Values-based food systems: the role of local food partnerships in England

Abstract:

This paper outlines the concept of values-based food systems building on the related idea of values-based food chains (VBFCs), terms which are definitionally diffuse but which cohere around a common commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice. The paper examines the development of four multi-stakeholder local food partnerships in Birmingham, Bristol, Rotherham and Sheffield – and the national Sustainable Food Places network to which they are affiliated. Based on our collaborative research with these organizations and a review of their public statements, the paper identifies the values that guide their work. The paper then draws on the evidence of a series of workshops which revealed some of the challenges the partnerships face as they seek to put their values into practice, focusing on governance issues (and related funding challenges) and the implementation of equity, diversity and inclusion policies. Our findings show that the partnerships' work is consistent with the concept of values-based food systems though they do not use the term themselves. Our research also shows the range of work being undertaken by these local food partnerships with much in common but also some significant divergence in their activities. The paper concludes with some reflections about scale and the differences between our English case studies and earlier work on VBFCs in the US.

Keywords:

Values-based food systems; local food partnerships; food system transformation; collaborative research; UK

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Introduction

Local food initiatives are playing an important role in food system transformation across Europe, as witnessed by the more than 200 signatories to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (Moragues-Faus 2020, 2021) and the extensive literature on sustainable food cities - see, for example, Moragues-Faus & Sonnino (2019); Santo & Moragues-Faus (2019); Sandover (2020); and Jones & Hills (2021).[1] One specific form of these initiatives that our research focuses on are local food partnerships which comprise collaborative working among multiple groups of local stakeholders. While our focus is on the UK (and England in particular), the importance of local food partnerships has also been studied in the United States, highlighting their significance in increasing the visibility and credibility of food system initiatives, focusing policy agendas, and obtaining stakeholder buy-in (Clayton et al. 2015).

The term 'local food partnerships' describes a range of place-based, cross-sector collaborations which are committed to creating more just and sustainable food systems.[2] In England, specifically, their value was explicitly recognised in the Government Food Strategy (2022, 2.2.3).[3] Local food partnerships comprise a diverse range of institutional and organisational arrangements. Typically, they are multi-stakeholder groups that bring together local state, private sector and civil society actors to coordinate a diverse range of local food initiatives, including research, policy and strategy development, and service delivery in relation to local food systems. However, this institutional diversity has not been a focus of much research, and the impacts of different organisational structures and processes of governance on local food partnerships are not well understood.

The past decade has seen a proliferation of local food partnerships across the UK. This increase has been driven in part by the Sustainable Food Places (SFP) programme which has provided resourcing, leadership, and networking capacity. There are now more than 100 food partnerships affiliated to SFP. The rise of food partnerships also reflects growing engagement with local food systems and their potential for addressing a diversity of societal challenges, not least related to food poverty, inequality, healthy diets, and climate change, exacerbated by the COVID-19

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[1] The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact was launched in 2015. It is an international agreement among cities from around the world, committed to developing sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, minimizing waste and conserving biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change (https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/).

[2] We acknowledge that 'local' has a range of diverse meanings in food system research. Here, however, we follow the terminology of our research participants who refer to themselves as 'local food partnerships'. To add further nuance, some partnerships specifically emphasise the value of locally produced food (from the area in which they are based). In other cases, they are place-based partnerships of local organizations, committed to the production of healthy and sustainable food with less emphasis on its geographical origins.

[3] Elsewhere in the UK, Wales has allocated £3m to support local food partnerships (https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-cost-living-summit-0?_ga=2.139311734.455406024.1657548940-962172382.1635525520) and Scotland included a requirement for local food plans in its Good Food Nation Act (https://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/2023/community-food-and-local-food-partnerships/).

pandemic (Jones, Hills & Beardmore 2022). The role of SFP as a networking infrastructure has received more scholarly attention than the local partnerships themselves (see, for example, Jones & Hills 2021; Moragues-Faus & Sonnino 2019). Based on her work with eight UK food partnerships and with a specific focus on their governance arrangements, Moragues-Faus (2020) asks a series of questions which are also pertinent to our research:

> Who participates, why, on what decisions, and how? What are the values, discourses, and knowledges underpinning the partnerships' governance arrangements? How do different actors, sectors, and scales interact in specific urban food partnerships to effectively transform governance dynamics? How do these partnerships incorporate diverse political and justice claims? (2020, p.74).[4]

The idea of values-based food systems which we advance in this paper builds on the more established notion of *values-based food chains* (VBFCs*)* with most references coming from the United States and Canada. VBFCs refer to supply chains that are motivated by progressive values such as social justice and environmental sustainability. The concept of VBFCs is closely linked to scholarship on short food supply chains which has emphasised the significance of social relations in constructing and encoding values along the chain and which in turn governs how products reach consumers 'embedded with information' (Marsden et al. 2000; Renting et al. 2003). In the US, the concept has typically been applied to 'intermediated' food supply chains rather than 'short' or direct market supply chains. Also, in the US, VBFCs operate at a variety of scales from the local to the regional, while the 'local' (place-based) nature of our English case study partnerships might be understood as one of their core values. We return to these issues in the Conclusion but here we seek to extend this line of thinking (including questions of scale and values orientation) by unpacking the explicit and implicit values that are embedded in diverse contemporary food movements and specifically how local food partnerships engage with these ideas. While the corporate sector emphasises values such as affordability and year-round availability, our research explores the production and mobilisation of a range of alternative values by local food partnerships, as well as the conditions that enable and constrain their transformative impact.

After a review of the literature on values-based food chains and related terms, this paper focuses on four local food partnerships in England and the national SFP network to which they are all affiliated. The paper focuses specifically on the idea of *values-based food systems* as a development of the more established concept of values-based food chains. Our four case studies were selected because they are at different stages of partnership development, from those that are already successful and well-established to those at earlier stages of development (as outlined in more detail, below). We present them as distinctive cases in their own right rather than claiming that they are 'representative' of the wider Sustainable Food Places network. Their values are all, however, consistent with SFP's aims and objectives as detailed

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[4] The eight food partnerships in Morgues-Faus's study were located in Bath and North-East Somerset, Bournemouth and Poole, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle and Stockport. See also the recently completed PhD dissertation by Martha Cross (2024) which includes case studies of local food partnerships in Bristol, Calderdale and Leicestershire.

below and on their website: https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/about/our_approach.

The paper then reviews the values that drive the work of the four local food partnerships and identifies a series of issues that are at stake as they seek to put their values into practice. We explore the similarities and differences between the partnerships, the strategic role of normative values in food system change, and the extent to which their work is consistent with the idea of values-based food systems. In doing so, we outline how different arrangements and interactions between normative values, institutional arrangements, and everyday practices can support progressive food system change. This work seeks to make an empirical contribution to the academic literature on local food partnerships at a time when all UK partnerships are under pressure to justify their value in the context of fiscal constraints. Additionally, this article contributes to a wider literature on the potential of networked approaches to local food governance to drive food system change.

Values-based food systems

Lev et al. (2015, p.1417) define values-based food chains as 'strategic business alliances formed between organized groups of farms … and their supply chain partners to distribute significant volumes of high-quality, differentiated food products and share the rewards equitably'. Based on US evidence, Anderson (2008) provides a long list of values that, she argues, can be achieved through a rights-based approach to food systems. They include food security, health, decent livelihoods, gender equity, safe working conditions, cultural identity, and participation in cultural life. Sumner (2017) explores the range of values that are supported by VBFCs in Canada. These include local sourcing, organic production and/or cooperative modes of working. Some proponents of VBFCs make a link to alternative food networks and their support for a range of values such as embeddedness, trust, and close personal connections (Goodman et al. 2014), while others have a commitment to promoting the health of soil, plants and animals, or endorse the values of self-help, equality and solidarity (ICA 2016). In the US, Feenstra and Hardesty (2016, p.11) emphasise transparency, fair pricing and purchasing from small and medium-sized producers, upholding values that prioritize quality, cooperation, inclusiveness, equity, sustainability, and health. There is also some work in a European context where the Healthy Growth research programme asked how local (organic) food systems can grow from niche to volume without sacrificing integrity and trust (http://www.bundesprogramm.de/fkz=12OE020).[5]

Ostrom et al. (2017) assert that VBFCs are a collective strategy that enable producers to realise the benefits of good stewardship beyond the levels that are possible in industrial food markets. Their focus is on a range of economic and non-economic values including trust, transparency, long-term shared values, cooperative decision-making, clear lines of communication, and an obligation to equity across the supply chain. Ostrom et al. argue that values-based food chains are not synonymous with short supply chains. Short chains may facilitate connection between producers and consumers but, they argue, VBFCs go beyond face-to-face connection and proximity to the producer and can extend to other scales and locations. They also

[5] Guthman's work on the 'conventionalization' of organic agriculture is also relevant here, asking whether local organic food production can expand in scale without compromising on the core values that inspired the organic movement (Guthman 2004).

argue that the values associated with VBFCs may be social, cultural, economic, environmental, or quality-related – and such values can be associated with the products, the way they are produced, and the characteristics of the relationships that link supply chain participants (ibid., p.7).[6]

Other work on VBFCs explores the role of food labelling (Barham 2002), comparing VBFCs in France and the US (Fleury et al. 2006), and supporting regional food and farming (Hardesty et al. 2014).[7] What this scholarship reveals is a diversity of intersecting values, across domains and scales, which are united by their contrast to prevailing corporate food systems. It also reveals a fundamental connection between VBFCs and place (Smith et al. 2019), whereby VBFCs emerge and thrive at scales that support close social relations and interactions between producers and consumers, and which are sensitive to geographical, economic, and social contexts.

Here, we expand the remit of VBFCs to include the broader notion of *values-based food systems*, extending beyond the economics of supply chain management to encompass the wider food environment including other aspects of food production and consumption, questions of governance and regulation, food waste and packaging, re-use and recycling. The reorientation away from value chains towards the wider food system reflects the rise of systems approaches that emphasise the interconnected, multi-scalar, and complex nature of structures, processes, and actors that shape food systems outcomes (see, for example, Eriksen et al. 2021; Hasnain et al. 2020).[8] Building on scholarship that has emphasised the significance of civic food networks in food systems governance (Andrée et al. 2019), our work focuses on organizations that oppose the unsustainability of current practices and seek a transition to more sustainable and socially just food systems. Our research probes the strategic role of normative values in food system change, advancing our understanding of the contribution of local food partnerships to the study of food system transformation.

Methods

For the last year, we have been working in collaboration with four food partnerships in Birmingham, Bristol, Rotherham and Sheffield, and with the national Sustainable Food Places network to which they are all affiliated. Our work is collaborative in the sense that the partnerships contributed to the research agenda, proposing themes for the workshops we held, and sharing data and ideas with the researchers. All of the researchers have had long-term relationships with one or more of the partnerships and have attended meetings of the Sustainable Food Places network. Our relationships varied across the partnerships but included: serving on their advisory boards, collaborating on research projects, and publishing our results on their websites (see below for further details).

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[6] See also the summary of this work on the Urban Food Futures website: https://urbanfoodfutures.com/2019/05/30/value-based-chains/.

[7] For a useful, if now somewhat dated, bibliography, see Lerner et al. (2012).

[8] Others have explored the integration of concepts such as 'netchains' with VBFCs (see Schermer 2017 and Slotten et al. 2017) but there is not sufficient space here to comment in detail on these authors' expansion of the concept of 'chains' to include place-based 'systems'.

Our current research included a review of the partnerships' public statements and other data provided by them following the initial stages of our work. Besides our analysis of this public data, we also conducted a series of three collaborative and reflective workshops, each of which lasted two to four hours, following a mutually agreed agenda. The workshops were co-led by the researchers and members of the local food partnerships. Though held in different locations (in Rotherham, Bristol and Sheffield) many of the same participants attended all three workshops, allowing trust to build and ideas to be carried forward from one workshop to another. Each partnership was represented by at least one member of their leadership team (Bristol, Rotherham, Sheffield) or a research collaborator (Birmingham), together with one or more members of the SFP team attending each workshop. Overall numbers at the workshops varied from 9 at the first meeting to 14 at the third meeting, with a core group of 6 present at all meetings. Most participants attended in person with some online. With the participants' consent, the discussions were recorded and transcribed using the facilities available on GoogleMeets. This also allowed an element of 'triangulation' in our thematic analysis of the transcripts among members of the research team. A preliminary draft of the paper was shared with all participants and their comments were incorporated into subsequent drafts, together with new data suggested by partnership members. This range of methods allowed us to interact with one another and for all of the research participants to contribute critical insights to the discussion, based on their personal and professional experience. It was also significant epistemologically in terms of the different kinds of evidence it made available including 'talk and text' as well as observations of discourse-in-practice.[9] Our funding was not sufficient to enable us to employ more in-depth or long-term ethnographic research methods which could be considered a limitation of our work.

Findings from the local food partnerships

In this section, we outline the work of the SFP organization and our four case study partnerships, identifying the values that drive their work, based on an analysis of their websites and other published material. In addition to resourcing, networking, advocacy and capacity building, SFP coordinates a framework of Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards marking progress towards the development of more sustainable food systems. Our four case study partnerships were chosen because they are at different stages of development, as recognised by the SFP awards system. Bristol was one of the first partnerships to receive a Gold award; Sheffield was awarded Silver in November 2023; Birmingham won a Bronze award in 2023; and Rotherham was awarded Bronze in 2024.[10]

The cities in which these partnerships are based are diverse in their historical and cultural contexts. Bristol, in the South-West of England, is a maritime (port) city whose history is inextricably linked to the tobacco industry and to the slave trade, with a population of around 460,000 in 2019. Sheffield is an industrial city in the North of England with a strong connection to steelmaking and metals-based

[9] For a discussion of these and related methodological terms, see Martens (2012).

[10] Since 2015, three partnerships have been awarded Gold, 20 Silver and 58 Bronze. This includes several partnerships who have moved up from Bronze to Silver, or Silver to Gold. For a full list, see: https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/awards/awardwinners/.

manufacturing and with a population of just over 580,000 in 2019. Rotherham is a smaller town in South Yorkshire, with a history of heavy industry, similar to Sheffield, and a population of around 270,000. Birmingham is the centre of the West Midlands conurbation, with a history of car-making and other manufacturing industries, and a population of 1.15 million.

Sustainable Food Places

Sustainable Food Places (SFP) is the national organization that brings together over 100 local food partnerships (including our four case studies). Their collective values are articulated via a six-point framework for systems-level change which also form the criteria for their awards:

- Good Governance and Strategy: to create more inclusive and collaborative food decision-making by working closely with local authorities to deliver robust and representative food policies, strategies, and action plans.
- Good Food Movement: to expand public awareness of food, empowering local food citizenship and building the momentum of local good food movements.
- Healthy Food for All: working to ensure that all are able to access healthy and nutritious food in a dignified and equitable way.
- Sustainable Food Economy: building prosperous local food economies by supporting local food businesses to grow and develop.
- Catering and Procurement: innovating how caterers procure food, making local supply chains more resilient and sustainable.
- Food for the Planet: tackling climate change by supporting local sustainable food production, protecting the environment, and minimizing food waste.

SFP provides start-up funding for local food partnerships, matched by local actors, typically local authorities.

Bristol Food Network

The Bristol Food Network describes its mission as to build a healthy, sustainable, and just food system for all of the city's residents (BFN 2023). In their Framework for Action, produced in collaboration with the City Council, grassroots organizations, local businesses and academics, they describe their vision in the following terms:

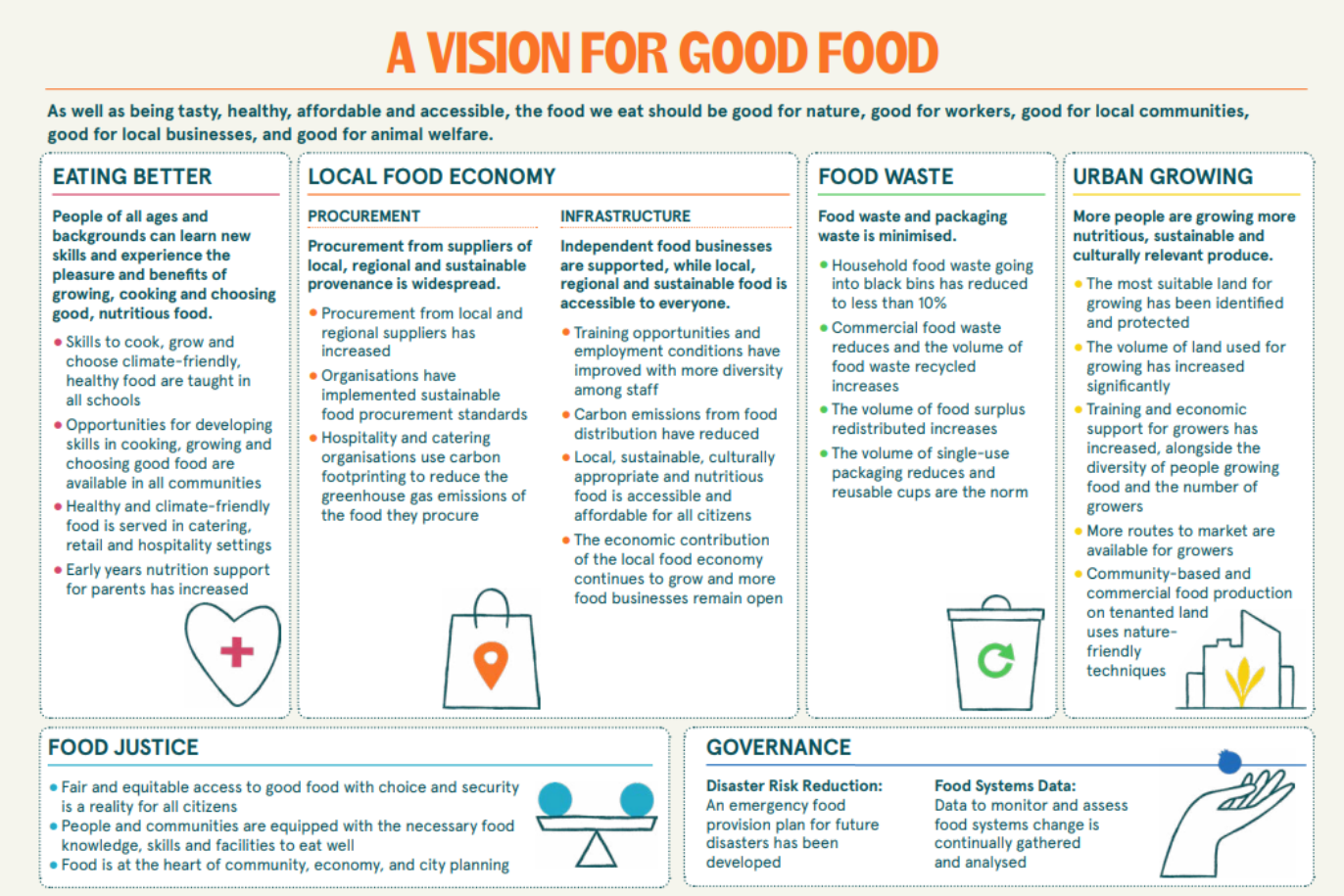
> As well as being tasty, healthy, affordable and accessible, the food we eat should be good for nature, good for workers, good for local communities, good for local businesses, and good for animal welfare (BFN 2023, p.7).

Their submission for a Gold award in 2021 included several specific commitments including more food grown from scratch; eating more fresh, seasonal, local, organically grown food; championing the use of local, independent food shops and traders; promoting the use of good quality land in and around Bristol for food production; encouraging the redistribution, recycling and composting of food waste; advancing education about the part that food, nutrition and lifestyle can play in meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups, encouraging social inclusion and social cohesion; promoting community-led food trade; and building expertise in food and sustainability that allows access to and creates opportunities for local people within Bristol.

As set out in their recent action plan, *Bristol Good Food 2030*, the Bristol food partnership seeks to transform the city's food system within the current decade, with ambitious plans on health, climate, biodiversity, and social justice. Their 'vision for

good food' (Fig. 1) identifies four themes: eating better, local food economy (with sub-themes on procurement and infrastructure), food waste, and urban growing, with cross-cutting themes on food justice and governance. For each theme, agreed actions and owners are identified (including specific targets and metrics).

Fig .1: Bristol Food Network's vision for good food
(source: Bristol Good Food 2030: a one city framework for action).



Their work is cast within a food justice framework including three specific commitments:

- Fair and equitable access to good food where choice and security is a reality for all citizens
- People and communities are equipped with the necessary food knowledge, skills and facilities to eat well
- Food is at the heart of community, economy, and city planning.

The *Bristol Good Food 2030* plan identifies a series of pathways to transform Bristol's food system, with the aim of building greater resilience, reducing the harm caused by the food system, and improving public health outcomes. The plan also considers a number of food system aspirations:

- Less and better meat is eaten, low-carbon plant-based diets are popular
- Regenerative, nature-friendly growing is supported and increased
- Resilient, sustainable supply chains are developed
- Food waste is reduced.

There is also a specific commitment to equality and diversity, referencing the Sankofa report which explores the links between Britain's colonial history and the current UK food system: https://www.foodmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Sankofa-final-03-10-edit.pdf.

ShefFood

Sheffield won a Bronze award in 2021 and more recently (November 2023) won Silver.[11] According to its Local Food Action Plan, ShefFood seeks to build a shared vision for a more resilient and sustainable food system for the Sheffield City Region, based on a cross-sector partnership of organisations from across the city, formed of local public agencies, businesses, individuals, academic and community organizations (Treuherz et al. 2023, p.2). ShefFood asks its members to sign the Sheffield Food Charter, upholding a number of shared values:

- Ensuring that everyone in Sheffield has access to healthy, sustainable and affordable food
- Using the power of good food to bring people together, creating cohesive communities through celebrating experiences and sharing knowledge
- Encouraging a diverse and vibrant food economy that promotes and prioritises local producers, boosts the local economy and treats customers, workers and nature well
- Developing resilient practices from farm to fork and beyond which reduce levels of emissions and waste, to feed tomorrow as well as today.

While it is independent from Sheffield City Council, ShefFood's Action Plan is closely linked to the Council's (2023) food strategy: *Fairer, Healthier, Greener*. The Action Plan includes five strategies which aim to:

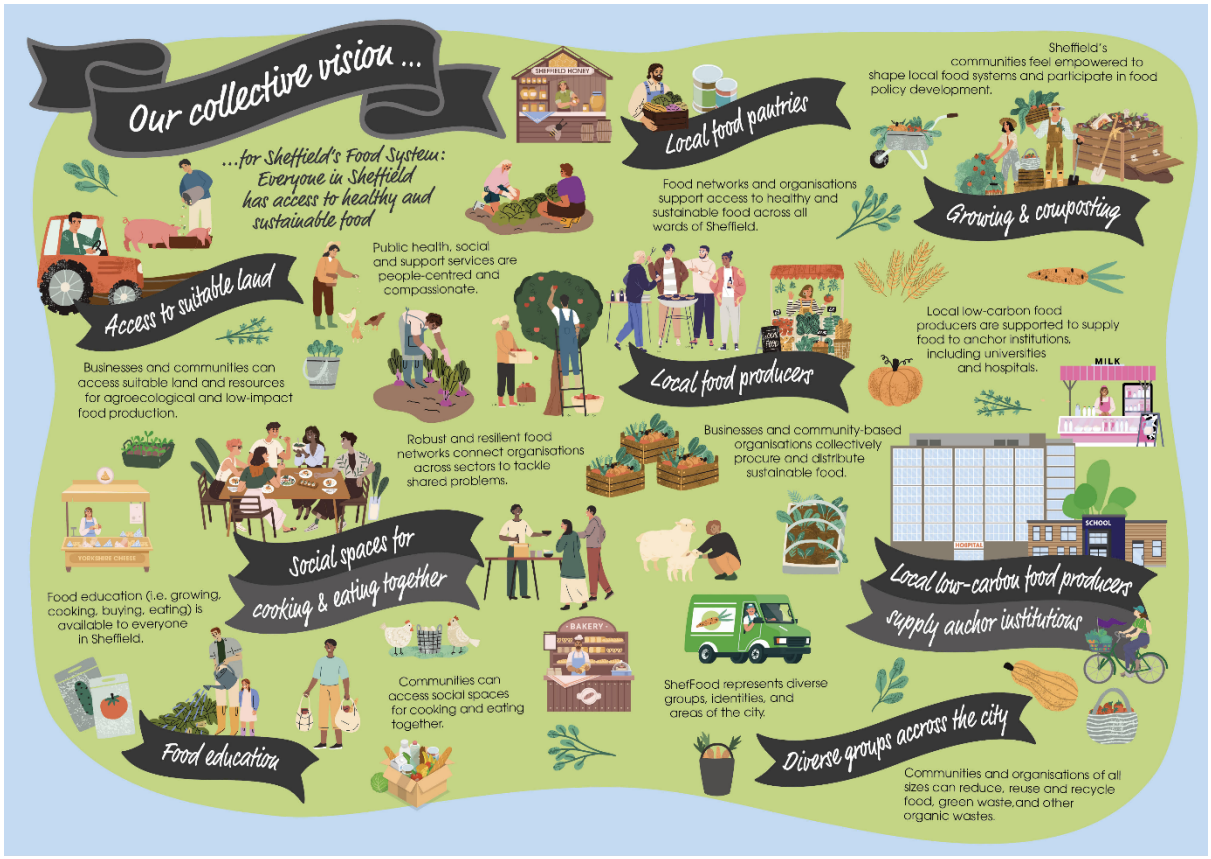
- Strengthen food networks by developing skills and learning together
- Build collective capacity to share and use data on Sheffield's food system
- Participate in making and delivering ambitious local food policy
- Build an inclusive food movement
- Leverage spaces for food initiatives (Treuherz et al. 2023, p.19).

The Action Plan was developed in collaboration with the FixOurFood research programme[12] and was based on five working groups focusing on: food, health, and obesity; food ladders (community food provision); good food economy and procurement; growing and composting; and good food movement (building community and increasing engagement with food activism). ShefFood's values are also apparent in a diagrammatic representation of their collective vision (Fig. 2).

[11] It is always the place (city, region etc) that receives the award, not the partnership.

[12] FixOurFood is a research project, led by the University of York and funded via UKRI's 'Transforming UK food systems' programme: https://fixourfood.org

Fig. 2: ShefFood's collective vision
(credit: Rachael McNiven, all Adobe images are copyright protected)



Birmingham's Creating a Healthy Food City Forum

Birmingham's local food partnership, Creating a Healthy Food City Forum (CHFC), reports directly to the Council's Health and Wellbeing Board. The Forum aims to apply a whole system approach to understanding the city's food landscape. Its objectives are to:

- Deliver a joint vision addressing current healthy food levels in Birmingham
- Develop a robust action plan underpinning the delivery of the Board's healthier food and obesity priorities and oversee its delivery
- Exploit opportunities for joint working and address areas for future development and improvement
- Promote and facilitate coordination and alignment between partners
- Consider where agendas and resources might be shared more effectively
- Provide strategic direction, oversee performance and share best practice
- Promote communication and engagement with stakeholders and residents of Birmingham.

Birmingham also has a Food Justice Network (comprising >300 foodbanks, community cafés and food pantries), a Cost of Living Food Provision Group, and a Growing Network, together with organizations such as the Birmingham & District Allotment Confederation and Slow Food Birmingham, all of whom are members of the Birmingham Food Revolution.

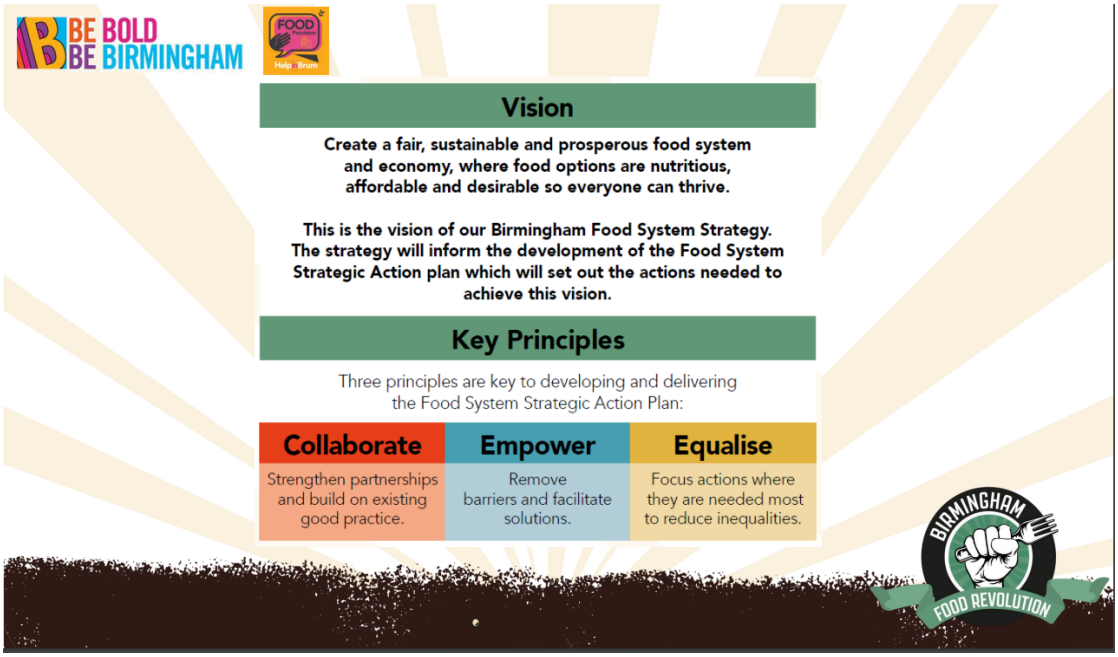
The Birmingham Food Revolution is a movement that has been building for many years, driven by people across the city who are helping transform its food

system. This is now underpinned by the Birmingham Food System Strategy. The ambition of the Birmingham Food Revolution is for a city where:

- We consume a nutritious diet that helps us thrive
- Our diet doesn't cause us harm
- Our food system is ethical, fair and eliminates injustice from farm to fork
- We reduce harm to the world around us
- We empower people and overcome barriers to providing healthy and sustainable food options
- We respect and support diversity and choice
- We are resilient, and adapt, learn and evolve
- We celebrate what food brings to our city (Birmingham Food System Strategy 2023: 5).

Birmingham City Council adopted the Food System Strategy in April 2023 (https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/23651/birmingham_food_system_strategy). The strategy was developed over a five-year period, including the Birmingham Food Conversation (with input from 400 citizens from the city's diverse communities, captured through 33 facilitated focus groups). They also ran a 'Birmingham Be Heard' survey and consultation events at community centres, local schools, colleges, and universities. The vision of the Birmingham Food System Strategy is to 'create a fair, sustainable and prosperous food system and economy, where food options are nutritious, affordable and desirable so everyone can thrive' (see Fig. 3). The Strategy includes four cross-cutting themes: on Food Skills and Knowledge; Food Behaviour Change; Food Security and Resilience; and Food Innovation, Data & Research, plus six workstreams on Food Production, Food Sourcing, Food Transformation, Food Waste & Recycling, Food Economy & Employment, and Food Safety & Standards.

Fig. 3: Birmingham's food system vision
(source: Birmingham City Council 2023)



Rotherham Food Network

Rotherham is at an earlier point in the development of its local food partnership. Established in April 2022, the Rotherham Food Network has five key principles: accessibility, collaboration, community, data, and education. Its aims focus on diet, economy and sustainability. They have also made specific commitments to tackling food poverty, promoting healthy eating, and reducing food packaging and waste. In September 2023 they published a draft action plan and recently (August 2024) achieved a Bronze award (https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/news/article/1050/rotherham-food-network-wins-a-bronze-award-for-sustainable-food-place).

Summary

As can be seen from the comparative data in Table 1, the four local food partnerships have some values in common, such as sustainability/resilience and improving access to healthy and affordable food. But other values such as a commitment to animal welfare or food waste reduction are only explicitly mentioned by one or two of the partnerships. The data in Table 1 were developed iteratively with our research participants based on discussion between the researchers and the partnership leadership teams. Some issues such as sustainability/resilience are very broad and encompass diverse (social, economic, and ecological dimensions) which the partners themselves acknowledge and reflect on. Some issues, such as carbon footprint, water scarcity and other climate-related environmental issues, were not prominent in the material we reviewed though they underpin some other concerns including their common commitment to sustainability and resilience. The data in Table 1 are indicative rather than definitive and should not be interpreted to mean that those who do not mention waste reduction or community engagement, for example, are not also (at least implicitly) committed to these values. But some values such as an explicit commitment to social justice are more central to the work of some partnerships than others, while support for healthy eating and/or obesity reduction are openly expressed commitments in most of the partnerships. We provide more commentary on these similarities and differences in the Conclusion.

Table 1: Shared values among the local food partnerships

	Sustainability/ resilience	Health/ obesity	Economy/ employment	Social justice/ ethics	Waste reduction	Skills/ learning	Inclusion, equity and diversity	Affordable/ accessible	Animal welfare	Community engagement	Data sharing
Bristol	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■		■
Birmingham	■	■		■	■	■	■	■		■	
Rotherham	■		■				■	■		■	■
Sheffield	■	■	■	■		■	■	■		■	■

Having reviewed the public statements of the four local food partnerships, we convened a series of workshops with key members of the partnerships and representatives of the national SFP network.[13] The focus of our joint work was to identify and share good practice and to encourage the partnerships' future sustainability. From this work, through discussion with the local food partnerships, we have identified two themes that help to explain some of the similarities and differences between the local food partnerships (as reported above) as well as illustrating some of the challenges that arose when putting their values into practice.

[13] Our work received ethical approval from the University of [redacted for review].

The first theme focuses on the different governance arrangements that characterise the partnerships and the funding challenges they face. The second highlights the partnerships' commitment to the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Governance challenges

In his recent work on food system governance, Yap (2023) points out that food systems are complex, interconnected, and multi-scalar, incorporating a diversity of material, social, economic and political processes. This complexity corresponds with a diversity of governance arrangements. The importance of these arrangements became clear in our work with the four partnerships. Local food partnerships take multiple forms. Some are Community Interest Companies (CICs), a moderated form of limited company in the UK, which exist to benefit the community rather than private shareholders. Others are formally located within local authorities under the auspices of public health or sustainability directorates. A few are charitable bodies, required to meet the stringent conditions of the UK Charity Commission.[14] These differences have implications in terms of the degrees of freedom they permit for engaging in political campaigning or the scope that partnerships have for attracting external funding.[15] Our case study partnerships represent this range, enabling a comparison across their experiences.

Bristol is a CIC. In the UK, CICs were introduced through the 2005 Companies Act. A critical element of CICs is the presence of an 'asset lock' which is a clause in the articles of the company that ensures that assets owned or controlled by the company must be used for the benefit of the community and not for private individuals. For this reason, CICs provide a measure of certainty and security for local authorities that, for example, the Bristol Food Network will deliver public good with public funds.

ShefFood is independent from the Local Authority. However, it is not formally incorporated, meaning that another organization, FoodWorks Ltd, acts as its accountable body in terms of finance, HR, and similar issues. Legally, ShefFood would be viewed as an unincorporated voluntary association with the potential for joint and several liability. In the event of a dispute or legal proceedings, lines of accountability would be difficult to disentangle.

Approximately half of the UK's food partnerships are located within local authorities. This reflects the historical emergence of local food strategies in the UK, which developed primarily as a public health initiative, led by local public health teams. Rotherham and Birmingham are formally part of their respective Local Authorities, reporting to their Health and Wellbeing Boards. While Rotherham Food Partnership is relatively new (established in April 2022), its leadership team is aware of the SFP advice that Local Authorities should 'fund it but not run it', giving local partnerships as much autonomy as possible. Being formally attached to a local authority has some practical advantages in terms of funding, as well as opportunities to build relationships with other relevant departments such as planning, waste, and education. But it also restricts their autonomy and scope to undertake political campaigning.

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[14] Most partnerships do not meet the criteria for charitable status because their members include food businesses that have commercial objectives.

[15] The distinctions can, however, blur in practice. So, for example, Bristol Food Network is a CIC, formally independent from the Council but receiving significant financial support from Council funds.

In terms of formal governance structures, all local food partnerships must have a steering group (or similar body) with published Terms of Reference to register with SFP. Most local food partnerships have a series of thematic working groups and a statement of their Vision (required by SFP as part of their awards process). The 100+ partnerships that are affiliated to the SFP are very diverse in terms of organization and governance, 'matched to the local context' as one of our workshop participants put it (Callum Etches, Impact lead for SFP).

While local authorities provide access to statutory funding and are governed by formal electoral processes (ensuring a degree of democratic accountability), independent partnerships have greater freedom in applying for grant funding (from the National Lottery and other sources). For example, being part of the Local Authority enabled Birmingham's food partnership to access a range of funding. The Food System funding (which is public health funding) was supplemented by the Council's resilience reserves and the Household Support Fund for work addressing food insecurity during the recent cost of living crisis. This enabled them to deliver an Emergency Food Aid Fund run by the Local Authority in 2022-23 and the Winter Food Aid Fund in 2023-24. They also instituted an Affordable Food Infrastructure Fund with capital grants of up to £3k for infrastructure and equipment to increase the capacity of local food provision projects via the purchase of fridges, freezers, cookers, thermal boxes, shelving, and other food storage solutions. But it can also bring significant disadvantages such as the need for any funding bids to be submitted by partner organizations in the voluntary sector rather than by the partnerships themselves. All sources of funding are under significant pressure at present with Local Authorities facing financial cuts and redundancies.

Our discussions with the local food partnerships also covered the tension between project-based and core funding, with the latter being more reliable and long-term, and the former being short-term but more readily available.[16] In our meetings, the coordinator of ShefFood talked about 'the precarity of third-sector funding' and its impact on jobs and livelihoods.

What this suggests is that the detail of governance arrangements can significantly impact on the ways that values are articulated by local food partnerships, influencing both the politics and language of the normative values they are able to voice publicly. For example, in Birmingham, the role of the food system in health improvement and reducing inequalities is an explicit part of the strategy. This is likely due to the governance of the strategy which sits in the Public Health Division, under the Health and Wellbeing Board. The wider determinants of health, including the food environment and commercial factors, are recognised. Therefore, coordinating action to regenerate the environment, communities, and economy as a way to tackle inequalities is core to the approach. This may in turn have led to a strong focus on food insecurity and food justice, which also may have been shaped by availability of funding and rising need during the cost of living crisis. In other cases, governance arrangements limit the way some issues are expressed in public. One participant in our EDI workshop (discussed below) argued that the use of 'radical language' (about anti-racism, for example) could produce a backlash, with detrimental consequences in terms of their future work (and funding) and that they were conscious of this when making public statements.

[16] The Bristol Food Network has been successful in attracting core funding from the Quartet Foundation and SFP have core funding from both the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the National Lottery Community Fund.

Governance structures can also have profound impacts on the implicit values that the partnerships can embed in local food systems through their activities and outreach, not least through their implications for available funding streams and political independence. There is a certain irony to this: despite the focus on creating values-based food systems, the shape and form of the governance structures on which they depend can be influenced by the availability of funding which can constrain their activities. This is not to argue that there is a single, universally preferred, governance approach or that governance challenges can be 'solved' abstractly. Rather, it affirms the idea that food partnerships are deeply embedded in their local social and political structures and that they must continually negotiate their place-based (and national) institutional context (cf. Mount 2012).

Equity, diversity and inclusion

The second thematic area that highlights possible tensions between value statements and working practices is the partnerships' commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion.[17] Alternative food networks (AFNs) and related social movements have often been accused of a lack of diversity among their membership - see, for example, Guthman (2008), Slocum (2007), and Slocum & Saldanha (2013).[18] The SFP network is well-aware of this issue and has published a series of resources on race, equity, diversity and inclusion (REDI) including their REDI for Change toolkit: https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/about/diversity-and-inclusion/.

Improving the diversity and inclusivity of local food partnerships has been a key issue for many of the participants in our research. For example, Bristol Good Food ran an event on 'Enhancing diversity and inclusion in the food sector' in August 2023 as part of the city's Food Justice Fortnight. The event, led by Ped Asgarian from Feeding Bristol and chaired by Louise Delmege from BFN, concluded by emphasising the rewards of a diverse and inclusive food sector and how it 'enriches perspectives, nurtures innovation, and creates a space where everyone can thrive' (https://bristolgoodfood.org/2023/08/24/diversity-inclusion-food-sector-insights-from-webinar/).

Being an ethnically diverse city (a 'majority-minority ethnicity city'), with a thriving LGBTQ+ community and a youthful population, requires Birmingham's local food partnership to give full consideration to EDI issues throughout their organization. So, for example, the Food System Strategy has three key principles of 'Collaborate, Empower, Equalise', while their Food Action Decision-Making and Prioritisation tool (FADMaP) seeks to embed equity, diversity and inclusion into all partnership activities. An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken as part of the process of developing the city's Food System Strategy, aiming to empower, celebrate, and improve the lives of those with protected characteristics, challenging life circumstances, and those seldom heard. Specific initiatives have included the creation of a series of culturally diverse healthy eating guides, tailored for European,

[17] Like many organisations, SFP has moved from the language of *equality* (with its emphasis on individuals and groups being given the same resources and opportunities) to an emphasis on *equity* (which recognizes that individuals and groups have different circumstances and that allocating them identical resources and opportunities will not lead to equal outcomes).

[18] On the problematic distinction between 'alternative' and 'conventional' food systems, see Sumberg & Giller (2022). .

African, Middle Eastern and North African, South Asian, East Asian, South American, and Caribbean communities.

Participants at our second workshop stated that EDI is a central issue for their partnerships with one participant saying that 'it should be embedded in everything you're doing' though it can get pushed down the agenda because people are short of time and money. Another participant commented on the tendency to treat EDI as a separate theme when it should be cross-cutting. Participants also noted that EDI can be highly charged and raise 'quite emotive' issues. For example, one participant had recently attended a training course, led by a woman of mixed heritage, who had asked those attending to reflect on their own privileges and how this might affect their recruitment practices.

Participants noted some practical issues that limited the involvement of those from 'seldom heard communities' (such as Roma) including the need for volunteers to be paid for their time and the restrictions on those partnerships without office space where volunteers were expected to work from home which may not be possible for everyone. In some communities, a history of distrust of the Council over issues such as minority-owned businesses or questions of immigration status made it hard for local partnerships to do their work.

Trying to incorporate people with learning disabilities had proved particularly challenging for one partnership, where people faced multiple disadvantages such as food insecurity, unemployment and/or various health concerns. It was acknowledged that building trust takes time and most of the work of local food partnerships is based on project funding where time is limited. Participants welcomed the opportunity that our workshops offered for 'reflective learning', sharing ideas with other organizations who are 'grappling with the same issues'. They also valued the relatively informal nature of the discussion, conducted with academics striving to maximise accessibility. The workshops enabled participants to think about the translation of research evidence into practice on the ground; to help make an evidence-based case for transformative change at the local and national level, based on their shared experience; to identify gaps in their current work and future needs. They compared the opportunity for less structured discussion and mutual learning with their hectic day-to-day experience (described by one participant as 'firefighting'). We are currently exploring how to maintain this momentum beyond the end of the [redacted for review] grant.[19]

The workshop ended with a discussion of the normative framework for the partnerships' EDI work and how this shaped the expression of their values. For some, their work was framed in terms of food justice (e.g. Birmingham's food justice pledge); for others, it was framed in terms of (health) inequalities (e.g. Rotherham) or, less explicitly, via references to '…for all'. In some cases, the commitment to a 'right to food' framing (with explicit, anti-imperialist roots) was evident.[20]

The partnerships' work on a range of EDI issues clearly shows how their values drive their practices. But our review of the SFP's actions in this area (see fn.19) also shows its limitations, with most of their actions directed 'outwards' towards their work with marginalised communities and less work directed 'inwards'

[19] Our work included a review of the SFP database and its list of over 50 actions on race, equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI), available at [redacted for review].

[20] The importance of 'framing' in food system research has been discussed elsewhere (Jackson et al. 2021) in terms of how it foregrounds some issues while others are dismissed as 'not within the frame'.

towards the composition of their workforce, both paid and unpaid. There is scope, then, for future work on the tensions between the partnerships' value statements and their working practices regarding their overt commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Discussion and conclusions

Our research with four English local food partnerships and the national Sustainable Food Places network demonstrates the diversity of these organizations and the existence of a range of continuities and differences across the partnerships. They all share an interest in sustainability and 'healthy eating' and, to varying degrees, could be said to share an investment in 'values-based food systems'. But there are also differences in the pathways they are taking towards food system change. Our research revealed significantly different emphases in different places, reflecting the partnerships' different governance structures, local contexts and histories. For example, the Rotherham partnership had a strong focus on public health, with less emphasis on other issues (such as food growing) except where there were clear benefits for mental health.[21] Bristol has a dual emphasis on sustainability and health, reflecting the two Council Directorates with whom they engage, with a separate organization (Feeding Bristol) dedicated to the provision of emergency food aid. ShefFood has a strong commitment to cooperative food provision and social eating, while the complexity of Birmingham's food partnership reflects the size and diversity of the city's population. Despite these differences, all of the partnerships were dependent on the goodwill of their members (most of whom engage in a voluntary capacity) with the attendant risks of over-commitment and burn-out. All the partnerships faced financial challenges, especially over the longer term, with continuity of funding being highly uncertain. Even where the partnerships have been successful in securing long-term core funding from local authorities, the precarious nature of local government finances means that future funding is far from guaranteed.

Following diverse pathways to food system transformation and strategically combining different activities is a characteristic of the wider landscape of civil society organisations in the UK, working to shape food systems change (Zerbian et al. 2023). However, in the case of local food partnerships, this dynamic and multi-stranded approach – comprising service delivery, facilitation, policy development, research, and advocacy – is a product of specific organisational constraints such as those relating to governance and funding discussed above.

It could also be argued that local food partnerships promote sustainability more than they focus on the *unsustainability* of current food systems. This enables them to articulate a positive narrative of working towards food system transformation, progressive change, and the 'right' interventions with less emphasis on articulating how unsustainable our current existence actually is, how futile all our efforts are proving to be, and just how far we are away from the level of transformative change

[21] This also suggests an important distinction between our case study partnerships and comparable organizations in the US where the original concept of values-based food chains (as described by Lev et al. 2015) involved an explicit commitment to supporting growers and enhancing their viability.

that is required. Narratives featuring trauma, violence, failure, uncertainty, pain, and grief are virtually non-existent within the partnerships' narratives.[22]

Local food partnerships demonstrate how progressive social values (around EDI, for example) are articulated and how they might be more deeply embedded and normalised within local food systems. But to what extent are their principles and practices consistent with a 'values-based food system' perspective (as articulated above) and to what extent is the concept useful for understanding their impacts? Our findings resonate with Ostrom et al.'s (2017) definition of values-based food chains as a collective strategy that enables producers to realise the benefits of good stewardship beyond the levels that are possible in industry-dominated market-based food systems. The concept's relevance for consumers and the wider public is, however, less clearly expressed. While it may help us to situate the work of local food partnerships within a diffuse global movement of locally driven food system change, the operationalisation of a values-based food system perspective as an analytical lens clearly requires further research and development. For example, not all of our case study partnerships had an equal commitment to the well-being of local food producers which suggests an interesting point of divergence from comparable organizations in the US which, arguably, take a more holistic food systems approach and encompass commercial as well as civic objectives. We have also drawn attention to the explicit focus on 'local' food partnerships in our case studies, where place itself represents a core value. Comparable organizations in the US, espousing the idea of values-based food chains, are not so confined to local place-based initiatives, encompassing wider (regional) scales as well as a more specifically economic orientation including support for local businesses. While some SFP members are regional in scope and include support for local businesses in their objectives, most began as city-wide or local initiatives and their objectives are mostly civic in scope, with their business members being mostly smaller and medium-sized enterprises.[23]

We conclude that the idea of values-based food systems is useful for unpacking the multidimensional impacts of local food partnerships, but we also draw attention to the limits of scale and the uneasy relations between values-based food chains and dominant (industrialised, market-based) food systems. The question of 'scaling up' local food initiatives has been a recurrent theme in research on food system transformation. Much of this work was inspired by Harriet Friedmann's (2007) pioneering work in the Greater Toronto region which focused on the role of public institutions such as universities, working with civil society and third-party organisations to achieve system-wide transformation (see also Connelly & Beckie 2016). This issue of scale – how and under what conditions the values of local food partnerships might be 'scaled up', without compromising their founding values, represents another important area for future research, building on previous work such as the EU-funded HealthyGrowth project (https://projects.au.ak/healthygrowth).[24] Our research leads us to conclude that a

[22] For an introduction to these challenging issues, see Machado de Oliveira (2021).

[23] SFP was previously called 'Sustainable Food Cities' before broadening its scope to include a wider range of places including regional partnerships such as Cumberland and Oxfordshire.

[24] The HealthyGrowth project addressed the question of whether values-based food chains could move 'from niche to volume' without compromising integrity and

713 'values-based' framework is useful for analysing local food networks as well as the
714 intermediated supply chains and other regional entities that are the focus of previous
715 work on VBFCs. Our work also draws attention to the importance of normative
716 values as drivers of food system change. This issue of scale – how and under what
717 conditions the values of local food partnerships might be 'scaled up', without
718 compromising their founding values – represents another important area for future
719 research. By making these values visible, championing their diverse and
720 progressive nature, and better understanding how they interact with wider social
721 conditions and institutional constraints, we can better support and defend the vital
722 work of local food partnerships in creating more equitable and sustainable food
723 systems.

trust. It was based on case study research with eighteen mid-scale and four regional-scale organic value chains. Unfortunately, for our research purposes, none of the case studies were drawn from the UK.

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