

Bridging the Gap

How to fix the food system for everyone



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Executive summary

This report sets out key policy recommendations and the next steps to unlock opportunities for British farmers and growers to supply climate and nature friendly fruit, vegetables (veg) and pulses, that are accessible to everyone.

These recommendations are based on nine pilots that were codesigned and run by partners¹ across the UK. These innovative approaches bridged the gap – between fruit, veg and pulses, grown using organic methods by Small and Medium (SME) farmers, and people on low incomes across the UK – in both retail and school settings.

Through action-based research the programme found that it is possible to overcome barriers and identified how these approaches could be scaled, drawing on additional evidence and expertise.

The findings highlight the benefits of increasing access to climate and nature friendly fruit, veg and pulses, and demonstrate practical short term as well as longer term systemic changes needed to fix the food system.

Using data, observation and modelling we show that adequate investment and utilising the power of public sector contracts can help: meet government goals for sourcing 50% local or sustainable food in public sector food procurement; boost the horticulture sector; ensure people receive nutritious, locally grown fruit, vegetables and pulses in schools and retail settings; and enable localised supply chains that provide this food to flourish.

Policy recommendations

1. Fix the supply - Boost British fruit, veg and pulse production

- Introduce cross-departmental horticulture strategies across the nations to support green growth and boost production and consumption of fruit, vegetables and pulses
- Support small-scale and organic farmers through grants, better land access, and training programmes

2. Fix the missing middle - Ensure fair prices and invest in infrastructure

- Invest in local food infrastructure like food hubs, processing and packing facilities (particularly for legumes), and distribution centres to help smaller local producers get produce to market.
- Strengthen supply chain fairness to enforce fair dealing across more of the supply chain.

3. Fix the access - Enable everyone to eat good food

- Use the state's £5 billion of public food procurement from schools and hospitals to create stable markets for organic and locally produced produce. This will deliver on the Labour Government election manifesto commitment to ensure 50% of publicly procured food is local or to a higher environmental standard.
- Run pilots and roll-out schemes to make healthy food more affordable for low-income households and reduce NHS spending, such as vouchers and 'fruit and veg on prescription'.

Creating a healthy, sustainable² and just food system

Food grown according to organic principles is better for both people and planet. Producing fruit, vegetables and pulses this way requires investment, and it is often smaller scale growers who bear the risks and financial burden. The dominance and power of big food corporations in the food supply chain drives down prices paid to producers, who also carry the highest proportion of risk in the supply chain. This creates additional barriers for growers to invest, grow their businesses and access markets, and often means that their produce is not available or accessible for many, especially for those on a low income.

The fruit and veg gap:

The UK only produces 35% of the fruit and veg consumed³

Fruit and veg consumption must double to reach health and planetary goals⁴

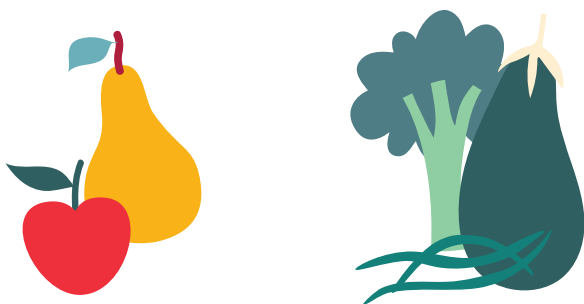
21% of people in the UK live in relative low income⁵

31% children under 5 are growing up in a food insecure household⁶

Creating a just, healthy and sustainable UK food system will require system-wide change alongside strong leadership. Farming of nutritious food with lower inputs, lower greenhouse gas emissions, which restore nature and support decent livelihoods for a diversity of growers must become the mainstream to build nutritional security and domestic resilience against global shocks. Our policy recommendations include ways to significantly increase domestic fruit and veg production in the UK⁷ and, with this, more jobs (up to 80 jobs per thousand tonnes produced⁸), benefiting local communities.⁹

Alongside this we need to double the consumption of fruit, veg and pulses to improve people's health¹⁰ while securing a market for growers, supporting the transition to climate and nature friendly farming. For this triple bottom line to be possible, good food must be available and affordable in local retail settings and across our schools and hospitals, sourced through ethical, value-based supply chains that provide growers with better and more reliable incomes than what they currently experience via supermarket supply chains.¹¹

If we are to produce food that is good for people and for the planet, and accessible to everyone regardless of their income, the Government must actively support climate and nature friendly horticulture and lead by example on how our food is bought and sold.



Bridging the Gap

Through the Bridging the Gap programme, we have shown that it is possible to make healthy and sustainable food accessible to everyone. With support from national and local government, working with growers, traders and school food buyers committed to ethical food, and people who can facilitate change at local level, such as local food partnerships, the financial and policy gaps can be bridged.

Between 2022 and 2025, six lead partners (Alexandra Rose Charity, Food Sense Wales, Growing Communities, Nourish NI, Nourish Scotland and Sustain) on the Bridging the Gap programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, explored practical solutions to support climate and nature friendly growers and widen access to organically produced fruit, veg and pulses for people on low incomes. Together with communities they co-produced and ran pilots across the four nations of the UK, reaching over 80,000 people.

The pilots covered the following approaches:

- Vouchers and other financial incentive models in retail settings, including food grocers, food coops, markets, stalls, and a veg box scheme;
- Support for supply into schools, including facilitating new food supply chains.

Evaluation of the pilots provided learning about the practicalities and evidence of the benefits, and the information needed to create recommendations for how to replicate or scale this work out.



Photo: Tower Hamlets Food Coop © Sylvie Belbouab

The programme in numbers:

2 years

9 pilots

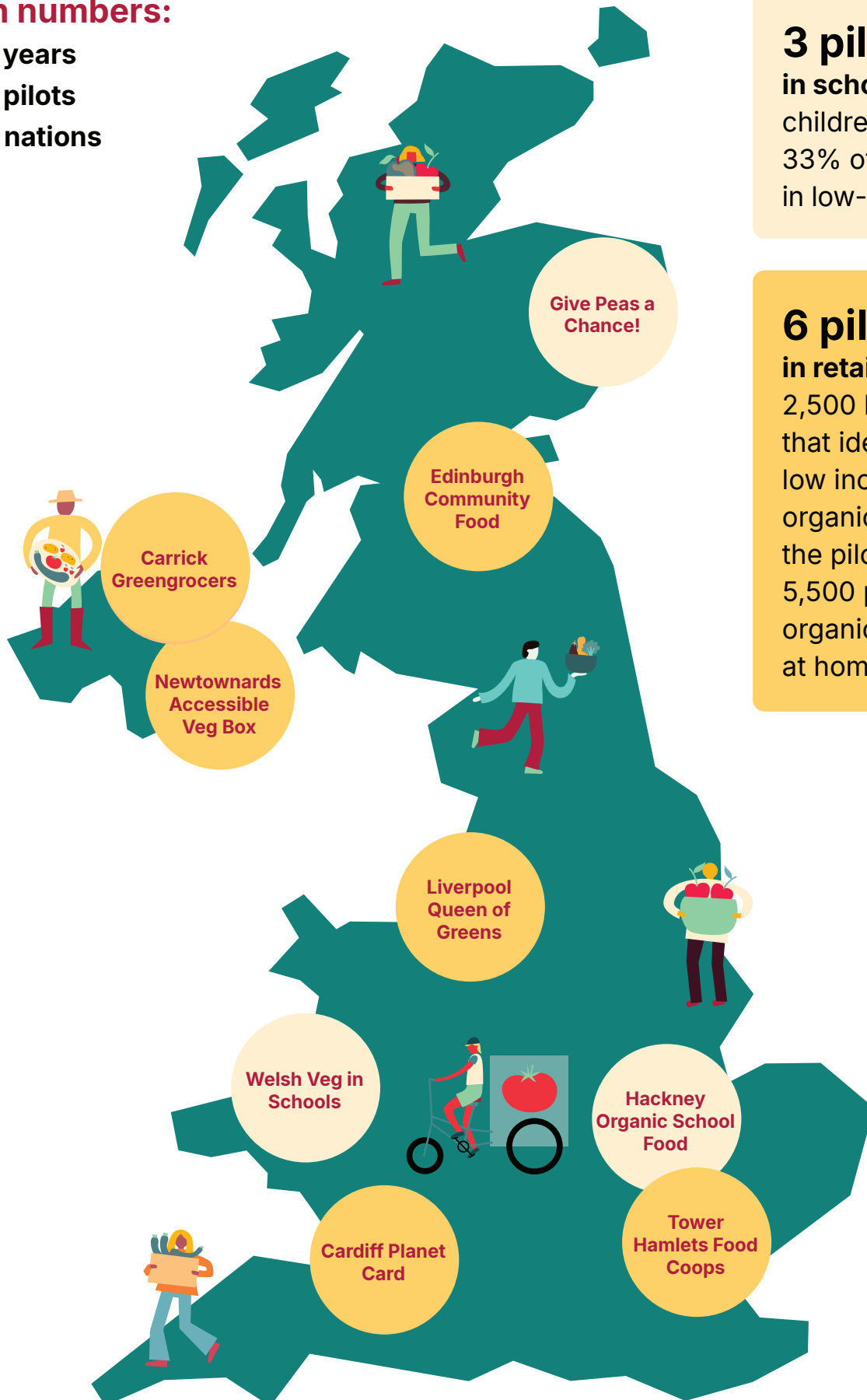
4 nations

3 pilots

in schools: 75,000 children in schools, 33% of which were in low-income areas

6 pilots

in retail settings: 2,500 households that identified as low income bought organic veg through the pilots, that's over 5,500 people eating organic fruit and veg at home



The farmer unlocking thousands of low-carbon school meals

Peas have power: they are delicious, nutritious, affordable and low-carbon protein and are suitable to be grown in the UK. With schools under pressure to cut costs while also nourishing our children well, they are an ideal ingredient for school dinners.

Farmer Phil Swire had been growing organic peas as a cover crop on his farm in Aberdeenshire and wanted to find a way to get them into school meals.

“Give Peas a Chance! is a drop in the ocean, but it has allowed us to make tangible differences to our business and allowed us to shorten supply chains. With enough drops we can make an ocean.

**Phil Swire, farmer,
Balmakewan Farm**

With funding from Bridging the Gap, Soil Association Scotland formed a partnership project with Aberdeen City Catering service and identified a pea processor in the Midlands. Bridging the Gap covered the price gap between the cost and what school caterers could pay, getting Scottish organic peas to onto plates in 360 schools across Aberdeen City.

Historically, traditional mince has been the most popular recipe on the menu across Aberdeen's menu cycle and is a high emission meal with 13.39g carbon per serving.¹² Adding peas to this recipe reduced the emission by almost half (42%) without reducing children's uptake of this menu option.



Photo: Children and farmer Phil Swire at Balmakewan Farm for Give Peas a Chance! © Matthias Kremer

Multiple benefits of supporting growth of climate and nature friendly horticulture

The Bridging the Gap programme was able to support with the cost of locally produced, organically grown fruit, veg and pulses to align the price paid by the 'customer'¹³ with non-organic prices. It applied this approach in three school and six SME retail settings across the four UK nations to understand the barriers and explore solutions to increasing supply and demand. This helped to unpack the scale of, and the factors that create, the cost difference between non-organic and organic food.

The findings¹⁴ show that with the right investment it is possible for

- people to buy climate and nature friendly fruit and vegetables in their local communities, grown just a few miles from their homes.
- public sector contracts to drive a market, meeting government manifesto commitments to get 50% local and sustainable food into public sector contracts in England, and to give growers the confidence they need to produce climate and nature friendly fruit, veg and pulses, while also feeding young people with nutritious fruit, veg and pulses grown close to their schools.

The programme found that financial support for the transition to a healthy, sustainable food system can be justified through delivering on four strategic goals that present longer term benefits and savings to people and to the public purse. Bridging the Gap pilots and evaluation provided evidence of:

- 1. Local economic growth.** More money circulated in local communities because of the pilot projects. Local growers, wholesalers and greengrocers got a fair return for their produce, which earned them £59,792 that they would not have otherwise earned. In turn, they spent their

money locally, contributing to job security and creation, and building community wealth in areas that need it most. Using a local multiplier¹⁵ we can estimate that this resulted in an additional £75,340 of spending within the local economy across the pilot areas in their short lifespan.

Friendly Food Club member, Carrick Greengrocers: *"I just agree with having a local greengrocer so try to support it as much as possible"*

2. Improvements in health and wellbeing.

People reported a strong improvement in their sense of health, wellbeing and autonomy from being able to choose food they think is best for them, in an enjoyable and dignified way. Improvements in diet through variety and fresher, pesticide-free ingredients supported this sense of physical health and wellbeing.

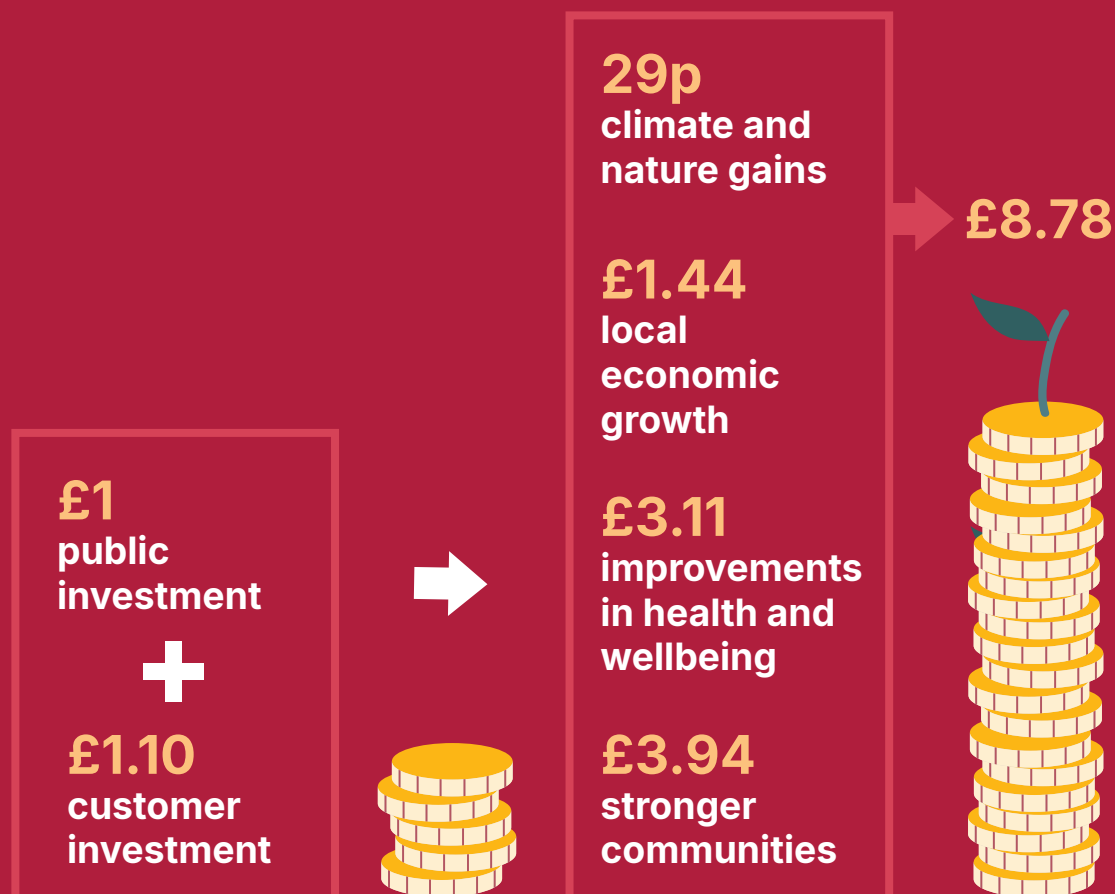
Ayesha, Queen of Greens in Liverpool: *"Organic is important because it's more healthy and it's what we're used to having back in Bangladesh so it's very important to me [...] In Bangladesh we produce everything, we grow everything organic and fresh."*

- 3. Stronger communities.** People reported greater social cohesion and sense of community and place, connecting with greengrocers and market traders and making closer links with the farmers growing their food, and school chefs and children taking pride in healthy, climate and nature friendly food served up in school meals.

Regular customer, Tower Hamlets Food Coop: *"Once I learned about organic food from the farm trip, it has made everything so much better."*

Potential return on investment in climate and nature friendly food

Every £1 of public money invested returns £8.78 in social, health, economic and environmental benefits (see annex B).¹⁶



- 4. Climate and nature gains.** Better routes to market for food produced using climate and nature friendly methods were established, with fewer synthetic chemicals running off into soils, better conditions for natural pest predators and pollinators to thrive, and food being produced closer to where it is eaten. As a result, 30% more carbon can be stored in soils¹⁷ and there can be a 30% improvement in biodiversity according to research.¹⁸

Our findings show clear benefits for people and planet. The time is now to seek ways to secure our food supply to build resilience.

Turning findings into policy solutions

The Bridging the Gap programme aimed to demonstrate what is possible; provide well-evaluated evidence of the practicalities and benefits; and present solutions that can be replicated and scaled out through policy and practice.

The voucher scheme expanding access to farmers markets

In 2022, Bridging the Gap brought together people from ethnically diverse communities, farmers, retailers and dietitians, to find ways to make organic fruit and veg affordable to people on low incomes. They co-produced the idea of a Planet Card – giving people on a low income £11 per week to use at three farmers markets in Cardiff.

Since April 2024, the scheme has been connecting new customers with organic produce and with the farmers who grow it. With 90 members, half of whom shop weekly, the project has led to a 10% increase in sales for the primary farmer stallholder.

“ I've always wanted to shop organic, and I do so now and then, but both price and accessibility options have always been the limiting barrier. This scheme has increased my desire and interest to actually get organic food.

Customer Ebed A from Cardiff



Photo: Paul's Organic Veg at Cardiff Farmers Market © Eleanor Church

The findings presented here were generated through qualitative insights from focus groups, interviews, observation and participant surveys, and quantitative data on production, consumption, and economic outcomes, backed by other evidence of impact. This mixed-methods approach – which engaged local communities, farmers and food system actors – ensured that the conclusions were rich and reflect both lived experiences and measurable impacts, providing a robust foundation for future action.

Programme partners experienced a range of obstacles which can be grouped into the following themes:

- 1. Lack of supply:** The UK does not grow enough fruit and vegetables to meet existing needs let alone what is needed for a healthy diet, and very little of the
- 2. Missing middle:** The system for getting food from SME local farms to relatively nearby communities is weak or often entirely missing. Our food system is highly centralised and complex, with ten major retailers accounting for 96.7% of grocery sales and many centralised processors and other actors extracting profit, squeezing farmers' incomes despite them carrying the lion's share of risk.
- 3. Barriers to access:** The relatively high cost of fresh fruit and veg for people in low-income areas, or complete lack of fresh food availability in food deserts, make healthy food choices difficult or impossible for many people, including for schools.

What we need to overcome the obstacles

Fix the supply

Boost British fruit and veg production

Fix the missing middle

Ensure fair prices, and infrastructure for farmers and growers²²

Fix the access

Enable everyone to access good food





Photo: James Taylor, Executive Chef at Hackney Organic School Food © Eleanor Church

Overcoming the obstacles

The pilots established practical solutions and helped to understand the long-term systemic solutions to the obstacles that arose. These solutions are grouped into three policy areas.

Obstacle	Solution
<p>Lack of supply</p> <p>Low levels of locally produced fruit and veg</p> <p>All pilots found a lack of supply of UK veg, exacerbated by extreme weather events, in the UK and abroad, is making supply increasingly unpredictable.</p> <p>Pilots dependent upon one or two growers needed sufficient scale and diversity in operations to meet demand.</p> <p>Collaboration between pilots and wholesalers, such as Growing Communities (Tower Hamlets and Hackney) and Castell Howell (Welsh Veg in Schools) enabled alternatives to be found by the pilots where supply was short in the UK due to crop losses.</p> <p>A strength of the Welsh Veg in Schools pilot was collaboration by a group of growers across geographies to supply the local authority and school needs. This provided resilience, with growers stepping up production where others experienced crop losses or failures.</p> <p><i>"I feel so proud and pleased. They are getting to know me and that this is my life. They appreciate my hard work as a farmer."</i> Paul, Grower, Paul's Organics</p>	<p>Fix the supply</p> <p>Collaborations between growers on growing plans enabled them to meet the demand.</p> <p>Working with wholesalers who could procure from the EU if needed ensured pilots delivered on their commitments even if there was a local shortfall.</p> <p>Long-term: Invest in organic and agroecological production by the horticulture sector to secure greater future domestic resilience in UK supply.</p> <p>Recommendations 1.1.-1.4.</p> <p><i>"The response from the community has been incredible, and knowing it's truly valued by the people it's grown for gives me a deep sense of fulfilment. Days like this remind me why I do what I do – they give real purpose to my work as a grower."</i> Chrissy, Head Grower, Folx Farm</p>

Obstacle	Solution
<p data-bbox="165 244 408 282">Missing middle</p> <p data-bbox="165 333 740 443">Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) organic supply chains have infrastructural and logistical limitations</p> <p data-bbox="165 483 740 775">Pilots found that processing has become centralised due to the dominance of the big supermarkets, meaning that infrastructure requirements (such as washing, splitting and bagging) add cost and carbon emissions to local supply chains that could be avoided if more localised infrastructure was available.</p> <p data-bbox="165 815 756 1144">For the Welsh Veg in Schools pilot, this meant investing in a carrot washer to get appropriately prepared carrots to schools; whilst for the Give Peas a Chance! pilot supplying locally grown peas into Scottish schools, the peas had to travel from Aberdeenshire to the Midlands for processing before returning to Scottish schools.</p> <p data-bbox="165 1184 756 1592">There are a limited number of SME organic wholesalers in the UK, and they do not yet operate at a large enough scale to deliver any day of the week at any time, which would better meet the needs of customers. As a result, careful planning was required in relation to delivery times and Head Chef, James Taylor, in the Hackney School Food pilot needed to buy from a previous supplier if last-minute additions to menus were required.</p> <p data-bbox="165 1666 756 1928"><i>“The Growing Communities [SME wholesaler] is brilliant. Such a lovely working relationship with them. They have saved me delivery stress to London, cut down admin, time, stress, and saved my mental health!” Sarah, grower, Sarah's Greens Organics</i></p>	<p data-bbox="833 244 1187 282">Fix the missing middle</p> <p data-bbox="833 333 1426 584">The Welsh Veg in Schools team in Wales and Soil Association Scotland played vital facilitation roles to support farmers on their pilots to overcome supply chain challenges. In some cases, the wholesaler stepped in to fund equipment or to source a solution.</p> <p data-bbox="833 629 1410 775">Long-term: Develop a robust market for UK grown organic produce, working with producers and investing in processing capacity for small and medium growers.</p> <p data-bbox="833 815 1426 1111">Invest in SME, farmer-focused infrastructure and fund feasibility studies to develop business cases and innovation. Priorities would include social enterprise or cooperatively owned/run washing and packing facilities (either at a food hub location or on farm with cooperative access for multiple users).</p> <p data-bbox="833 1151 1219 1189">Recommendations 2.1-2.2.</p> <p data-bbox="833 1256 1426 1547"><i>“We pay our growers fast. We pay them what they want. We don't haggle as policy. So that makes us popular with our growers. We pay them straight away. And then what we get is we tend to have loyal growers because of the way we treat them” Sean, wholesaler, Organic North</i></p>

Welsh local authority caterers drive increase in Welsh veg production

Wales has strong agricultural history, but until a few years ago it seemed impossible that Welsh organic veg could be served in school dinners.

However, in 2022, wholesaler Castell Howel partnered with Food Sense Wales to change the story. Realising the benefits that growing local supply chains could bring, they took it upon themselves to bridge the price gap and supply local, organic courgettes to a school holiday club in Cardiff.

With extra backing from the Welsh Government and Bridging the Gap, the project became Welsh Veg in Schools which now delivers veg to over half the local authorities in Wales. The guaranteed income and support of the pilot has allowed the 14 growers to plant more and new crops, which has contributed to a 20% increase in land used to grow veg in Wales, using nature friendly methods of farming.

Set against a wider UK decline in veg production, this demonstrates how using public procurement as a tool for change can help build stronger local sustainable food systems while supplying healthy food to school children.

“If we can be producing more veg locally in Wales then that’s really going to help the local economy, grow that supplier base and build greater resilience.

Katie Palmer, Food Sense Wales



Photo: Welsh Veg in Schools © Food Sense Wales

Obstacle	Solution
<p>Barriers to access</p> <p>Fruit and veg produced using organic methods have a higher cost</p> <p>The programme found that on average organic produce cost 25-50% more than non-organic produce, depending on the product and supply chain.</p> <p>People perceive organic to be expensive</p> <p>In addition to actual price difference, there is also a perception of organic being expensive due to branding and marketing. Pilots demonstrated this was not always true. For example, Liverpool Queen of Greens mobile grocer, which bought organic produce from SME cooperative wholesaler Organic North, needed a discount to cover the seasonal fluctuations in price but found numerous instances where organic prices matched non-organic prices.</p>	<p>Fix the access</p> <p>The programme funded the difference in the cost between organic and non-organic fruit, veg and pulses. For simplicity, each pilot identified a uniform subsidy level.</p> <p>Long-term: Implement a horticulture strategy that supports small and medium growers to grow fruit, veg and pulses that are in demand in the UK to increase availability of more affordable produce.</p> <p>Pilot larger schemes, which support people to buy seasonal climate and nature friendly produce.</p> <p>Recommendations 1.1.-1.2., 3.1., 3.2. and 3.3.</p> <p>Cardiff Food Planet regular: <i>"If I had more money, I would go organic. I mean, you peel a potato, you can see straight away, the juices coming out of it, I do value it. And the taste. But it's financial for me."</i></p>
<p>In the UK people are unaccustomed to eating a seasonal diet</p> <p>UK seasonal fruit and veg are less familiar with the UK public, with a higher demand for tropical and out-of-season fruit. For example, Bridging the Gap programme partner Edinburgh Community Food has a diverse community of people shopping from diverse food cultures. In this pilot, it was important to maintain access to produce that grows better outside the UK while also engaging with people buying food in retail settings on the opportunities to develop recipes with seasonal produce.</p> <p>In the Hackney Organic School pilot, head chef James Taylor led taste and cooking sessions with every class across two</p>	<p>Across these pilots, interaction with retailers supported people to learn about the seasonal produce they could buy. For example, in the retail pilots – Newtownards accessible veg box and Cardiff Planet Card – the farmer engaged with the people buying the food and enabled greater understanding of how to prepare and store produce.</p> <p>In schools, supply chain facilitators worked with schools to co-design menus that suited the kitchen teams and farm visits that encouraged students to try new foods.</p> <p>Long-term: Invest in high street renewal, through local and regional support packages, such as sliding scale of</p>

<p>schools. All classes had a chance to visit the local Growing Communities organic market garden. Participants reported that these experiences supported children to try new, seasonal, and less familiar veg.</p> <p>Cardiff Planet Card regular: <i>“speaking to the vendors every week and them giving you ideas on food, different meals you can make, what they’re best with. It’s not just having the different foods, it’s trying different meals, they tell you what to do with it.”</i></p>	<p>business rates and other investment for SME food retail, particularly coops or social enterprises, which builds footfall to the high street and encourages people back to local food retailers.</p> <p>Develop a whole school food curriculum that centers food and taste education.</p> <p>Recommendations 3.1.-3.8.</p>
<p>Convenience is a priority</p> <p>In a context where people are either shopping online or at their nearest supermarket for most of their needs, community food enterprises such as coops can struggle to compete on frequency and convenience.</p> <p>For example, in the Cardiff Farmers Market pilot, while the market is well established, many shoppers did not use a once-weekly market. Once the Cardiff Planet Card pilot launched, people appreciated the value of making the weekly shop at the farmers market a priority, with half of the members of the pilot ‘Planet Card’ scheme visiting the market each week.</p> <p>In Northern Ireland, Bridging the Gap programme partner Carrick Greengrocers opened to ensure there was fresh fruit and veg consistently on offer in the town and to revive their local high street.</p>	<p>By introducing incentives, people on the pilots changed their shopping habits and felt the benefits of doing so in terms of health and wellbeing, as well as connection with their community.</p> <p>In Liverpool, the Queen of Greens bus reaches people near to their homes making it more possible for them to eat fresh produce.</p> <p>Long-term: Invest in high street renewal and ensure cash incentives, such as vouchers (e.g. Healthy Start) and fruit and veg on prescription, that can be accepted at local retailers, such as street markets and corner shops.</p> <p>Recommendations 3.1. and 2.3.</p> <p>Customer Tower Hamlets Food Coop: <i>“I don’t buy fruit or veg at the supermarket as much now, I wait for the co-op to open.”</i></p>

Obstacle	Solution
<p>Barriers to access</p> <p>Resistance to unprocessed organic produce in school kitchens</p> <p>Produce grown using organic methods can arrive in kitchens unwashed or unprocessed, which requires kitchen teams to develop new skills and take extra time using these ingredients in meals.</p> <p>Catering teams participating in the Give Peas a Chance! pilot in Aberdeenshire were initially resistant to minimally processed dried pea and raised concerns that young people would not continue to eat school meals.</p> <p>Cook in Charge at a school in Aberdeen: <i>"It was a great experience as it was a grey area for me. Not knowing how the dish would be welcomed but I enjoyed every moment and look forward to trying new dishes which incorporate the dried split peas"</i></p>	<p>Fix the access</p> <p>Soil Association Scotland helped to alleviate the concerns Cooks in Charge raised by facilitating recipe development with them and giving everyone the opportunity to share challenges and solutions. This helped Aberdeen City to create new recipes with the peas that were just as popular as the previous recipes, increasing the number of recipes using split peas by 28% within the first 3 months of the pilot.</p> <p>Long-term: Review and reform school food funding to ensure a fairly paid workforce and access to skills development.</p> <p>Appoint a supply chain facilitator to ensure that menus include an element of co-design with kitchen staff in Local Authority Catering services and Multiple Academy Trusts.</p> <p>Recommendations 3.2. and 3.5.</p>
<p>Inaccessible catering contracts</p> <p>Our pilots found that catering contracts are hard for SME producers and suppliers to access due to their size and complexity. The more accessible contracts are where catering is delivered by an in-house service within the school, as in our Hackney pilot, or where a catering service is run by the local authority, as in Scotland and Wales.</p>	<p>The pilots largely worked through existing catering contracts held by wholesalers to enable them to introduce produce to the supply chain. The exception to this was Hackney as the in-house catering approach meant that it was possible for the pilot to change suppliers easily.</p> <p>Long-term: Fund and incentivise public sector food procurement frameworks that support local, sustainable and British sourcing, shorten supply chains and enable participation by British producers and SMEs.</p> <p>Recommendations 3.2. and 3.5.</p>

The bus driving organic produce to new places

The barriers to accessing organic fruit and veg are not solely financial. 1.2 million people in the UK live in low-income areas where accessing affordable fresh food is difficult¹⁹ – and in those places organic fresh produce is even harder to come by.

Enter Queen of Greens; a bus transformed into a mobile greengrocer that brings affordable fruit and veg to the communities around Liverpool and Knowsley – areas often described as food deserts.

They found in their consultations that Queen of Greens customers are interested in organic but just can't afford it. Through Bridging the Gap, they partnered with Organic North to introduce organic fruit and veg on the bus, accepting Rose Vouchers or Healthy Start vouchers to enable their customers to 'trade up.' Stopping at 40 locations, 700 people a week now have access to organic that didn't otherwise.



I've just got a massive broccoli, and I know it's not got any rubbish in it. It's been really helpful for us to have this van, especially here, because it's a community van and it's over the road from my house.

Clair, Queen of Green's customer



Photo: Paul Flannery from Liverpool Queen of Greens © Eleanor Church

Policy recommendations

1. Fix the supply

1.1 Introduce a cross-departmental horticulture growth strategy to increase fruit, vegetable and pulse production and consumption.

- Support collaboration between and with growers.
- Offer grants to new entrants and growers, alongside advice and land access, to increase the number of growers and amount of fruit and veg grown.
- Offer horticulture training to new entrants and the next generation of growers.

1.2 Integrate the horticulture growth strategy with an organic action plan to ensure that the increase in production minimises environmental damage, increases biodiversity, and plays its role in both meeting and driving increased demand for climate and nature friendly food.

1.3 Introduce a collaborative layer to farming schemes to support coordination between multiple growers. Also, fund actions under the layer.

1.4 Create a strong domestic market for UK organic and agroecological horticulture by harnessing the power of public sector procurement.

- Deliver on the government's commitment to achieving 50% of public sector food from local or sustainable sources.
- Fund supply chain facilitators and kitchen support in local authorities, which have been critical to all school pilots in unlocking opportunities for growers to access catering contracts.

- Require schools to have a food policy and food in the curriculum, and among catering and educational staff to promote the food the children are eating.

2. Fix the missing middle

2.1 Invest in and support shorter SME supply chains by creating a national or regional investment pot or grants targeting organic and agroecological supply chain SMEs.

- Grants and other forms of investment should prioritise increasing processing and aggregation capacity between farmers or at distribution level, such as washers and splitters.
- Create planning policies at local level that prioritise space and facilities for food SMEs, including values-led wholesalers and distributors.

2.2 Improve fairness and transparency across mainstream supply chains through legislation, and by strengthening the role of UK supply chain regulators.

- This can be delivered through, for example, enhancing the mechanisms and powers of the Fair Dealing Obligation, Groceries Code Adjudicator and the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, and learning from good practice set by the Spanish translation of the EU's Unfair Trading Practice directive.²⁰

2.3 Produce a local food plan for each region in conjunction with civil society and the community, including food partnerships, to map out the most effective regional approaches to increasing availability of healthy and sustainable local food.

3. Fix the access

In retail settings

3.1 Using existing and new incentive schemes to increase access to organic fruit, veg and pulses in independent retailers.

- Fund further pilots and roll-out in communities to understand the most efficient mechanisms for getting people back onto the high streets to purchase climate and nature friendly fruit and veg. These could be voucher schemes as explored in the Planet Card pilot, which could build on existing schemes such as Healthy Start²¹, or trials of fruit and veg on prescription.

In public sector food settings

3.2 Invest in supply chain facilitation roles and facilities to ensure connection and feedback between growers, local authority procurement officers and kitchen teams so there is a good mutual understanding of seasonal UK grown veg and school menu pressures.

3.3 Fund and incentivise public sector food procurement frameworks that support local, sustainable and British sourcing, shorten supply chains and enable participation by British producers and SMEs, such as Food for Life Served Here. This should include consideration of:

- breaking up contract tenders into smaller lots
- including sustainability, freshness and locality weightings
- flexible payment schedules.

3.4 Amend free school meals guidance to make integration of quality assured produce (organic certified fruit, vegetables and pulses) a condition of the grant.

3.5 Review and reform school food funding to reflect the true cost of delivering sustainable and nutritious meals, including food, labour, workforce and skills development, and local infrastructure.

3.6 Set ambitious environmental targets for organic fruit, veg and pulses in public sector food set in buying standards and school food nutrition standards that are specific to each nation, which will provide the drive and incentives to pursue and embed the work that the pilots have begun.

3.7 Require schools to have a food policy and food on the curriculum.

3.8 Increase pulses on school menus, including where relevant, relaxing requirements to serve meat.

Next steps

Bridging the Gap pilots have demonstrated what is possible to enable children, and households experiencing low incomes, to access climate and nature friendly fruit, vegetables and pulses. These pilots have shown that it will take a concerted cross-government approach, in partnership with the food and farming sectors, to stimulate supply, demand and the growth of the ethical local supply chains in the middle.

Widening access to organically produced fruit, veg and pulses will drive long-term demand and security for smaller growers in the UK farming sector. It will also mean an equitable shift to healthy and sustainable diets, increasing the environmental benefits and ensuring a just and inclusive transition to a climate and nature friendly system of producing our food.

To make this happen:

Governments and local authorities across the four nations of the UK should recognise and take up the need to invest in climate and nature friendly horticulture to increase availability nation-wide. This needs to be embedded through strategy, policy, finance, training, supply chain facilitation, local food infrastructure and access to land.

Government, growers and other actors involved in food and farming must work collaboratively to secure the infrastructure and facilitation needed to develop shorter supply chains. This would enable people and public sector institutions to buy and serve local organically produced fruit, veg and pulses.

Civil society, the research community, funders and government need to work together to scale and replicate these pilots in new settings to continue to test, learn and adapt solutions that deliver long-term food system change and ensure that momentum and learning is capitalised on, not lost.



Tower Hamlets Food Coop © Sylvie Belbouab

Annex A:

The policy recommendations by nation

The policy recommendations outlined in this report would be implemented differently across each of the UK nations, with some nations already progressing or completing some of the recommendations. The table below outlines where the responsibility for each recommendation would sit in each nation.

Recommendation	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Fix the supply: increase the supply of agroecological and organic fruit and vegetables				
Food strategy outcome: "Sustainable and resilient supply" with environmentally sustainable growers supported and greater resilience in domestic supply of healthy and sustainable food.				
Introduce a cross-departmental horticulture growth strategy or strategies to increase fruit, vegetable and pulse production and consumption.	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Department for Education (DfE), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)	Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate	Rural Affairs Wales
Integrate the horticulture growth strategy with an organic action plan.	Defra, Department for Business and Trade (DBT), Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)	N/A	Due January 2026	Rural Affairs Wales
Create a strong domestic market for UK organic and agroecological horticulture by harnessing the power of public sector procurement.	Defra, DfE	DAERA, Department of Education	Procurement and Property Directorate	Rural Affairs Wales, Education Department

Introduce a collaborative layer to farming schemes to support coordination between multiple farmers and other supply actors. And fund actions under the layer.	Defra	DAERA	Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate	<i>Layer in development in Sustainable Farming Scheme</i> Climate Change and Rural Affairs Wales
Fix the missing middle: strengthen distribution and processing infrastructure to support farmer focused supply				
Food strategy outcome: "Good Growth" with fairer and more transparent supply chains.				
Improve fairness and transparency across mainstream supply chains through legislation, and by strengthening the role of UK supply chain regulators.	DBT	DBT	DBT	DBT
Invest in and support shorter SME supply chains by creating a national or regional funding pot of grants ringfenced for organic and agroecological supply chain SMEs, prioritising processing and aggregation/distribution capacity.	Defra, DBT, MHCLG, HM Treasury (HMT)	DAERA, Invest NI, Department for the Economy	Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate	Climate Change and Rural Affairs Wales, Economy, Energy and Planning and Development Bank of Wales
Produce a local food plan for each region in conjunction with farmers, growers, values-led enterprises, civil society and communities.	Defra, Local/combined authorities	DAERA, local councils	already a legislative requirement under the Good Food Nation Act	Rural Affairs Wales, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice local authorities

Fix the access: enable more people to access climate and nature friendly fruit, vegetables and pulses

Food strategy outcome: "Healthier and more affordable food" An improved food environment that supports healthier and more environmentally sustainable food sales.

School food

Invest in supply chain facilitation roles and facilities to ensure connection and feedback between growers, local authority procurement officers and kitchen teams so there is a good mutual understanding of seasonal UK grown veg and school menu pressures.	Role held in local authority or delivered by Food For Life Served Here. Local/regional authorities			
Fund and incentivise frameworks that support local, sustainable and British sourcing, shorten supply chains and enable participation by British producers and SMEs, such as Food for Life Served Here.	DfE, Local Authorities	Department of Education (DoE)	Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate, Procurement and Property Directorate, Local Authorities	Education Department, Local Authorities
Set ambitious environmental targets for organic fruit, veg and pulses in public sector food set in buying standards and school food nutrition standards that are specific to each nation. Amend free school meals guidance to make a target for quality assured produce (organic certified fruit, vegetables and pulses) a condition of the grant.	DfE, Defra	DAERA	Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate, Procurement and Property Directorate	Education Department

Review and reform school food funding to reflect the true cost of delivering sustainable and nutritious meals, including food, labour, workforce and skills development, and local infrastructure.				
Require schools to have a food policy and food on the curriculum.	DfE	N/A		N/A
Increase pulses on school menus, including where relevant, relaxing requirements to serve meat.	DfE	N/A	N/A	N/A
Retail				
Using existing and new incentive schemes to increase access to organic fruit, veg and pulses in independent retailers.	Defra, Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), DWP	DAERA, Department of Health (DoH)	N/A	Rural Affairs, Health and Social Services

Annex B:

Economic modelling methodology

Overview and methodology

The analysis is based on economic modelling by the University of Portsmouth and the Organic Research Centre, looking at data from the pilots alongside published literature.

The research found that for every additional £1,000 of subsidy to retail projects, about £2,100 worth of organic fruit and veg are purchased: roughly 700 kg and 84 extra customer transactions.

The analysis monetised key benefits from the pilots, combining direct project data, economic modelling, and survey findings. The research team used conservative assumptions where data gaps existed and adjusted all values to 2024 GBP for consistency and incorporated displacement where appropriate. The “counterfactual” assumed no intervention (status quo).

1. Environmental impact

As the fruit and veg supplied to the pilots were only one of several income streams for producers, the team estimated the organic land area supported by each project based on the amount and type of fruit and veg sold and the typical land required to produce these crops. This enabled quantification of the annual environmental externalities avoided relative to a non-organic baseline.

The environmental benefits monetised included:

- Carbon reduction
- Biodiversity increases
- Reduced nitrate leaching
- Avoided eco- and human-toxicity
- Reduced synthetic input use
- Carbon savings from shorter supply chains

Reduction factors and unit damage values were drawn from UK/EU evidence, peer-reviewed literature, national datasets, and recognised valuation frameworks. Conservative assumptions were applied to reflect variability across farming systems. The total environmental benefit is then calculated by multiplying the organic area supported in each crop category by the relevant environmental burden reduction and the associated avoided damage cost, summed for each pilot.

2. Consumer benefit and surplus

The report treats consumer benefits as a combination of three complementary components:

- a. Consumer surplus from reduced prices,
- b. Dignity-related mental health improvements, and
- c. Broader wellbeing effects (health and life satisfaction).

a. Consumer surplus (financial welfare gains)

Subsidies lowered the price of organic fruit and vegetables, increasing affordability, choice, and purchasing power for consumers. The Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) measures this increased welfare through standard consumer surplus methods:

- A linear demand curve is assumed.
- For low-income groups, the model assumes no organic purchases before subsidies, so the gain in consumer surplus equals the full area under the demand curve above the subsidised price.
- The rule of half was used to calculate consumer surplus as half the subsidy multiplied by the volume purchased.

- For projects not specifically targeting low-income households, price elasticity evidence (14% increase in consumption for a 10% subsidy) was used to estimate the quantity that would have been purchased without the subsidy. This provides a lower-bound estimate to avoid overstating consumer surplus.

This component captures improved affordability, access, and choice.

b. Dignity benefits (mental health and anxiety reduction)

Because the projects were designed to avoid stigma and to give participants control and choice, unlike many traditional food aid models, the CBA includes the mental-health value of reduced anxiety:

- Evidence links dignity-based food initiatives to reduced mild anxiety, valued at 0.0788 QALYs (£6,252.85 per person per year).
- A conservative assumption applies the benefit only for one day per interaction, yielding a value of £17.13 per participant visit.
- This benefit is counted for each interaction involving a low-income household, representing the positive psychosocial effect of a non-stigmatising, empowering food support model.

This captures the emotional and psychological consumer benefits of a dignified experience.

c. Health and wellbeing benefits (life satisfaction and empowerment)

Although long-term disease reduction could not be modelled, the CBA incorporates wellbeing improvements observed in participant surveys:

- Regular participation increased life satisfaction, empowerment, dietary confidence, and community connection.
- These broader wellbeing gains were monetised using the WELLBY (Wellbeing-Adjusted Life Year) metric.

- UK Treasury guidance values 1 WELLBY at £15,300 per person per year.
- A highly conservative uplift of 0.001 WELLBY per participant was applied: £15.30 per person per year.
- This valuation applies to all unique participants, representing general improvements in wellbeing beyond anxiety reduction.

This component captures psychological, social, and wellbeing-related benefits of participation.

3. Social impact

Analysis of the participant surveys found frequent pilot participation boosted community connection and reduced loneliness.

- The New Economics Foundation's *Farmer-focused routes to market: An evaluation of social, environmental, and economic contributions of growing communities* report values an increase in sense of community and an increase in social interactions at between £319 and £370 per customer.
- Social benefits are valued at £363 per farm visit (proxy: Rural Payments Agency rate).

4. Local economic impact

Projects provide new income streams and market access for small/local growers.

- Total additional revenue for organic farmers is estimated at £154,303, with net new revenue (after accounting for displacement) at £42,811 for retail/veg box/farmers' market projects and £16,981 for school meals projects.
- A local multiplier effect adds an estimated £75,340 of additional spending in the local economy.

Endnotes

- 1 Alexandra Rose Charity, Barry Ferguson, Cardiff Farmers Markets, Carrick Greengrocers, Edinburgh Community Food, Food Sense Wales, Growing Communities, Nourish Scotland, Nourish NI, Queen of Greens, Soil Association Scotland – coordinated by Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming.
- 2 For sustainable in this report read climate and nature friendly production, which also refers to food produced using organic and agroecological principles. Read more about Sustain’s approach to healthy and sustainable food and farming here: <https://www.sustainweb.org/sustainable-farming-campaign/sustains-approach/>
- 3 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), UK Food Security Report 2024, (Defra, December 2024), p. 128.
- 4 Johan Rockström et al, [The EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy, sustainable, and just food systems](#). (The Lancet, Volume 406, Issue 10512, October 2025), p. 1625 – 1700.
- 5 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [UK Poverty 2025](#) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, January 2025).
- 6 Thomas Weekes, Alex Vickers, Charlotte Miles, Adam Nichols, Arianne Clarke, Holly Clarkson, Ellie Ball and Sophie Padgett, Hunger in the UK 2025 (Trussell Trust, September 2025).
- 7 Tim Lang, with Natalie Neumann and Antony So, [Just in Case: narrowing the UK civil food resilience gap](#), (National Preparedness Commission, February 2025), p. 333
- 8 Food Sense Wales, Tonnes of Change Summary Report, p. 19.
- 9 IGD, [Viewpoint: Driving growth through a thriving food system](#), (IGD, September 2025), p.35.
- 10 Rockstrom et al, [The EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy, sustainable, and just food systems - Summary Report](#), (The Lancet, October 2025), p. 3.
- 11 Jacks and Hammans, [Unpicking Food Prices: Where Does Your Pound Go, and Why Do Farmers Get so Little?](#), (Sustain, December 2022).
- 12 Data analysis by Angela Tregar, University of Edinburgh using the Carbon Meal Analyser Tool.
- 13 In the case of retail pilots this was the person buying the food while for the school pilots this was the local authority or school
- 14 A further report detailing additional findings and approaches used in the pilots will follow
- 15 Kłoczko-Gajewska, et al., ‘[What are the economic impacts of short food supply chains? A local multiplier effect \(LM3\) evaluation](#)’. (European Urban and Regional Studies, 31(3), 281-301. 2023)
- 16 Based on research carried out by University of Portsmouth and the Organic Research Centre for Bridging the Gap
- 17 Aubert and Poux, ‘[An agro-ecological Europe: a desirable, credible option to address food and environmental challenges](#)’, (IDDRI, 2018).
- 18 Tuck, Winqvist, Mota, Ahnström, Turnbull, and Bengtsson, ‘[Land-use intensity and the effects of organic farming on biodiversity: a hierarchical meta-analysis](#).’ (Journal of applied ecology, 51(3), pp.746-755, 2014).
- 19 <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/barriers-eating-healthily-uk/>
- 20 Head of State, [Law 16/2021, of December 14, which modifies Law 12/2013, of August 2, on measures to improve the functioning of the food chain](#), (Head of State, December 2021), p. 153323-153352.
- 21 Sustain campaigns for the improved uptake of the [Healthy Start and Best Start schemes](#) and expansion to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.
- 22 By local food infrastructure, we mean access to appropriate scale processing, packing, distribution, supply chain facilitation, wholesale coordination, retail and marketing methods, tools, facilities and opportunities to enable shorter supply chains that connect farmers and growers with diverse market outlets.

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Bridging the Gap

How to fix the food system for everyone

A Sustain publication

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About Sustain

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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