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# Local Food Partnerships in Wales

Sustainable Food Places Evaluation Report

INTERIM REPORT JUNE 2023

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For other reports in this series, see:

Jones, M., Hills, S., & Beardmore, A. (2022). *The value of local food partnerships: Covid and beyond*.

<https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9228014>

# Overview

**In 2022 the government in Wales became the first of the four UK nations to fund the development of multi-sectoral food partnerships in all local authority areas. This report presents an analysis of the background, plans and early progress taking place in twenty-two local authority areas in Wales.**

The food system has a leading role in social, health and environmental welfare. Yet historically there has been no policy platform in the UK for local governments and their partners to take coherent action on the food system issues that affect their area. Local food partnerships are designed to bring together parties from across public, private and third sectors – and civil society – to coordinate work on key issues such as household food security, shorter food supply chains, and sustainable procurement by public bodies.

Independent of UK or devolved nation policy, at least 102 councils<sup>1</sup>, have invested in multi-sectoral food partnerships, often with supplementary funding and support through the Sustainable Food Places programme. In Scotland this process is set to accelerate through the Good Food Nation Act that requires all councils and health boards to develop local food plans. While there is no current requirement to take this step in Wales, the Welsh government has marked out its approach through a £2.5m fund to support every local authority to develop a multi-sectoral

food partnership. The guidance placed emphasis on the role of these partnerships in tackling the food poverty, with attention to root causes of the issue and the need for wider social, economic and environmental changes across the local food system.

Part of the impetus for promoting food partnerships in Wales has come from evidence of effective partnership action during the pandemic. During this period many areas saw remarkable work by all sections of society to provide emergency food aid. A small number of places benefited from a track record prior to the pandemic of area-wide and multi-sectoral food poverty work. Those that did, such as Cardiff, received national attention for the rapidity and focus of their response, as well as the ability of the partnerships to demonstrate the impacts of their actions. Food Sense Wales, an organisation that seeks to take forward a cross-sector approach to the food system in Wales, has curated this best practice with all Welsh local authority areas seeking to develop a place-based action on food issues.

<sup>1</sup> Sustainable Food Places data on UK local authorities between 2017–2023.

# Methods

**This research forms part of the UK wide evaluation of the Sustainable Food Places (SFP), a programme that runs from 2019 to 2024. For this study, we sought to understand the effects of the Welsh government food partnership grant (WG grant) for both SFP and non-SFP member areas. We analysed applications from 21 of the 22 local authority grant holders<sup>2</sup>. This included categorising the composition and roles of local stakeholders, as well as the priorities and objectives for each area.**

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We conducted thirteen interviews with grant holders, delivery organisation leads and coordinators representing 10 of the 22 local authority areas in receipt of the grant. These included areas that were SFP members and those that were not. The interviewee areas representing at least one local authority from each of the seven Health Board areas (See Appendix).

There are limitations to the current findings. The WG grant funded period covers the 23–24 financial year and many areas were only just commencing their use of the funding at the point of the interviews. While we interviewed representatives from a range of agencies, further research is likely to produce additional perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> There are 22 local authority areas in Wales. Due to its geographical size, Powys received two grants to cover North Powys and South Powys. One local authority area did not provide consent for UWE to review their application.

# Findings

## Routes to developing partnerships

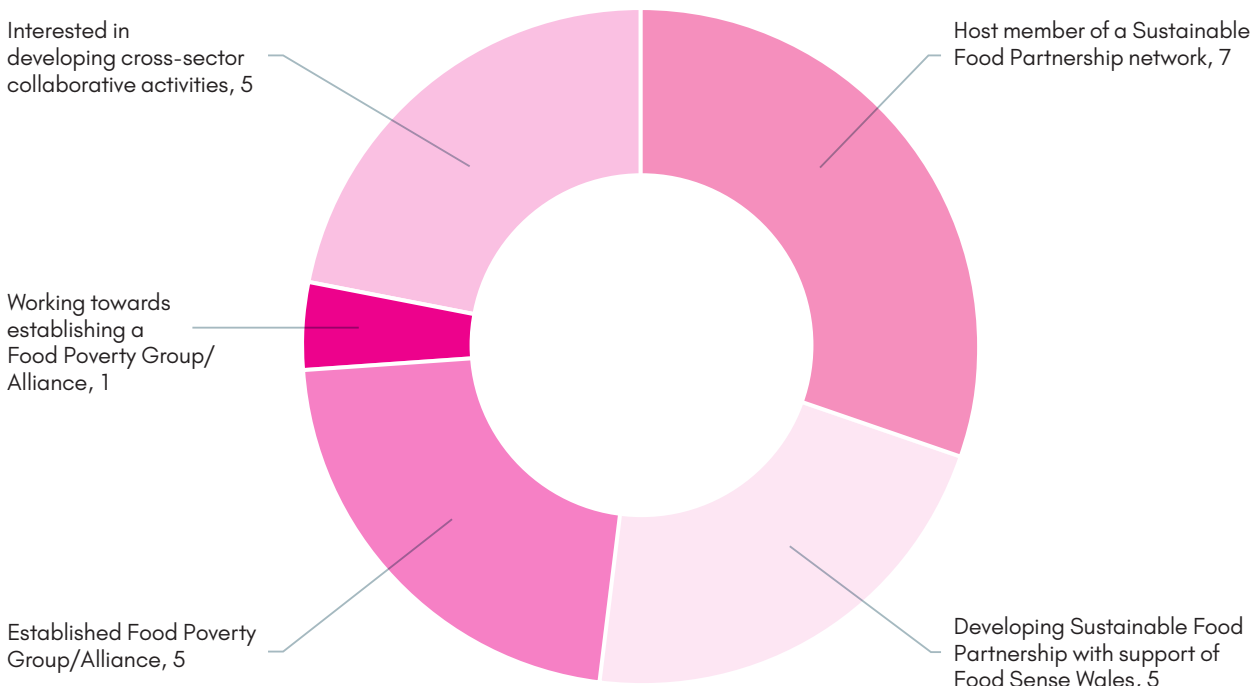
**Local authority areas across Wales are in different points in their journey to develop food partnerships. As the chart below shows, at application a minority had already established a multi-sectoral food partnership. Other areas had no pre-existing forum or a pre-existing partnership that was limited to a focus on food poverty.**

The majority of partnerships are hosted by local authorities. However, some areas have alternative arrangements including food growing social enterprises, third sector infrastructure organisations and one housing association. Interviewees explained how their specific governance arrangement had benefits and drawbacks. The learning from these different types of arrangements will be critical for any future guidance on best practice in Wales and the UK more widely.

Nine out of 22 areas (41%) are Sustainable Food Places (SFP) members. About fifty percent of the Welsh population live within SFP areas.

The organisation of emergency food aid during the pandemic was a substantial stimulus to partnership working. This work continued to be a driving force with the rise in the cost of living from 2021.

### Stages in food partnership formation



Notes. Two areas gave multiple responses. Two areas have become members of SFP subsequent to application.

Health Boards, particularly public health teams, were instrumental helping areas develop a population and whole systems approach in their applications. Notably some public health teams helped broker links between neighbouring local authority areas within Health Board catchments to coordinate plans.

A notable feature for areas with strong voluntary sector leadership was their emphasis on involving diverse agencies in partnerships and conducting grass-roots consultations. This focus appears to be based upon the strength of trust within both formal and informal networks.

The applications showed that some local food partnerships are growing out of the long-term rural and urban development programmes that were a feature of the EU Structural Development and Investment Funds and similar schemes. Partnerships led by such teams indicate expertise in the type of complex programme management necessary to achieve food system reform.

## Stakeholder engagement in partnerships

A core principle for any multi-sectoral partnership is to enable the representation of diverse interests. Applicants identified a wide range of stakeholders with interests in food issues at the local level.

For most cases the stakeholders identified were those also engaged in the partnership's steering group. However, specific roles were not consistently identified, which means it was not always clear how actively involved each stakeholder would be. There were also differences in the composition of steering group members in terms of the balance between senior decision-maker posts, operational leads, and lay members who brought lived experience.

The applications did not provide a consistent account of the partnership structures – for example in terms of the roles of the coordinator, chair, and others with specific remits. SFP member areas consistently provided a more detailed account of their governance structure, reflecting guidance provided to the membership.

Some applicants identified a large number of organisations in addition to the core group. These are likely to reflect the wider network of organisations with an interest in local food issues, rather than the core steering group. Those areas not yet at the stage of having a food steering group listed the alliance or network of key organisations involved, primarily with food poverty activity.

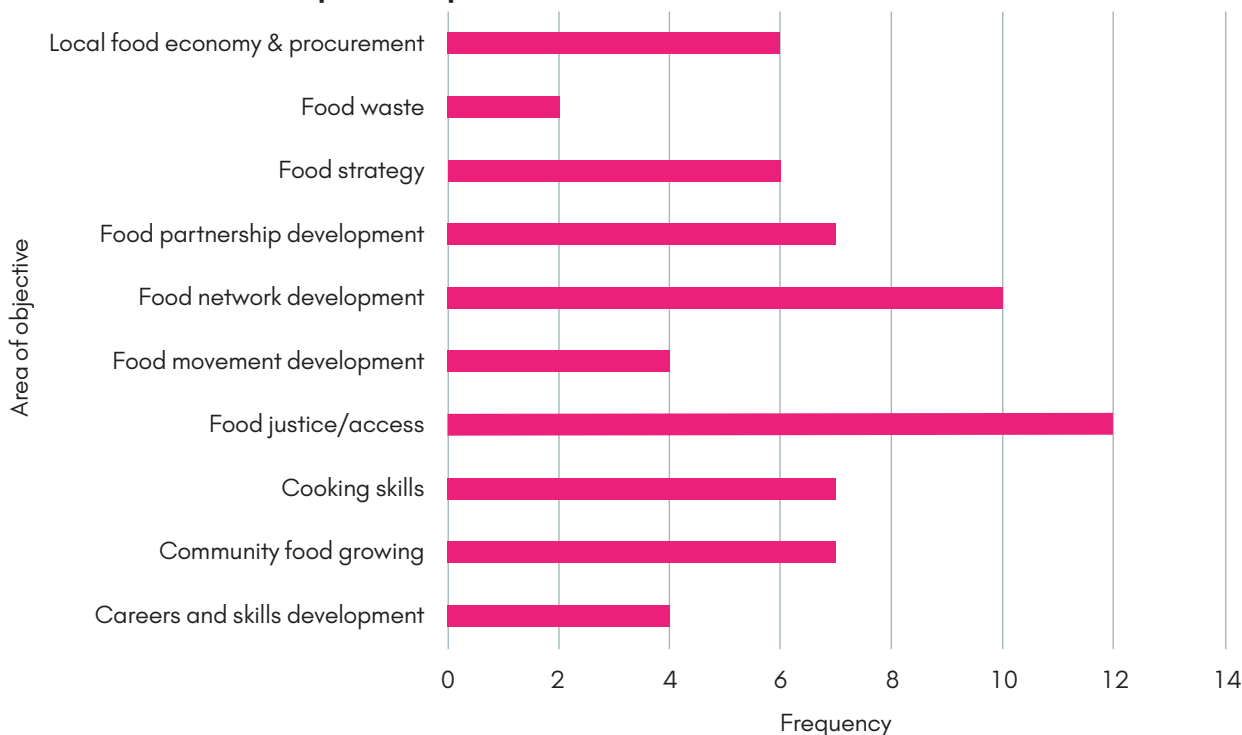
Considering the types of stakeholder, local authority sections were strongly represented – as might be expected. Specifically, the most frequently reported LA groups represented were from community development, economic and business development, and rural development (or similar sections). Health Boards, specifically from public health teams and to a lesser extent NHS procurement, were strongly represented.

Stakeholders from farming and larger food retail sectors were largely absent. There were notable exceptions to this pattern. Many interviewees emphasised that business engagement, particularly with the farming sector, was underway but needed time to develop. Interviewees with a long track record felt that food business engagement needed additional resources and greater clarity about the remit of local food partnerships for these stakeholders.

The localities identified a wide range of objectives connected to the use of the WG grant. Our raw coding produced 64 types of objective statement, which we then reduced to ten categories as shown in the chart. The overwhelming focus for local partnerships was on food poverty. This corresponds to the WG grant guidance, but many interviewees confirmed that this was the leading public concern on food.

Most areas clearly prioritised actions that would address the deeper causes of food poverty, rather than an emergency response. A recurrent theme was how areas had learnt from the experience of the pandemic to deal with matters of coordination, inclusion, and consistency. Four interviewees welcomed the grant as an opportunity to step back from 'firefighting' and to take a more strategic and longer-term view.

### Actions and ambitions of partnerships



Food justice and access-based objectives featured strongly in the plans. These were often closely linked to cooking skills, community food growing, and community food programmes such as food clubs. Food network development activities and food partnership development activities also featured strongly in the applications.

Food industry goals tended to focus on horticulture and small/medium enterprise activities. Issues relating to 'mainstream' farming and large processing and retailing were rarely featured, probably reflecting the limited engagement of these stakeholders and perceptions of what is out of scope for these partnerships.

Except for references to work with FareShare Cymru, food waste reduction and recycling were not prominent in the applications. This may reflect the focus of WG grant guidance and a distinctive set of local policy drivers for this food issue.

The 'ambition' of the objectives of areas closely mirrored the stage of the development of the partnership. In other words, areas with new partnerships are seeking to baseline their work

(such as mapping community food provision), while established partnerships are concentrating on extension activities (such as diversifying the reach of their programmes).

### The role of the Sustainable Food Places programme

Nine out of 22 Welsh local authority areas are currently members of the Sustainable Food Places programme<sup>3</sup>. Further areas are in the process of exploring membership. A comparative analysis of WG grant applications showed that SFP members tended to have more developed applications than non-SFP members in terms of:

- Representation from diverse agencies on the food partnership.
- Representation from senior local decision makers, both in and outside local government.
- Evidence of the impacts of previous relevant work.
- Ambition of the objectives for the work plan.
- Technical detail for implementation of the work plan.

<sup>3</sup> This was seven at the time of WG grant application in late 2022

Interviews indicated that SFP member areas were pro-active in their use of the WG grant. This meant that they had provisional plans in place prior to the funding announcement and, where relevant, had made timely staff appointments, local grant awards, and capital spends.

New food partnerships have been able to accelerate their work by drawing upon the early established and more mature food partnerships in Wales, all of which were SFP members.

Interviewees who were both SFP members and non-members reported using SFP online resources to help them develop their applications, through for example the adaptation of case study examples.

### Food Sense Wales and the creation of a national network of partnerships

Food Sense Wales has convened and coordinated multiple strands of food work for the benefit of local areas. Interviewees reported that Food Sense Wales was a highly effective communicator to key players in local authorities on the latest developments in food policy in Wales. Equally the agency had helped present queries and contributions from local areas in national fora. Work by Food Sense Wales to raise awareness of the SFP framework helped 'authorise' actors who wished to pursue a food systems approach.

Work to develop a food partnership can be complex and daunting. Leads in council areas have been sharing their practice and engaged in peer-mentoring and support. Notably, those areas with the longest history of partnership working, such as Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan, and Monmouthshire have been in a position to advise teams that are new to the field.

Some food system issues are better addressed by regional partnerships rather than local ones. Most areas are using their WG grant funding to collaborate in regional clusters, building upon the strategic geographies of Health Boards or regional development agencies. Leading

examples include standardised food project mapping, promotion of food voucher schemes, the development of food hubs, extending school food and farm-school exchange programmes.

### The significance of the policy context in Wales

The development of the multi-sectoral food partnerships has been enabled by a number of features arising from devolution in Wales. Devolved public bodies and policy making have contributed towards the distinctive features and impacts of local partnerships in Wales such as the influence of Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales obesity strategy (2022–24), and the Well-being of Future Generations (WFG) Act, 2015.

The WFG Act provides one point of reference for partnerships. Through the act, Public Service Boards in local authority areas give partnerships a framework for governance and, from a practical point of view, a route to reach decision-makers at a local authority level. However, WFG Act offers only limited support for food partnerships: the well-being goals and indicators within the act are broad and lack specific references to food. This means that food system issues do not directly drive the priorities of Public Services Boards.

Local authority areas have also benefited from food policies specific to Wales. These include the roll out free school meals to all primary school children and the extension of holiday hunger programmes. Since 2004, there have been statutory food recycling targets in local authority areas.

While the private members Food (Wales) Bill 2023 is not going forward through the Welsh Senedd, the evidence collection and consultation processes surrounding the bill have stimulated widespread attention on the importance of locally led food systems activities and the need for greater policy coherence and accountability<sup>4</sup>. The Welsh government seeks to build upon the momentum and is in the process of developing a Community Food Strategy in the next year.

<sup>4</sup> Food Policy Alliance Cymru (May 2023) Food Policy Alliance Cymru: Does Wales Need a Food Bill?



Through the network of County Voluntary Councils (CVCs), Wales has a clear framework for infrastructure support to local third sector organisations. CVCs had a role in coordinating engagement on food system issues for some local food partnerships.

In Wales, food systems issues have become a feature of many local and regional grant streams. Prior to the WG grant, some councils and their partners have already decided that they need to coordinate their response to these opportunities.

More generally, a number of interviewees felt that local histories of community solidarity, social and environmental activism, and pride in local place were important drivers for grass-roots interest in local food partnerships and networks. In contrast to some partnership-based issues, consultations on food issues attracted public interest.

### **Feedback on the WG grant**

Interview feedback was largely very positive about the grant process and the intentions behind the scheme. Interviewees appreciated the guidance from Food Sense Wales and the brevity of the application form.

The terms of the funding provided for local flexibility and novel ways of working. It also gave a platform to take a more strategic and less reactive stance on local food issues.

Indirect benefits included the role of the funding opportunity to convene experts working at the local authority level across Wales. Some of these connections are new and surprising in terms of their synergies. For teams with less experience, there are opportunities to transfer learning from outside the area.

The long wait between announcement, application and confirmation to go ahead was a source of frustration for areas with clear plans in place.

The short duration of the grant was a concern, given the time involved in consultation, co-production and strategic work. Many areas were finding it a challenge to press ahead with the more complex aspects of their plans within the grant period. However, as one interviewee commented, the tight schedule helped them focus local attention on the need for action.

# Conclusions

**The recent Welsh government award for local authorities to support the development of local food partnerships represents a new step in food systems policy in the UK. The emphasis in Welsh devolved public policy on cross-sectoral working and long-term planning has helped create conditions for local food partnerships.**

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Local food partnerships in Wales are at different stages of development and reflect the specific conditions of their area. This variety indicates the appropriateness and potential of the model for different place-based settings.

The Sustainable Food Places framework and resources have been a driver for change in the food landscape in Wales. New food partnerships have been able to accelerate their work by drawing upon the early established and more mature food partnerships.

Nevertheless, food partnerships are not securely resourced, relative to the scale, complexity and significance of the local food systems issues they are seeking to address. Some councils and their partners are seeking to address this through bringing together staff teams and aligning investment. With the local food partnership grant funded work set to run only into 2024, it is important to capture learning at the earliest opportunity to inform future work in this field.

# Appendix

We interviewed lead grant applicants and/or project leads covering 10/22 LA areas and representing at least one LA from each of the seven Health Board areas.

Local authority	Health Board	Interview [+ other sources]
Blaenau Gwent	Anuerin Bevan	17 May
Bridgend (Pen-y-bont ar Ogwr)	Cwm Taf Morgannwg	
Caerphilly (Caerffili)	Anuerin Bevan	
Cardiff (Caerdydd)	Cardiff and Vale	
Carmarthenshire (Sir Gaerfyrddin)	Hywel Dda	17 May
Ceredigion	Hywel Dda	
Conwy	Betsi Cadwaldr	
Denbighshire (Sir Ddinbych)	Betsi Cadwaldr	8 June
Flintshire (Sir y Fflint)	Betsi Cadwaldr	
Gwynedd	Betsi Cadwaldr	
Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn)	Betsi Cadwaldr	
Merthyr Tydfil (Merthyr Tudful)	Cwm Taf Morgannwg	
Monmouthshire (Sir Fynwy)	Anuerin Bevan	
Neath Port Talbot (Castell-nedd Port Talbot)	Swansea Bay	
Newport (Casnewydd)	Anuerin Bevan	
Pembrokeshire (Sir Benfro)	Hywel Dda	13 June
North Powys	Powys	30 May
South Powys	Powys	30 May
Rhondda Cynon Taf	Cwm Taf Morgannwg	25 May
Swansea (Abertawe)	Swansea Bay	30 May
Torfaen (Tor-faen)	Anuerin Bevan	24 May
Vale of Glamorgan (Bro Morgannwg)	Cardiff and Vale	15 May
Wrexham (Wrecsam)	Betsi Cadwaldr	

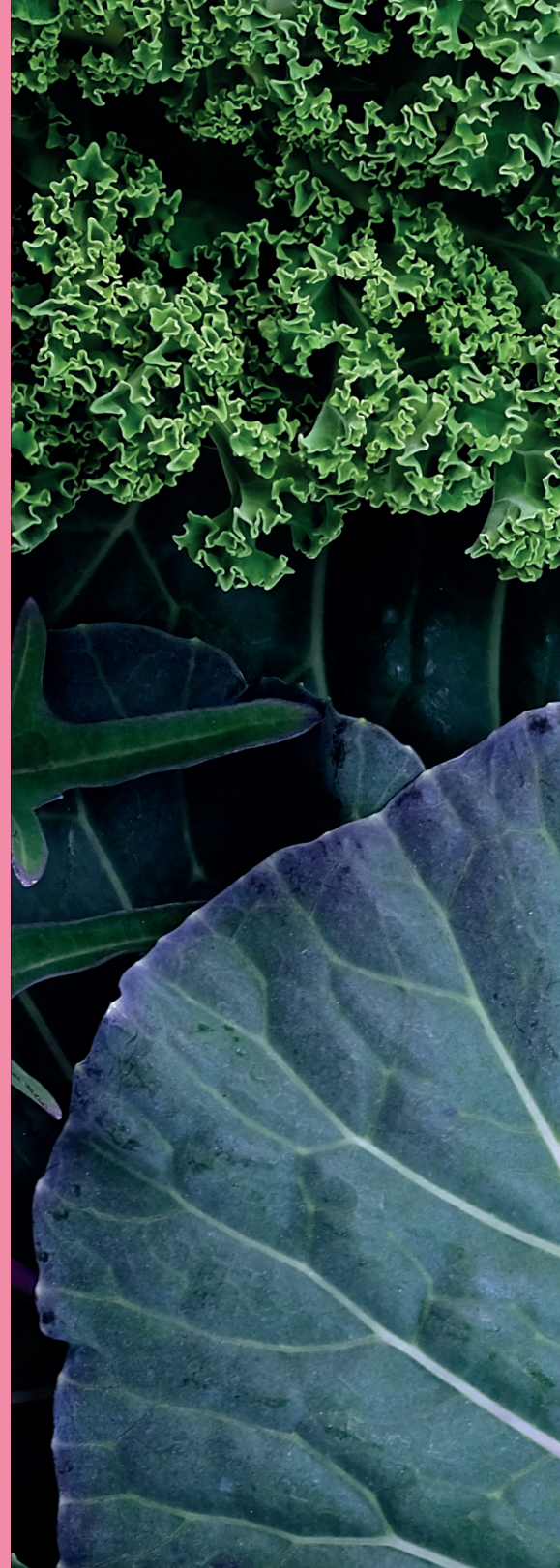
## Key

■ Interview conducted prior to the award of the grant

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**Leaves of different types of kale**  
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