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How can we build resilient food systems in the COVID-19 recovery?

This report summarises findings from an event held with [Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming](#) on the how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed different strengths and weaknesses within our local food systems.

There have been tremendous shocks to our food system over the last few months, showing both how fragile it is but also how responsive communities can be in moments of crisis. In Big Local areas across the country, people came together to source and deliver food to the most vulnerable residents, with local knowledge proving invaluable. To explore this issue further Local Trust invited Sustain to guest-host a discussion on how we can build more resilience into our local and national food systems, in ways that ensure that everyone has access to healthy, delicious and sustainable food.

"COVID-19 has been like a flood, bringing a crashing wave into every nook and cranny of our food systems." Maddie Guerlain, Sustain

Key points

- Community and collaboration have been at the heart of responses during the lockdown, and we should work to strengthen these vital connections.
- Developing food systems at a more local scale is crucial to ensuring environmental and financial sustainability, thereby benefitting the local land, economy, workers and residents.
- The ability to access healthy, sustainable and culturally appropriate food is deeply entwined with economic systems, such as fair wages and benefits. Therefore, our responses to shaping food systems must reflect this reality.

Introduction

On 25 June Local Trust and Sustain partnered to host an online panel discussion on the question “**How can we build resilient food systems in the COVID-19 recovery?**”

We heard from the following panellists:

- Maddie Guerlain – Project Coordinator, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming (chaired the discussion)
- Dee Woods – Independent Food Aid Network, London Food Board, and African and Caribbean Heritage Food Network
- Julie Brown – Director, Growing Communities
- Sue Morris – Chair, Devonshire West Big Local
- Sue Pritchard – Chief Executive, Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

The COVID-19 outbreak has forced UK society to confront a number of challenges within our food system and has laid bare its weakest points. The spotlight has been shone on the fragility of employment in the hospitality sector, the inability for many households to afford basic essentials, our reliance on migrant farm labour and ‘just in time’ systems to stock supermarket shelves, among others. Now is a pivotal time to reflect on and re-imagine the way we produce, distribute and consume food in order to better nourish ourselves and the planet.

Context

While the COVID-19 outbreak created many new immediate challenges within food systems, such as shifting shopping habits, it magnified challenges that many people were *already* grappling with. These challenges can roughly be identified through **two broad themes**:

- **Food access:** Many families before coronavirus were struggling to afford and access food, most visibly seen by the steady and alarming rate of increasing visits to food banks over the past few years. Due to financial uncertainty, school closures and job losses, this got much worse during lockdown as [food bank use shot up](#) and [almost a fifth of UK homes with children went hungry](#).
- **Food production:** The pandemic also demonstrated the precariousness of how our food gets from farm to fork. Reliance on migrant farm labour with poor working conditions, ‘essential workers’ at supermarkets who have zero-hour contracts and empty shelves are just a few of the ways in which these cracks have been exposed to the public. This shows how ‘cheap food’ has ripple effects down the supply chain and calls into question how our society values food and the labour behind it.

This must be viewed within the wider context of two other great challenges to our food system: Brexit and the climate and nature emergency. How the UK Government chooses to address these in terms of trade deals, [the Agriculture Bill](#), new National Food Strategy and support for local farms, producers and communities will have a massive and long-term impact. Finally, this will also be related to how we address obesity and healthy eating, which has seen further public attention, both because of being a risk factor for COVID-19 and the food industry’s recent to [return to marketing](#).

“Brexit and the climate and nature emergency are deeply intertwined in the future of our food system.”

Maddie Guerlain

On the positive side, the community response to food security has been extraordinary. From within our own networks at Sustain, we have seen [bakeries innovate](#), community gardens support mental and physical health, [meals on wheel revitalised](#) and [local food partnerships](#) demonstrate their value during emergency responses. [Support for local veg box schemes](#) has gone through the roof, small retailers have surged and new local collaborations are persisting as the crisis subsides.

Whilst the scale of the problems within our food systems loom larger than ever, after months of uncertainty and challenge, creative and people-centred ways of responding to these issues are slowly becoming the new normal.

Discussion: How can we build resilient local food systems in the COVID-19 recovery?

1. Community and collaboration have been at the heart of responses during the lockdown, and we should work to strengthen these vital connections.

During the event, the speakers emphasised how much community-level initiatives have been the driving force behind ensuring no one goes hungry during lockdown. From delivering hot soup and rolls in Eastbourne to Growing Communities’ veg box scheme in Hackney, local people taking action in their own neighbourhoods has proved vital. As Sue Pritchard mentioned, the strength of non-institutional and non-managerial responses has made the poorly implemented government interventions only more glaringly obvious, such as the [government’s food parcels](#) or [free school meal provision](#). Telling these stories which reflect the lived experiences of people will help us better understand how to respond in the future.

“Community has the capacity to just sort things out when it has the space to do so.”

Sue Pritchard

Whilst the nature of the needs and responses vary from rural or urban areas, the consensus from our speakers was that the energy behind these actions is not lifting as lockdown does. Rather, [there is commitment to keep up the momentum](#) for these “pacier, creative, imaginative, responsive and tailored” ways of working, as Sue Pritchard aptly described them. For example, a more nuanced understanding of a neighbour’s needs lends itself to longer-term support with shopping as it’s not coming from a faceless service but from someone within the community.

“As we recover from COVID-19, a lot of our emphasis is on teaching people about food, nutrition and eating more healthily, without preaching”.

Sue Morris

2. Developing food systems at a more local scale is crucial to ensuring environmental and financial sustainability, thereby benefitting the local land, economy, workers and residents.

Julie Brown of Growing Communities used their [Food Zones ethos](#) as an example of a localised system. Produce for their veg boxes is sourced from as close to Hackney as possible as the priority, they then work outwards to apply a set of principles for buying choices from further afield. She emphasised that intentionally setting up the organisation to be locally rooted has enabled it to keep functioning during the pandemic – for example, customers and workers can walk or cycle to collect their weekly box, meaning people kept their jobs and neighbours could easily deliver to those who couldn't go out. This also maintained a steady supply route for the farmers during lockdown as the relationship with GC is direct. Rather than GC expanding beyond Hackney, the focus should now be on establishing similar models in other communities that fit the local context so they too can absorb shocks to the system in the future.

“We need to identify food models that work well and scale them up around the country and identify the economic levers that enable us to do that.”

Julie Brown

The idea of a 'local context' does not have a concrete definition and can also include linking together local growers, people and markets, even at a very small scale. For example, in Eastbourne allotment holders have been donating to food banks so more fresh produce goes to those in need, as Sue Morris described, as well as selling small amounts at the local market.

Dee Woods further linked this to the importance of local food businesses and organisations supplying culturally appropriate food for diverse communities, saying that the needs of multi-ethnic communities cannot always be met by local producers. While the local context is key, it is not always conducive to rely on shorter supply chains where culturally appropriate food cannot be grown. Therefore, we also need to ensure fairness and support for agro-ecological growers abroad, much of which is now being negotiated as a part of Brexit trade deals.

3. The ability to access healthy, sustainable and culturally appropriate food is deeply entwined with economic systems, such as fair wages and benefits. Therefore, our responses to shaping food systems must reflect this reality.

Throughout the discussion, speakers turned to the profound links between our food systems and economics, particularly how government chooses to support people and producers. Sue Pritchard stressed that we need to avoid a “race to the bottom for the cheapest food”

and instead think about re-valuing the work of farmers, particularly as it comes to the new Agriculture Bill and establishing trade agreements post-Brexit.

As Julie Brown said, “society doesn’t pay everyone enough to afford decent food.” How we re-imagine our food system must include living wages for all workers (not just within the food sector), and benefits that reflect the true cost of living so people can shop, eat and enjoy food with dignity.

What next?

The fourth thread running through our conversation was focused on **creativity and the need to re-imagine ways of interacting with each other and food**. The speakers felt “encouraged” and “inspired” by this, and as Sue Morris described, making sustainable and healthy food more accessible to wider number of people was becoming a key part of their town’s food and poverty strategies going forward. Striking this balance is not easy given the greater economic climate, but as Dee Woods put it so well:

“The next 6-12 months are crucial. We need to be building the new infrastructure for communities to produce and distribute food in a way that is just and includes marginalised groups. So, community hubs, markets and food box schemes that cater to everyone. Moving beyond charity, building on solidarity to invest in communities, mutual funds, community shares and other social solidarity finance models.”

The conversation concluded by discussing what actions people listening in could take, and the advice was to support local food businesses, box schemes, growers and organisations in order to re-build thriving economies and communities. The renewed efforts to shop locally and cook more at home are positive steps, [as long as they continue](#).

However, we need to **move beyond an approach that sees individuals only as consumers and instead, as food citizens**. [As the Food Ethics Council describes it](#), this is about “people acting as interdependent participants in a food system, not just as producers or consumers in linear supply chains.” As Dee Woods mentions in her re-imagined visions for the future, it’s about shifting from transactional to relational ways of working. We all need to be active participants of the food system in order to build its resilience.

Other resources

Based on the panellists' discussion and an active chat by the webinar attendees, the following links may be of interest for further reading.

- [Our Future in the Land and Field Guide for the Future](#) (Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, 2019)
- [Better Food Traders](#): A network of ethical food retailers who supply food from organic small and medium scale farmers
- [Selling allotment produce: Is it legal? Is it right?](#) (Organiclea, 2007)
- [The Food Zones](#): Our vision of what a sustainable and resilient food and farming system might look like (Growing Communities)
- [Food Citizenship](#): How thinking of ourselves differently can change the future of our food system (Food Ethics Council)
- [Learning from lockdown](#): A survey of 388 professionals in food, farming and the countryside (Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, 2020)
- [Sustainable Food Places](#): UK network of food partnerships
- [Doughnut Economics](#), by Kate Raworth (2017)
- [Open Food Network](#): An open-source and co-operatively run online platform for local, sustainable, healthy food

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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About Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming

Sustain advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture and promote equity. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

sustainweb.org/

Local Trust

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR
General enquiries 020 3588 0565 Registered in England and Wales
Charity number 1147511 | Company number 07833396

