



Food Research
Collaboration

Exploring the National Food Strategy

A place for food?

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FRC Policy Insights

This series of Policy Insights provides opportunities for experts from academe and civil society to highlight gaps and opportunities in emerging food policy. The aim is to put detailed, specialist knowledge into the public domain at this critical time.

Food policy in England is in a state of flux. The UK's departure from the European Union opened the way for clean-sheet approaches to agriculture and trade, and required the UK to take responsibility for many areas of food regulation previously overseen by the EU. Evidence of the food system's adverse impacts on climate and habitats has prompted urgent calls for food policy to reverse these trends. And Covid's consequences have shown where the system lacks resilience – for example in ensuring food supplies for the vulnerable.

In July 2021, the Independent Review for the National Food Strategy, led by Henry Dimbleby, produced a comprehensive analysis of the state of the UK's food system, and a set of recommendations – but the report was advice, not policy. A White Paper will follow, outlining the Government's own intentions and proposals. Legislation – whether an omnibus 'Food Bill' or a patchwork of measures to augment existing policy – may then be brought forward to implement the plans.

While policy is developed, there are opportunities for improvements and course-corrections. We hope these Insights will help to inform that process. If you would like to contribute, please contact the [Food Research Collaboration](#).

Exploring the National Food Strategy: A place for food?

It has been a few months since the Independent Review for the National Food Strategy published its final report, entitled *The Plan*¹, and we have now had the chance to look at its assumptions, analysis and proposals for food in the UK. There is much to admire here. *The Plan* sets out some of the critical food issues we face, and it makes very good suggestions for improving individual health and nutrition and tackling society-wide issues like climate change and soil, water and habitat loss. *The Plan* is passionate about why food matters, how we got here, and what we might do about it.

There is, though, one substantial gap from an 'urbanist' point of view – which means thinking about how places are shaped and what that means for peoples' lives. The places where people live, work and visit are the result of many decisions which affect the physical qualities of cities, suburbs, towns, villages, hamlets and, in fact, any kind of settlement. This can have a profound influence on the way people can interact with each other, making life better or worse. *The Plan* needs to give more attention throughout to how food interconnects with places and how to organise this interplay effectively for individual and societal benefit.

You might ask what these food and place interconnections are. I would start by saying that the way food is grown, processed, distributed, stored, bought and sold, cooked and eaten, cleaned up after, and food waste dealt with, have all been aspects of cities, the semi-rural edge of towns, and rural areas around them, for thousands of years. That has not changed, but the way we have understood or acknowledged food's 'place'

aspects has altered in ways for which we are now paying the price.

In the 20th century and now in the 21st we have tended to treat cities as largely disconnected from agriculture and ecology^{2,3}. The semi-rural edges of cities and towns have fallen victim to urban sprawl over agricultural land⁴. Patterns of food distribution and retailing in cities and towns have been based mostly on vehicle access. There is an abundance of food for those who can afford it but food waste is a huge problem. Meanwhile many people live in what have come to be known as food deserts and are in food poverty – unable to get access to decent, affordable and healthy food. The way that cities are shaped makes it hard to build non-car movement into everyday life – difficult or even impossible to walk or cycle to the shops – and we have what has been identified as an obesity crisis, with some places now called obesogenic environments. That means places which because of the way they are shaped, and what food access they allow, tend to make people fat.

As well as these food problems in our own cities and towns we have taken the view that we don't need to focus on growing food locally, regionally or nationally. We can just buy food we need or want from other places and make use of industrialised methods to produce and move that food at scale. This takes food resource from other – often poorer – countries around the world and the result is huge worldwide inequality in relation to food access. As *The Plan* notes⁵, it is estimated that around 820 million people worldwide are suffering from chronic food deprivation. This situation is also helping worsen the climate emergency. Many of the food production methods used in the UK and abroad are unsustainable, producing a lot of carbon and leading to the loss of soils, water and biodiversity habitats that we can't get back.

All of this means that food is a critical part of how places are designed, planned, managed and stewarded for long-term health of people and the planet. **Organising space to help with the food aspects of urban and rural resilience is at the heart of how I think any National Food Strategy should approach food.** That is the context in which I look at what *The Plan* says about place and also what I think it should cover.

As it stands *The Plan* does make some mentions of place and planning but these often seem to be squeezed in at the margins, or rather underplay crucial place aspects. *The Plan* notes that we need to consider food systems as straddling the devolved administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland⁶ yet this seems to be a policy interplay rather than a place one focused on bioregions. *The Plan's* use of systems dynamics as a tool⁷ means it has looked at the flow of system components from one place to another – so place gets a mention here. In support of a systems approach, there is reference to place-focused work by King⁸, which notes geography as a dimension in food-related health outcomes for people. Evaluation work by Hills and Jones⁹ referenced in *The Plan* points to the importance of local food partnerships, although this is about shaping the 'food policy landscape' rather than actual places. The Sustainable Food Places reference¹⁰ is to case studies from eight UK cities responding to Covid in food terms. These aspects are not drawn out to the degree I suggest they need to be. Place is also referred to in the interesting discussion of what to do about meat-based agriculture. It is noted that cattle raising and sheep farming have helped maintain the traditional appearance of rural landscapes as valued places¹¹. Place also features in the discussion of the ecological necessity of returning some rural places to lower-yielding agriculture or to forest, rewilding and nature¹². A rather lyrical evocation of place is to be found in the discussion of People and the

Land¹³. The climatic and landscape character of places is noted as important in underpinning our transition to sustainable energy sources¹⁴.

This is all to be welcomed but a more developed place- and planning-focused analysis would really build on this promising start. This should begin with *The Plan's* overall framework and be reflected in its specific proposals. Currently, *The Plan* notes:

Defra should work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in support of its housebuilding agenda and reforms to the planning system. The additional land needed for new housing is relatively small (approximately 2.2% of total UK land by 2060): sharing data across Government can help make sure that the most appropriate land is used¹⁵.

Obviously, sensible land allocation matters, but this is not sufficient as either an analysis or a social or economic prescription for change towards a more food-centred approach to settlement. Thinking of place as simply about housebuilding is fundamentally inadequate to meet the need for creating and remaking liveable places that work for people in food terms. **The future National Food Strategy needs to approach place and planning as a core aspect of how to conceptualise the food system as one which is spatial in nature.** That would then help government and others, in responding to *The Plan*, to develop their approach to localised food systems and strategic opportunities like shaping neighbourhoods for food. As one example, this could encourage and make easy local walking and cycling based food retailing. That in turn would also have very positive effects on health and obesity, which are rightly major preoccupations of *The Plan* but generally explored only in individual or institutional terms.

If neighbourhoods were human-scaled, had mixed land uses, reasonable densities to support local food businesses, space for food growing, and a walkable and cyclable design, they would help create more food friendly conditions. This might include possibilities for food-focused exercise to go shopping, to eat out locally, and to grow food at or near home. More speculatively, being able to buy fresh, affordable food 'little and often' might take less time than a big weekly shop, freeing up time for cooking at home. Food would become a more accessible part of local everyday life.

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With health treated just in an individualised, nutritionally focused way in *The Plan*, it misses the chance to do more to conceptualise place-shaping opportunities and propose specific, place-based interventions to improve health, sociability and conviviality through a food focus. There are positive statements to build on, though. For instance a more coherent understanding of place-making, planning and food starts to be hinted at in the proposal for a 'Community EatWell' initiative:

Funds could also be used to invest in local infrastructure and facilities that make it easier to eat healthily and affordably, such as community kitchens, fruit and vegetable street markets, community farms and box schemes, and community cafes¹⁶.

I want to see *The Plan* help government and other 'stakeholders' to become more aware of the place and planning aspects of food, so they are in a position to use that understanding to help develop appropriate laws, strategies, policies and plans. That then needs to translate into informed action from all those with influence over our food system. **In a situation of climate emergency any future National Food Strategy needs to be talking about food as a crucial part of making resilient places, not just trying to deliver housing numbers.** As part of a more nuanced place focus, I want to see informed discussion of and proposals for what the planning system can do to lead on this. It was good to see that *The Plan*¹⁷ proposes that a Rural Land Use Framework be established by 2022. It also suggests, "All Local authorities should be required to put in place a food strategy, developed with reference to the goals and metrics set out above, and in partnership with the communities they serve. (Over 50 places are already doing this, with impressive results)"¹⁸. As *The Plan* notes:

*National strategies only work when they can be delivered on the ground, including locally. Local initiatives – designed to suit the communities they serve and implemented with an understanding of local conditions and challenges – are therefore essential for the success of the National Food Strategy*¹⁹.

That local focus on food is needed is undoubted; however, there is considerably more scope for action in this area at national, city region and neighbourhood levels that could be covered within *The Plan*. For example, there are national planning instruments that could be drawn on here. The National Planning Policy Framework (2021), which sets out planning policies that local authorities need to take into account in planning places, is one of these. The National Design Guide (2019)

and National Model Design Code (2021), which suggest ways to design places sustainably, can make more explicit references to food as a central consideration for planning and making places. **Just as The Plan calls for a Rural Land Use Framework, perhaps an Urban Land Use Framework with a food focus could also be considered?** Nationally, this can also build on work through the government-supported development of new garden settlements and initiative such as the NHS Healthy New Towns Programme. At city and local authority levels, this would include food being a central part of City Plans, Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans, Design Guides, Pattern Books, Design Codes and Briefs for 'masterplans' – which are tools used in different contexts by community proponents, planners, architects and others to help guide and shape the places produced as major new developments and renewal areas.

Work on sustainable transport is another obvious strategic and policy area for *The Plan* to tie into a

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more developed food and place focus. The benefits from making more people-friendly streets, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, 'Mini-Holland' schemes, and 15-minute city approaches all have highly positive food elements, including by making food business such as local shops and food markets easier to walk or cycle to and safer to access. The terrible effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have also shown that place changes to improve our food

situation can be introduced rapidly. At the moment *The Plan*²⁰ treats the response to Covid-19 in food terms as a dietary issue, but it is also fundamentally a food and place one.

There are already good examples of food being treated as central to place-making. London is well ahead with an excellent London Food Strategy demonstrating that food work is often best done in partnership. Community and advocacy organisations are already playing a substantial leadership and partnership role. For example the national advocacy organisation the Town and Country Planning Association has recently published a Practical Guide to Edible Garden Cities. More place-based Food Partnerships, like that in Brighton and Hove, are also leaders here, and their Food Strategy has been adopted by the local authority, demonstrating how such bottom-up action can make a real difference.

This is not solely the preserve of government and community. *The Plan*²¹ shows very clearly how business decisions are having deleterious effects on the food system and health, yet 'place' business can also be a great help on that front. For instance, **I want to see the development and housing industry play a major role in ensuring that any new developments and existing area redevelopments are planned, designed and stewarded over the long term to be more aware of and shaped around food**, not just create car-dependent pods of houses or dormitory estates like some of those studied recently by Transport for New Homes.

There are good examples that show what can be done. The Duchy of Cornwall's Poundbury, on the edge of Dorchester in Dorset, demonstrates that new towns can build in cafes, pubs, restaurants, food shops, food market buildings and spaces, and garden space for food growing, within a highly walkable town form. Proposals for a new garden village and a new neighbourhood

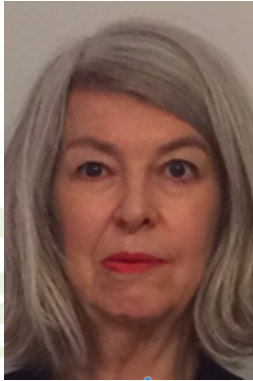
on the edge of Hatfield New Town in Hertfordshire, designed by the developers Gascoyne Cecil, have a strong food focus, including allotment space, walkable food shops, and private garden space for food growing. Letchworth Garden City, the first garden city based on Ebenezer Howard's principles, has recently run a design competition for a new part of the garden city in partnership with the Royal Institute of British Architects. In its Brief to potential master planners, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation insisted that the plan must reflect Howard's very comprehensive food and place principles, and the winning entry has shown a real food focus in its plans for the new neighbourhood.

It is all too easy to point out what others are not getting right, rather than reflect on your own practice. **Researchers like me who are involved in educating people who work in the built environment need to take food seriously as a topic.** *The Plan*²² rightly calls for more focus on food education at school level, but in the tertiary sector through our teaching and research we should be aiming to produce food-conscious planners, architects, landscape architects, urban designers, engineers, quantity surveyors, environmental managers, public health professionals, public policy makers and more – all of whom should see the benefit of working with each other. When we have good evidence, we should then be doing as much as we can to gain the attention of political leaders, public policy makers, industry and community to share that knowledge and influence practice.

So, in summary, the Independent Review for the National Food Strategy contains much to applaud – it is heartening to see a deep engagement with food issues at national level and many proposals for better practice – but it does need to also do more to be a *place* for food.

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The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the Centre for Food Policy. It facilitates joint working between academics, civil society organisations and others to improve the sustainability of the UK food system, and to make academic knowledge available wherever it may be useful.

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