding comes to an end?
6. Is there anything you need to feel better resourced or able to take on food work?
7. How has food featured in your community work more broadly – for example using food as a part of gatherings or fetes, etc?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to say or anything we haven't covered?

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