

Sustainable Food Cities: Phase 2 Evaluation, Scoping Research

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September 2017

Introduction

This report summarises findings from the baseline evaluation Sustainable Food Cities (SFC) Phase 2 programme, which runs from 2016 to 2019. This is based on a small study consisting of semi-structured interviews with representatives from eight urban areas at different SFC “life stages”. The SFC programme team uses the concept of life stage to reflect the maturity of a city’s food partnership and its history of engagement with the programme. SFC classify cities under four stages: ‘prospective’, ‘emerging’, ‘established’ and ‘advanced’.

Although the overall SFC programme has not previously been subject to external evaluation, there is a growing body of relevant research on city-level initiatives such as food policy councils, food strategies, food networks and food hubs (Santo *et al.*, 2017). Some of these studies have explored their origins and development over time, for example Carey’s study of Bristol (2013), Blay-Palmer on Toronto (2009) and Mendes on Vancouver (2008). Notably, Castellanos *et al.*’s (2016) and Coplen and Cuneo’s (2015) case studies respectively examined the struggles and floundering of Dayton and Portland’s food strategy groups, and the lessons to arise from these experiences. Other recent work has considered points of similarity and difference between different city level initiatives. For example, Sonnino (2016) analysed the documentation of 15 urban food strategies in the UK, the US and Canada. Sussman and Bassarab (2016) has conducted the most extensive survey to date with 324 food policy councils in the USA and Canada. In the context of SFC, these latter studies are particularly useful in casting light on the growth and interactions taking place beyond the scale of the city. However, there has been little research on grass-roots perspectives of national support and membership schemes such as SFC.

The aim of the research was to give the evaluation team a better understanding of how the programme operates from the perspective of members from different areas in the UK. The study also helps to start to develop a qualitative understanding of the impacts of SFC, which will underpin the next stages of the evaluation.

Method

Cities were chosen on the basis of the advice of the SFC programme team. The team selected two cases to represent each life stage and identified a one person for potential interview for each city (see table below). Most candidates for interview have a formal role in coordinating SFC, or related work, for their city.

Classification	Distinguishing features	Selected cities
"Prospective"	In the process of joining SFC	Aberdeen Stoke on Trent
"Emerging"	Terms of Reference in place Been in existence for a year, but with few partnership meetings	Lewisham Oldham
"Established"	Achieved (or nearly achieved ¹) a Bronze Award May or may not pre-date the formal/funded SFC programme	Cambridge Carlisle
"Advanced"	Pre-date establishment of SFC Phase 1 programme Achieved a Silver Award	Brighton Bristol

In June and July 2017, all eight individuals agreed to be interviewed after having been provided with written information about the evaluation. We asked permission to record the interviews and to report extracts anonymously where possible. The interview schedule is provided in Appendix 1. The interview recordings were selectively transcribed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool.

Results

The results are summarised under headings that reflect the interview questions and the main themes arising. Overall there was a very positive reception to the request for interview - many of the interviewees referred to the value of having this chance to reflect on what they were doing and the value of their engagement with SFC.

1. Is there a shared understanding of the SFC goals and approach?

All interviewees demonstrated an understanding of the key elements of the SFC approach. All mentioned the six key themes, partnership approach, value of knowledge sharing and potential/necessity of collective action to create significant national and local change.

The extent to which cities are either already adopting or are likely to be able to be able to adopt the approach and fully engage with SFC is mixed. This is partly attributable to the factors such as the maturity of the partnership and the extent to which there is dedicated resource to support SFC. There are also in some cases tensions and unresolved questions regarding issues such as sustainable food governance in the city (who is the lead? who should be the lead? should there be a single lead?) and also about whether the focus for change should be top-down (strategy/partnership) or bottom up (community-led practical initiatives on the ground that arise organically). Cities that have been involved with SFC for longest are tuned in more to the formal programme narrative and what the offer is to them as a food partnership.

¹ One of the initial criteria for 'Established' was a Bronze Award. At interview it became apparent that Carlisle does not have this award, which led us to adjust the description in the table.

The aims of SFC were articulated in a variety of ways. In some cases, interviewees struggled to give a concise statement on the overall aims of the programme. It was notable that a recent shift to talking about SFC as creating a 'good food movement' struck a positive chord.

"Each city is too small on its own, but the SFC network is enabling us to synergise and be part of something bigger, be part of a movement."

"I think one of the things that I really quite liked, although we couldn't go to the conference in Edinburgh was the blog written by Ben from Food Matters about trying to grow a food movement. Recognising that they've got the strength of the membership and the network. Really creating that movement of people who are passionate about a sustainable future."

2. How are cities interpreting the holistic approach to sustainable and healthy food?

Each interviewee recognised and welcomed the fact that the SFC focus is holistic - as represented by the six key themes. In practice, each city places a different emphasis on the health, economy and environmental dimensions of sustainable food and how they interrelate.

Overall the interviews suggested that public health (food poverty, physical activity, community well-being) was a key driver in practice and many of the practical initiatives mentioned had this focus. Supporting the local economy and local enterprise was also a strong driver for some cities. Some interviewees mentioned food waste, but there wasn't really much mention of the environmental aspects of the food system. Although community growing schemes were a feature of some of the public health-focussed work, there was little mention of SFC as a driver of a more strategic approach to, for example, urban agriculture, connecting growers and producers to local markets or other more systemic aspects of the food system.

3. How are cities engaging with SFC programme?

There is already a sense that it is easier for a broader range of cities to engage with SFC in this second phase of the programme. This is partly a result of the way that funding is being spread more evenly in Phase 2. There was also a perception that SFC is now offering a broader range of resources, for example, guidance and the case studies provided on the website and the "email the network" facility. In addition there are opportunities that enable cities at all life stages to benefit from the programme and network, for example partnering with other cities on specific initiatives such as procurement or network advocacy.

The level of engagement varies depending on partnership maturity and resourcing. Early stage partnerships with no dedicated resourcing for SFC are, or have in the past, struggled to keep local stakeholders engaged with SFC, and to do more than tick over.

4. What aspects of SFC appear to be working well, or are most beneficial?

Very positive overall

All interviewees clearly value the overall SFC scheme highly, or very highly.

"We absolutely believe in this. It is amazing."

"Really happy with SFC approach. Nothing yet where I think they are missing a trick."

There is clear appreciation of the Phase 2 programme framework and the way in which this has been informed by the experience gained through Phase 1. Interviewees valued the practical and personal nature of the support they receive from the SFC programme team. Contact with the programme team was motivational for SFC leads. Some interviewees also mentioned how motivating SFC-run workshops had been for local stakeholder.

"My experience of it [SFC] is that it is very supportive. Close contact from people who understand the difficulties we face, who listen to us who encourage us who sometimes say you could be doing a whole lot better and who sometimes say don't beat yourselves up, you have done something good."

More specifically, the perceived benefits of SFC fell into several broad categories:

Enabling cities to benchmark themselves and to give them a trajectory

The award process helped cities understand their position and progress in the context of a wider movement.

"I think for me it has been really beneficial going through the Award because you look at what you are doing well and you see where the gaps are. And also you've got someone from the outside who has defined what makes for a sustainable food city. It is a way of measuring progress."

Incentivising cities to do more

Some city representatives spoke of the Award not just as a way to gain credit for what they are already doing, but also as a stimulus to improve and consider potential new areas of work.

"For us the local economy came up as an area with huge potential, but which hadn't necessarily been considered as fully as it could have."

"...the thing with Gold is that we have to use it to get people to do some additional stuff so that you get a bit of an incentive to do something different."

Lending authority to sustainable food activity and engaging key city stakeholders

The award scheme provided some interviewees with a tool for negotiation with local stakeholders.

"Without the stimulus of 'look this isn't negotiable, the sustainable food cities won't look at us for [Award] unless we are doing this' is fantastic. It's a bit like having a fairy godmother!"

"And now, partly through getting the [Award] and the evidence base, you know it is such a valuable document for us. That's enabled universities, city council, NHS, Green Capital to say, 'We can see what you are on about: food is a heading!'"

Celebrating, affirming and communicating the value of sustainable food work

The award helped make local work more 'real' or visible both to those highly active in the field and to a wider audience. This was particularly useful given that some activities are less tangible, or could become taken for granted over time.

"We had a local celebration when we got it and it was a really good opportunity to bring people together and remind people of what was going on. People here get very used to what we do and it was good to remind them it is worth doing."

Knowledge sharing

Access to SFC programme information and guidance and learning from other cities were perceived to be a key benefit of SFC by cities at all life stages.

“And the written documents like take for example the guidance on how to set up a partnership, I think it is a perfect document. It is so clearly informed by what cities are really experiencing and it is short – really readable.”

“The SFC e-mail list has proved to be a useful tool for us if we want to find out if someone else has done something (e.g. tried to set up a social enterprise for meals on wheels) or had a problem with something (e.g. applying to be a charity) – it is a quick and easy way to find someone to talk to on a specific issue.”

“Things like going up to Liverpool and Manchester and seeing what they are doing. We have been visitors to other cities and learnt from their approach. Being part of the network has really helped us in terms of what we have been doing here – definitely. It’s about having those contacts and resources.”

Encouraging a more joined-up approach to work on food within cities

The SFC model actively pushed local groups to think across sector boundaries.

“We had over 60 members attending [a local event] and everyone said there is so much going on, but no one organisation has a handle on everything that is going on. So they really saw a benefit in having this partnership approach to share information between the various public sector silos.”

Gaining inspiration and motivation from the SFC membership

As the programme moves into phase 2 most interviewees felt encouraged and that they were seeing good ideas from other members.

“I just don’t think we would be where we are [without SFC]. That sense of we are part of something bigger. Otherwise you just get worn out, you feel ‘how are we going to keep this going?’”.

“It [the 2017 conference] was quite empowering really. I just felt that this was a genuinely important food movement and came away feeling that this was going to change things.”

Creating access to funding

The coordinator grant was a tangible and well-received aspect of the early stage of the phase 2 programme.

“We have been successful in getting a grant to get a coordinator for the post and they will be starting very soon. I think that will have a huge impact on the partnership and our involvement with the sustainable food cities programme.”

5. What is the influence or impact of SFC?

‘Influence’ not ‘impact’ ... so far

At this early point, interviewees largely felt it more accurate to talk about the ‘influence’ of SFC phase 2 rather than its ‘impact’ in terms of creating tangible changes to policy or practice. For cities at all life stages, there is evidence that SFC having an influence in a number of ways.

City governance and priorities around food

Given the relatively small capacity of groups at the city level, earlier stage cities were particularly appreciative to have guidance documents.

“Our priorities have been based almost entirely around the SFC model.”

“Just any documentation that I can find on their website has been quite important for our approach so far. We’ve tried to not stray too far from what their approach should be because it has been tried and tested in other cities. We are very much of the opinion that we shouldn’t try and invent the wheel.”

Helping to raise the profile of the sustainable food agenda and keeping key stakeholders engaged

News of the Phase 2 stage of SFC itself helped energise work at the city level, both in instances where parties had not previously come together, and where there were existing partnerships that needed to be revived.

“If we hadn’t joined [SFC] I’m not sure if people would still be engaged.”

“Being part of a national programme or network has helped to keep the level of engagement with our partnership.”

Changing the approach that cities are taking to implementing their food strategy or vision

SFC was reported to sharpen up the ability of local groups to turn general ideas into actions.

“In terms of added value for SFC for us, it is where we have been able to work with other cities. Things like Fish Cities or the procurement stuff. Where you can begin to harness the fact that there is quite significant buying power if you get the cities together.”

Leveraging funding

Direct SFC funding was a point of reference in terms of influence, but it also helped leverage in other funds or forms of support.

“One of the things they [the funder] wanted us to do was show how we were sharing what we were doing. This is one of the easiest ways we have done that without a doubt.”

6. What are members’ hopes and expectations of what SFC will achieve in Phase 2?

Interviewees expressed a range of views in response to this subject. For SFC Phase 2 the five main themes were:

1. Having a simple, common methodology for measuring impact (This was mentioned by every city),
2. Working jointly with other cities on issues such as procurement,
3. Having a supra-local influence on the food agenda,
4. Developing a more joined-up and holistic approach to food at city level,
5. Learning from others.

7. Are there any areas where SFC is working less well?

The Award

A. Resource intensive

All cities who had received or worked towards an Award referred to how resource intensive the process was. Some referred to the fact that the complexity and demands of the Award might mean that some cities would be put off from engaging with it at all. For Advanced cities developing Award criteria as well as completing the application could have opportunity costs in terms of being able to direct resources towards activities that actually advance the food agenda in those cities.

“Going for the Awards is very time-consuming. We used a lot of time and resources that way and you just had to plod through it.”

B. Methodology

A couple of cities suggested that the methodology could be streamlined/made simpler. One aspect which seemed to take up a lot of time was assigning evidence relating to cross-cutting issues or that could potential relate to more than more criteria.

“Maybe simplifying the way you go through that Award process, making it a little bit smoother and more streamlined would encourage more people to actually pick up the phone and start that conversation because a longer document can be a little bit daunting.”

C. Potential to stifle local innovation

Learning from others is potentially a double-edged sword. In terms of winning an award, some cities thought it was very positive to see what other cities had done to achieve theirs. On the other hand, it could lead to cities simply copying other rather than feeling motivated to come up with new and innovative solutions.

“I don’t know if they [the Awards] are sending people down the route of almost being too prescriptive and just copying each other.”

“I think taking a structured approach is really important, cities should take a structured approach. I think that the SFC network and website needs to recognise that that structured approach might be slightly different in different places and that if you can evidence the idea of having cross-sector working, you have got a structured approach to developing an action plan and making sure that everyone is around the table, that there may be slightly different ways of doing that.”

Measuring impact

All cities referred to this and in some cases referred to discussions that they had had with cities not included in this baseline research. The key message was a desire for guidance on – ideally simple - ways to measure impact that all cities can adopt. Interviewees recognised that this was not necessarily straightforward, given the multiplicity of influences on change at the city level, of which SFC was only one source.

Recognition of SFC and engaging a wider group of city stakeholders

Interviewees referred to gaining wider recognition of SFC outside of main city contacts as a litmus test for the programme. One interviewee, welcomed the idea of SFC creating a good food movement, but raised the question of what the implications of that would be in terms of where SFC attention should be focussed.

"[The] spread of support across areas...may prevent that point about the SFC network from achieving its aim of creating a movement because I think movements need to come from grassroots/bottom up. So if SFC is aiming to encourage that, which I think is great and really strong it seems as if some of the support is not necessarily targeted at a movement, but at a partnership or strategic level. Maybe some of the support needs to be targeted at both of those...]"

Keeping non-funded cities engaged

Particularly smaller cities/areas without their own or SFC funding struggle to do more than tick over and there can be particular challenges in keeping a wider group of stakeholders engaged with SFC in these circumstances.

Short campaign timescales

Some interviewees felt that short campaign timescales did not reflect 'what it takes' to get an lightly-resourced local campaign off the ground. There is a lost opportunity in starting a new campaign when the previous one has only just started to get going.

Conferences could focus more on networking and co-production of learning and ideas

Interviewees felt that members really wanted to learn and share experiences and ideas at key opportunities such as the annual SFC conference.

"It was lovely to meet people at the conference and it would be lovely to have more networking and a little bit less talking at you time."

Discussion and conclusion

This was a small scale piece of work to gather perspectives from SFC network members in a range of cities. The views are likely to reflect many of the impressions that the core programme team have formed over the course of the last year. Overall, the interviewees were highly engaged with our questions and clearly passionate about the field. As might be anticipated given the life stages of the cities, there was a range of historical knowledge about the SFC programme. Notably, some interviewees reported how elements of the national SFC model were rooted in learning that originated in leading cities. This bottom-up development helped give the scheme depth and credibility.

Given the complexity – and potential slipperiness – of language on sustainable food (Sonnino, 2016), interviewees showed a shared understanding that corresponded quite well with the SFC model. Interviewees could also readily point to the value of SFC at the city level, and this extended beyond financial support. Evidencing tangible and short term impacts of the Phase 2 programme was keenly recognised as both a priority and a challenge. As in North America (Sussman and Bassarab, 2016), the applied research and evaluation appear to be priorities in the UK.

SFC's focus on the life stages appears prescient, given feedback from interviewees on the importance of understanding the development and trajectory of city-based initiatives. Whilst there is an increasingly established literature on the inception and innovation of early adopters, less has been reported on keeping fragile and marginal city schemes engaged (Coplen and Cuneo, 2015; Castellanos *et al.*, 2016) or on the longer term consolidation and intensification of advanced initiatives. It is also likely that city schemes experience uneven and disjointed periods of development, a phenomenon that will have implications for the stage-based progression model informing the SFC Phase 2 programme and the design of the award scheme.

This study therefore helps inform a number of areas of focus for the evaluation, whilst recognising the limited scope and depth of the interviews. It has started to map areas of influence, impact and potential forms of value; it identifies key systemic challenges and opportunities; and it indicates the importance of understanding a range of different perspectives on processes and mechanisms for change at city and network levels in the SFC programme.

References

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Interviewer's version with prompts

1. What does your role involve and how long have you been in post?
2. How would you describe the SFC approach?
3. How would you describe what the overall SFC programme is aiming to achieve?
4. What involvement have you had with the SFC national programme to date?
Prompts:
 - *Support from SFC staff, info via Network, Award, Grants, etc*
 - *Most and least beneficial elements if relevant*
 - *What would/would not have happened without SFC?*
- 5a. What are the priorities of your food partnership for the year ahead?
- 5b. How if at all have these been informed by your involvement with SFC?
6. What do you hope will be the key impacts and benefits of SFC Phase 2?
Prompts:
 - *Aggregate, local and individual benefits/impacts*
 - *If you had to identify one key impact what would it be?*
7. At this stage, which aspects of the SFC approach and programme do you believe are likely to be most and least beneficial/impactful:
(note location (i.e. their city or national) of impact left open to interpretation of interviewee)
8. Please tell me about any significant positive influences on the sustainable food agenda in your city/area outside of SFC?
9. Do you have any thoughts at this stage about:
 - key challenges for your partnership in engaging with SFC phase 2
 - any limitations with the SFC approach
 - any factors that may prevent SFC from achieving its overall aims