



# Growing a resilient food system in Leeds

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Two workshops were held to look at how we can enable a climate resilient food system in Leeds that promotes health, sustainability and food security. They found that Leeds has many strengths and opportunities in this area, but will need the Council to show leadership and strategic vision to deliver the benefits.

## Overview

- A resilient, healthy and sustainable food supply should be viewed as a matter of public good, as it underpins public health, social equality and environmental quality
- Leeds has plenty of farmland, expertise, innovation, and excellent practice. Minimal interventions could deliver major changes and benefits.
- We recommend that Leeds City Council sets up a high-profile task force to work with local stakeholders to create a local sustainable food brand, improve access to land for growers, strengthen economic measures to support a vibrant local food ecosystem, and promote education and skills development.

Covid-19 has uncomfortably revealed how exposed our food system is to external shocks. Further challenges are expected due to climate change and evolving trade relations.

The UK is a net importer of food, as is Leeds, so trade plays an important role in food and nutrition security, with current uncertainties having major resilience implications. Meanwhile, climate change is impacting both local and global food systems. Heat stress affected UK crops last year, and rain reduced the wheat harvest by 40% this year, while globally; droughts, fires, floods, changing humidity leading to diseases, soil degradation and more are affecting production, which impacts on local availability and prices. Biodiversity is being lost at alarming rates, while unhealthy consumption habits increase diet-related chronic diseases, putting pressure on health services.

Leeds needs to be strategic and bold, to increase the climate resilience of its food system while promoting health, sustainability and food security.



## Food system workshops

This policy brief is informed by two workshops.

In December 2019 a consortium of experts, led by Dr. Paola Sakai and Tom Bliss from the Leeds Climate Commission Resilience Working Group, held an event to explore **different scenarios that can drive the future of the Leeds Food System**. Cllr Judith Blake (Leeds City Council) and Prof. Tim Benton (Royal Institute of International Affairs) hosted the workshop, with Andy Goldring (Permaculture Assn) facilitating. Results highlighted the need to support local food production and consumption, and the need for more control, to drive a more healthy, sustainable and secure food system.

In September 2020 a second workshop, 'Pathway for a climate-resilient, healthy and sustainable Leeds Food System', explored the Sustainable Local Food Scenario of the first workshop, to identify robust decisions capable of putting Leeds on track to a climate-resilient, healthy, sustainable and secure food system. This was attended by delegates from Leeds City Council, University of Leeds, Leeds Beckett University, Yorkshire Water, Nestlé, FoodWise Leeds, Feed Leeds, the Permaculture Assn, Green Futures UK, Leeds Indie Food, and Hyde Park Source. A full Workshop Report is in preparation, and further workshops will be undertaken using a climate multi-hazards vulnerability index and adapting the **CARA framework** for food mitigation and resilience.

## Current barriers

Leeds operates with consumption patterns that prioritise cheap food to release disposable income. This has led to over-consumption, poor nutrition, health and environmental problems. The externalised costs are supposedly met by health and environmental services, but only a small fraction can be rectified. There is minimal engagement by supermarkets who dominate the production and supply chains. Unsustainable imports drive farmers to damaging practices. Fast food and low-cost outlets drive poor diets and other health problems, and form a barrier to good food habits as there is a complete disconnection with food sources. There are pockets of expertise and good practices but it was recognized that there is a major lack of knowledge and skills around environmental costs, seasonality, nutrition, cooking, food growing, waste management, packaging etc.

Locally, Leeds is still not fully recognised as a food city, like Bristol or Brighton. Leeds holds the Sustainable Food Cities Bronze Award, but is a long way from Silver. Funding cuts have made things more difficult for low income families, and food insecurity among children in poverty is worrying. Funding cuts also demand increased innovation and partnerships, but currently engagement is only sporadic and lacks strategic vision. There is a lack of land, and access to land, for growing. Some Leeds City Council land is theoretically available, but hurdles to access are too high and no-one knows where it is. There is little interaction with the Planning department. Conservative public opinion has contributed to limited productive use of green space - for example, slow progress on relaxed mowing, wildflowers and tree planting. Lockdown has influenced people's perception around green spaces, and introducing food in parks and public land will require strong leadership at ward level. Fertile

**“Governments and local authorities have not tended to see food as a public good, so have left provision largely to the private sector and market forces.**

**But the Covid pandemic has shown just how vulnerable cities are, and while Leeds coped magnificently on this occasion, the lockdown sounded a claxon for the looming challenge of Brexit and, more alarmingly, climate change, which is already putting global food production and distribution under threat, while also demanding reductions in carbon emissions, plastics and waste.**

**Now is the time to look at the evidence and introduce robust measures to ensure a resilient, sustainable and benign food supply for the citizens of Leeds. And Leeds City Council needs to be front and centre of that effort.”**

**Professor Tim Benton, University of Leeds,  
Research Director – Emerging Risks; Royal Institute  
of International Affairs, Chatham House**

land is not a special case within a city-wide plan and is not properly valued, with bespoke development rates as required for commercial viability. There is minimal trade or engagement between the city and periurban producers. Food waste is comingled and sent to the Leeds energy recovery facility, which reduces energy output and wastes circular economy opportunities. There is a lack of investment in food projects or encouragement for start-up food businesses that promote health and sustainability. 1 in 6 households are still struggling to put food on the table, a problem **exacerbated by the pandemic** - especially with furlough ending on 31 October - with job losses, no school or at-work meals, reduced incomes, and reduced supply of affordable food.

## Strengths and opportunities

The workshops identified the following key strengths and opportunities in the Leeds Food System, which suggest that minimal interventions could deliver major changes and benefits:



**Timely social change** is finally taking place. Covid-19 and Brexit has increased the awareness of the importance of building resilience in the food system. Building climate-resilience, focusing on health, sustainability and food security makes more sense today for the general public. There is an increased interest in circular economics, composting and food waste reductions (e.g. Zero Waste Leeds, Leeds Rotters), concerns regarding plastic, and other environmental matters. Pursuing a green recovery is encouraged from all fronts and there are opportunities related to **devolution and mayoral election**. Other actors are also looking to engage with the agenda, such as the **food industry** aiming to improve logistics, or reduce emissions (Arla, ASDA and Co-op in Leeds, and McCain, William Jackson, and Morrisons in Yorkshire). The **two large Universities in Leeds are on board**, bringing expertise and good links with industry partners (UoL Global Food & Environment Institute and NEXUS, LBU student new social and business startups) and student community. Leeds also has the Climate Commission Resilience Working Group working on food, SMEs and health.

There is **plentiful Grade 1 farmland** in Leeds District with opportunity to short-circuit supply chains. Increasingly, farmers are seeking local markets and new business models, e.g. less livestock, different crops, box schemes, milk / egg delivery, etc. There is **plentiful urban green space** including parks, housing land, ex-allotment sites, redundant golf courses and SLOAP. There are also private landlords that have offered land for growing food (e.g. Yorkshire Water, 2.5 acres in Roundhay). In addition, there are **plentiful brownfield sites** for vertical farms and 'meanwhile' use.

There are **growing networks and activity**. This includes: strong recreational food growing with increased home growing during lockdown; vibrant allotment scene; strong network of community projects; plus increasing interest in food growing in schools. We have a **burgeoning commercial urban farm network**: Kirkstall Valley Farm, Meanwood Valley Urban Farm, Patchwork Project (coalition for sales, distribution and marketing), Nell's Urban Greens, Swillington Organic etc. There is also **Leeds-based commercial hydroponics / vertical farm, Growing Better**, and aeroponic growing in schools by ReThink Food.

There is significant **innovation and mentoring**, including by landowners: Yorkshire Water (Esholt vertical farm and Land Anchor network project), Leeds City Council farms, Harewood, University of Leeds farms, Askam Bryan, Wades Charity, Crown Estate, National Trust, among others. The Permaculture Association is based in Leeds. Good mentoring and education support network is offered by Zest, Hyde Park Source, Space 2, Lemon Balm, Grow to School, and others.

There is a **strong fresh food offer**: Kirkgate Market, farmers markets, farm shops, Yorkshire Produce Centre, independent shops, cafes and restaurants buying local produce, Leeds Indie Food, new box schemes and online platforms during lockdown. Excellent **emergency food provision** was provided by Leeds City Council and third sector partners (e.g. Food Aid Network) during Covid-19, which could be adapted to continuing efforts to support those in need. There is **good surplus food re-distribution** via Fare Share Yorkshire, ReThink Food, Food Revival, Good to Go, Real Junk Food Project. There is good practice around **public procurement**

for instance, in school dinners, care homes, and hospitals by the Leeds City Council Food Group, FoodWise Leeds, and N8 Procurement project.

There are **pockets of excellent practice** within the Leeds City Council, especially around the Food Group led by Public Health: the Fast Food SPD to restrict outlets near schools was introduced in 2019 and could be expanded; healthier vending machine trial with NHS and the Leeds City Council; Catering Leeds 2 day meat-free and more **plant-based menu**; and the HENRY program which has been a success in the efforts to **reduce child obesity**.

Food is becoming more important in the **National agenda and funding streams are opening up**. For instance, the **Sustainable Food Places Silver** bid (FoodWise Leeds), and the successful £2.5m Lottery Funding (Climate Emergency Community Action Programme). The latter aims to facilitate local climate action through the creation of local hubs to champion good food practice. Also, the **National Food Strategy** is encouraging the creation of more sustainable food systems and is active with public consultations to further promote strategies with Local Authorities (e.g. separate food collection). Leeds also has the opportunity to become a member of the **Cooperative Councils Network**.

## Other local food systems

Attendees also mentioned various case studies that Leeds could learn from. For instance, in Canada local authorities use assets to support community food growing, e.g. **Vancouver Parks providing seedlings**. Alternatively, Milan has developed an urban food policy pact, providing a framework for municipalities to adopt for sustainable food systems, with 200 signatories worldwide.

## Recommendations

### Food systems working group

Leeds City Council should seek to appoint a **senior / high profile council contact** to chair a **Leeds Food System Cross-Council working group**, meeting regularly with members in attendance as required. There are many things happening in the city, but to upscaling them to deliver a city strategy requires city leadership.

The working group should include all senior officers with food, land and/or other relevant responsibilities e.g. asset management, planning, parks and countryside, environment, climate, public health (enhancing the existing Food Group), procurement, business innovation, waste management, among others.

The group should also hold **regular outreach meetings** with local experts such as Feed Leeds, FoodWise Leeds and a **new Farm Forum** linking and supporting producers in the Leeds/Yorkshire agricultural zone and others (e.g. processors, distribution).

A small investment in Council time and resources would deliver major changes.



## Priorities for working group

The working group should look to upscale good examples already happening in the city and create a city-wide food strategy that promotes climate resilience, health, sustainability, and food security. In particular, it should look to:

### Create a local food brand

Create a **local food brand** / kite ('Owl') mark to **encourage sustainability, health and food security**. **Celebrating existing successes** and best practice will create pride and a clear statement that Leeds is promoting a sustainable, healthy local food & drinks as part of a city strategy. For instance, all procurement to buy marked goods only. Likewise LIF, Leeds 2023, First Direct Arena, Leeds Fest, major sports and cultural events.

### Improve access to land

Embed food into **local planning policy** and **improve access to land** for growers. On **public land**, adopt an open door, supportive approach, with a higher tolerance of failure, and routine consideration of food crops in all new developments, especially housing, urban regeneration (e.g. South Bank) and environmental improvements, e.g. pedestrianisation schemes, new parks and green spaces, ELOR etc. On **private land**, including brownfield and temporary / 'meanwhile' use. Include urban farming in spatial planning strategies and establish routine consideration of food crops in tree planting and other carbon measures. Create an interactive **map** of fertile land suitable for food production, showing access information and advice, and along with partners create spaces to develop a joint strategic approach.

### Grow business ecosystem

**Boost multiplier effect** by considering building resilience as an investment rather than a cost. **Strengthen economic measures** to make local and small-scale growing both viable and a major cachet for Leeds. Promote innovative food production; introduce **incentives** for food businesses that promote sustainability, health and food security (e.g. lower rates and rents, blended finance); use **public procurement** to promote local produce with enhanced sustainability and health criteria (e.g. direct sales to schools, hospitals and major employers). Develop new **online sales platforms, co-operatives, new market routes, sustainable food hubs** (e.g. wholesale markets at Kirkgate, Yorkshire Produce Centre and/or new specialist sites) for farmers and growers. Encourage **vertical farms, box schemes** and **'click and collect'** (e.g. the Preston model, engage with Leeds Pound and build on Patchwork Farm innovations).

### Engage, educate and upskill

Promote co-benefits and engage local communities in growing, cooking and eating healthily and sustainably (e.g. benefits of outdoor exercise for mental and physical health, flood amelioration, biodiversity, tastier produce etc.). Promote

practical education that increases knowledge and skills in farming and business enterprise. Create an open source database library of relevant case studies plus data on Leeds food system resilience. Educate around impacts of industrial farming vs regenerative farming, and weather-related impacts. Harness local expertise and resources in schools, universities, businesses, community groups and charities.

### Show leadership

In the face of the Climate Emergency, international uncertainty, and the challenges of poor diets and health risks, and now with Covid-19, Leeds has the opportunity to create a city-wide food strategy that promotes climate resilience, health, sustainability and food security. Leeds, thanks largely to progress by the Leeds Climate Commission and the commitment of the Leeds City Council, is well suited to lead UK cities in developing meaningful actions. Every sector - academia, government, civil society and, especially, business, has a vital role in building the city we want. But to 'build back better' our food system and green our city, we need leadership and a strategic vision.

## About the authors

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## Further information

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