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Christopher Yap & Selina Treuherz

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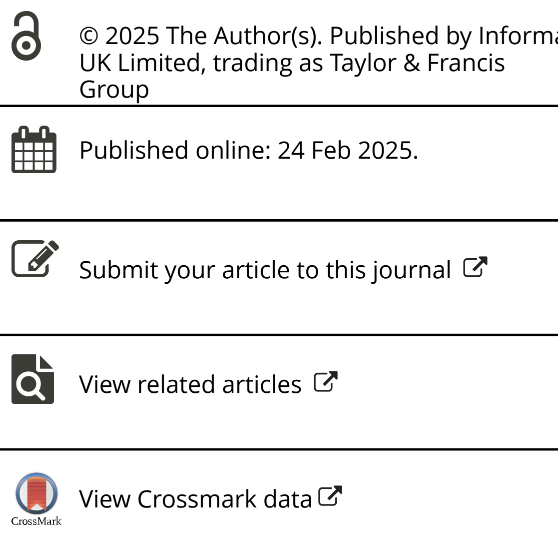

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Emerging processes of territorial food systems governance: lessons from a local food action plan in Sheffield, UK

Christopher Yap [a] and Selina Treuherz[b]

[a]Centre for Food Policy, City St George's, University of London, London, UK; [b]ShefFood, Food Works Ltd, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT
Innovations in food policymaking and governance are increasingly emerging from the local level. This article reflects on an action research project to develop a local food action plan in the city of Sheffield in South Yorkshire, UK, as both a networked food systems governance process and as a complementary form of local food policy. The article provides a structured reflection on the process of developing the action plan. The discussion finds that the local food action plan exemplifies a grounded, networked approach to local food governance that productively blurred the boundaries between state and non-state actors. However, the process only partially succeeded in delivering territorial food policy that is both socially and ecologically sensitive. This reflection recognises how the development of the plan potentially reproduced pre-existing dynamics of exclusion in the city. This experience suggests that local food action plans can be powerful and effective forms of territorial food systems governance under specific conditions that will vary significantly with context.

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Action research; food systems; governance; local food policy; territory; Sheffield

Introduction

In the UK, transformations towards fairer and more sustainable food systems are increasingly driven by organisations working at the local and regional levels, and particularly in urban settings (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015; Morley and Morgan 2021; Sonnino and Milbourne 2022). In this context, researchers and policymakers are turning to the potentials of local food policies to address a wide range of societal challenges, not least in relation to widespread household food insecurity, global supply chain disruptions, and the climate emergency (DuPuis, Ransom, and Worosz 2022; Ferguson 2017; Sonnino 2016).

The ways that food systems are shaped through the interactions between policies, politics, market forces, social relations, and environmental processes at multiple levels represents a significant governance challenge (Yap, 2023). And yet the urgency of the task to ensure that our food systems are more sustainable, equitable, and resilient, demands critical engagement with how they are currently governed, as well as an openness and a willingness to develop new approaches.

Food policy represents an important mechanism of food systems governance (Lang, Barling, and Caraher 2009). In the UK, local food policies take diverse forms that hold different potentials (Parsons,

CONTACT Christopher Yap Christopher.yap@city.ac.uk Centre for Food Policy, Myddelton Street Building, City St George's, University of London, Myddelton Street, EC1R 1UW London, UK

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Lang, and Barling 2021). Some are statutory documents with a strong legal basis, clear responsibilities for delivery, and dedicated budgets. Others are more general public statements or visions set out by local authorities with regards to local food systems. Some are written by one or two individuals; others involve multiple organisations. Local food policies can be long term or short term in scope; they can be radical or unambitious. In the UK, different forms of local food policy are variously referred to as policies, strategies, or plans, however there are no universal definitions for these terms, and their form, content, and remit shifts with context.

We begin from the position that each form of local food policy has a role to play in driving food systems change. The challenge, then, is to better understand the strengths and limitations of each type of document (and development process), the conditions under which they can be effective, and how these different forms of policy might coexist and interact with one another to effect change within local food systems. This article offers an example of how one form of local authority-led food policy can be complemented and enhanced by a non-local authority-led action plan. Going further, it examines the extent to which local food action plans may address some of the key challenges facing food systems governance scholarship and practice.

Our contribution comes from a structured critical reflection on an action research project to develop innovative local food policy in Sheffield, a city in South Yorkshire in the north of England. In June 2023, ShefFood, the local food partnership for Sheffield, in collaboration with the FixOurFood research programme (Doherty, Bryant, et al. 2022), published a Local Food Action Plan. The plan represents the outcome of a year-long process of participation and engagement that brought together almost 100 organisations. The project was conceived with the dual aim of developing a local food action plan and learning from the process about their potentials for local food systems governance.

Despite a significant rise in local food strategies in the UK over the past decade, there are few examples of published local food action plans. There is also high variability in the ways that existing action plans – that typically follow publication of a strategy – have been developed, what they contain, and how they relate to other forms of local food policy. The case of Sheffield, then, provides a novel approach to the development of local food action plans that emerged in a particular social and institutional context.

This article aims to make two contributions, the first is a detailed account of a "bottom-up" approach to local food policymaking that responds to the need to better understand, "the diverse ways that governance actors develop and mobilise power to impact food systems through strategies such as capacity-building, horizontal organisation, advocacy, financial resourcing and regulation" (Yap, 2023, 75). The second is to mobilise the idea of territorial food systems in order understand the potentials and limitations of local food action plans as processes of local food systems governance and to advance debates on the role of "local" and "place" in food policy debates. Specifically, we draw on two live areas of debate within food systems governance literature to structure our reflection on the development of the plan as a process of networked governance and as an expression of place.

Action research approach

Our approach was informed by the action research tradition that seeks to develop knowledge that is specifically oriented towards social transformation (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). Action research is characterised by iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection, which supports the creation of a more dynamic relationship between theory and practice, and which can generate the conditions and social constructions for action that enable one research experience to reach out beyond the first case (Gustavsen, Hansson, and Qvale 2008).

Critical reflection is a vital component of action research (Stynes, Murphy, and McNamara 2018): as a site of learning and insight (Scott and Weeks 2002); as a way to make visible issues of power in knowledge processes (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008); and as a way of enhancing transparency that is essential for academic rigour. Accordingly, we critically reflect on the planning and delivery phases of

the action research collaboration. We structured our reflection through a series of conversations and fieldnotes maintained throughout the course of the development of the plan, as well as field notes and workshop notes recorded by volunteers and ShefFood staff across the working group meetings, detailed below.

The action research collaboration between FixOurFood and ShefFood, the local food partnership for Sheffield, began in October 2022.[1] FixOurFood is an interdisciplinary research programme focused on food systems transformation in the Yorkshire and Humber region, UK. The first author is part of FixOurFood. The second author was employed from 2022 to 2024 as the partnership coordinator for ShefFood.

The authors developed a detailed project outline and terms of reference to guide the collaboration, which was agreed with the ShefFood Steering Group – a cross-sector, voluntary committee that advises ShefFood. The document set out the aims and scope of the collaboration, agreed timeframes, budget, and workplan. This document was essential to reconcile the dual aims of developing a local food action plan and drawing lessons from the experience that are relevant for other contexts.

Our approach combined structured and spontaneous moments for reflection throughout the process. These moments enabled the authors to be reflexive and improve the process iteratively as it unfolded. They also offered opportunities for co-operative inquiry between the authors working in different sectors and with different life experiences. These moments occurred at two levels. At the first level, the authors met following each working group meeting. These conversations were structured around four questions: what is working well; what is not working so well; what have we learned; and what should we change? At the second level, the authors held more infrequent discussions about the "bigger picture" that was emerging through the process, through which the themes in this article emerged. Written notes from both levels of reflection informed the development this article. Specifically, the authors reviewed together all the written reflections collected throughout the process over a period of three days. Key themes and learnings included in this article were identified inductively in these notes. The process was unsystematic but represented a further opportunity for cooperative inquiry. A draft of our reflection and analysis was shared and discussed with academic staff within FixOurFood, members of the Sustainable Food Places network, and a member of the ShefFood Steering Committee.

We recognise that our role as lead co-authors of the local food action plan will undoubtedly shape our reflections here. We are personally and professionally connected with many of the organisations involved in the plan's development and we are advocates for the plan. Our aim, then, is not to position ourselves as unbiased observers, but rather to be honest, open, and critical about how we perceive its impacts and limitations. Our proximity to the process is also a strength; this article draws on a unique knowledge of the development of the plan including our experiences of all meetings and workshop discussions, as well as an in-depth understanding of how the published plan was developed and written.

In the following section we outline some key challenges and knowledge gaps identified in the wider literature: the need to better understand networked food systems governance and to develop more place-based approaches to food policy and food systems change. We draw on these themes to structure our reflection on the development of the local food action plan for Sheffield. In the conclusion, we return to the potentials and limitations of local food action plans as emerging processes of local food systems governance.

Food systems governance, local food policy, and the role of local food partnerships

In the context of food systems, the term "governance" is used variously to describe mechanisms of state intervention in food systems (Wang et al. 2022), coordination across governmental departments and agencies (Parsons and Barling 2022), and the networked interactions between

governmental and non-governmental institutions (Hammelman et al. 2020; Rosenthal and Newman 2019; SAPEA 2021). Scholarship in this latter area has emphasised the inherently relational nature of food policy and food systems governance; characterised by inequalities between diverse food systems actors – related to capacity, authority, resourcing, etc. – operating within and between multiple administrative levels and spatial scales (Eakin, Rueda, and Mahanti 2017; Sonnino, Marsden, and Moragues-Faus 2016; Yap, 2023). Relational readings of food systems governance emphasise the interactions and dynamics between different organisations across the public, private, and civil society sectors; how these interactions shape food systems outcomes; and the strategies that might be effective in shifting these relations.

The term "networked" in this context, refers to the ways that decision-making power is produced, negotiated, and contested across a heterogeneous actor landscape rather than a through a formal, static, or centrally coordinated system. The emergence of networked readings of food systems governance has corresponded with an increased focus on the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). Scholarship from North America, for example, has highlighted the role of CSOs in generating collaborative, inclusive, and participatory food systems governance structures (Andrée, Clark, and Levkoe 2019; Levkoe et al. 2023). Experiences from Columbus, Ohio, suggest that networked, collaborative forms of local food systems governance – specifically, local food action plans – can be "the precursor to longer term institutional arrangements or regimes" (Clark 2019, 166) between governmental and non-governmental actors.

Recognition of the role of networked governance in food systems change is reflected by international examples of more deliberately cross-sector, inclusive forms of local food policymaking, such as Food Policy Councils and multistakeholder alliances (Clayton et al. 2015; Gupta et al. 2018). In the UK, this trend has corresponded with the rise of the Sustainable Food Places (SFP) network of local food partnerships, led by three non-governmental organisations: Sustain, the Soil Association, and Food Matters.

SFP provides resourcing, leadership, and networking capacity for local food partnerships. It also coordinates an awards framework that benchmarks progress towards sustainable food systems. At the time of writing there are over 100 local food partnerships in the UK affiliated with SFP. While the growing role of local food partnerships *within* networked governance processes has been well-documented (Moragues-Faus 2020), the potentials of local food partnerships *to shift* these networked relations remains under-examined.

Local food partnerships have been recognised as consequential actors within food systems governance networks (Verfuerth et al. 2023). While their vital role in coordinating responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 brought them to national attention (Jones, Hills, and Beardmore 2022), local food partnerships deliver multiple benefits to local food systems (Jackson et al. 2024; Jones and Hills 2021). However, there is a lack of empirical and case-based research into how power is negotiated, contested, and leveraged by these CSOs in practice (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2019).

The rise of more consciously networked approaches to food systems governance *could* herald the democratisation and diversification of food systems decision-making. However, governance networks can also "degenerate into conventional governance spaces, characterised by elites excluding needs and interpretations of those not readily accessible to these spaces" (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015, 1569). In other words, networked approaches to food systems governance are not inherently fairer, more inclusive, or more democratic than conventional forms of state-centric decision-making, and can even reinforce broader social dynamics of exclusion, marginalisation, and oppression. Recent scholarship in this area has emphasised that research concerning "inclusion" in food systems governance must first interrogate "Who is doing the including? What are people being included into?" (Guinto et al. 2024, 101). Greater understanding is required, then, of the conditions under which governance networks could produce fairer and more inclusive food systems outcomes, as well as a critical engagement with the power dynamics embedded within them.

In the UK, local food partnerships are key drivers of local food policy, however for historical reasons the conception of *local* is typically urban-centric. This aligns with international scholarship that has focused on the significance of *urban food systems* and *city-regions* for food systems transformation (Blay-Palmer et al. 2018; Kasper et al. 2017). However, it falls short of the more socially and ecologically sensitive conceptions of *place* and *territory* that exist beyond public policy jurisdictions or bounded spatial categories (Anderson et al. 2019; Forster and Mattheisen 2016; Sonnino, Marsden, and Moragues-Faus 2016).

Over the past fifteen years, the related concepts of territory and territoriality (referring to spatial practice) have been revaluated within the field of human geography. Understood historically as spatial expressions of power and control by nation states (Elden 2013), territories are increasingly understood as political constructs emerging from social interactions and processes (Raffestin 2012). This social basis implies that they can be understood as spatial expressions of broader dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. As Storey (2020, 19) describes: "Issues of identity frequently have a spatial expression as social fractures are given material form through spatial divisions".

But in the context of food systems, the idea of territory has also been used as a more positive expression of agency and inclusion, for example by elements of the global food sovereignty movement who assert notions of territory that are independent of nation states (Trauger 2014). Such counter-hegemonic formulations of territory may be useful for advancing discourse on the social production of place-based and local food systems. However, they remain largely abstracted from the ecological and topographical conditions in and through which the social production of territory occurs.

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to unpack the relationship between *local, place* and *territory* as spatial imaginaries for structuring food systems governance – this represents a significant area for further research. But we infer a common engagement with unbounded socially and ecologically sensitive spatial areas which do not correspond necessarily with administrative boundaries or nested levels of public policy. Each has been mobilised as a vital challenge and practical alternative to dominant food systems (Galli et al. 2020; Sonnino and Milbourne 2022); characterised by organisational experimentation, horizontal networks, and new structures of decision-making. However, the precise role of *place* and *territory* in food governance processes is often overlooked. Equally, local food policy too often is understood *in place* rather than *through place*; as policy at a particular scale rather than policy that is a product of specific geographical, institutional, and socio-economic circumstances. Finally, in the context of food systems, the potentials of territoriality as a lens for understanding how civic action can produce and expand framings of "local" and "place", has not been sufficiently examined.

In summary, scholarship that engages simultaneously with the spatial and relational dimensions of food systems governance – with institutional and geographical context, with locality and territory – pushes us to recognise the potentials of local food policy as both a consequential mechanism of change and an opportunity to challenge unequal relations within and between socio-spatial scales. However, the "how" of such approaches is often ill-defined. While it is certain that one approach will not work in every context, practical, detailed, and critical accounts of innovative examples of local food systems governance are required to advance the discourse.

Context: Sheffield's food policy landscape

In 2021, Sheffield had a population of 556,500 people. The city is governed by a single local authority, Sheffield City Council. Sheffield is part of the wider metropolitan region of South Yorkshire, which has a population of 1,396,000 people and which is governed by the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA). Sheffield is characterised by spatial inequalities: areas in the south and west of the city are amongst the most affluent in the country, while others in the north and east are amongst the most deprived. These economic inequalities correspond with significant

inequalities in terms of health, education, and employment outcomes. Recent research has also found geographic inequalities in access to food services such as food banks (Leather and Treuherz 2022) and outdoor green spaces (Mears et al. 2019). In 2021, 22% of adults in Sheffield reported experiencing food insecurity defined as hunger, struggling to access food, or worry about household food insecurity (Blake, Whitworth, and Moretti 2021).

Sheffield's first local food plan was published in 2011. This was superseded by the 2014–2017 Sheffield Food Strategy, which in turn was replaced by the Sheffield City Council Food and Wellbeing Strategy 2018–2022. The latest food strategy, *Fairer, Healthier, Greener* (Sheffield City Council 2022) was endorsed by the council in 2023. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the content of these policies, but they demonstrate a steady trajectory towards more systemic approaches to food policy. For example, the 2014 strategy focused on individual, health-related interventions such as healthy weight support whereas the most recent strategy included interventions that contribute to the sustainability of the food system and the local food economy.

ShefFood, the local food partnership for Sheffield, was founded in 2015. ShefFood is a cross-sector partnership involving local public agencies, businesses, individuals, academic and community organisations committed to working together to create a more sustainable food system for Sheffield. Over 80 partner organisations have signed the ShefFood Charter, committing to contribute towards a fairer and healthier food system. The partnership is hosted within the not-for-profit organisation, Food Works Ltd, and employs a part-time coordinator.

Reflections on the process of developing a local food action plan for Sheffield in practice

The process of developing the Local Food Action Plan began in January 2023. We developed a thematic working group structure that aimed to ensure representation from across Sheffield's food system. The identification of the groups was both strategic and pragmatic; they built on existing networks and ensured that the plan resonated with key themes of the SFP network.

Existing groups on "Food Ladders"[2] convened by Voluntary Action Sheffield with support from ShefFood, the "Food Health and Obesity Board" convened by Sheffield City Council, and the "Good Food Movement" working group, convened by ShefFood, were brought into the process and a terms of reference negotiated with each. Two further working groups were established, entitled "Good Food Economy and Procurement" and "Growing and Composting". We recognise that the development of the plan was only possible due to decades of network and relationship building, advocacy, and practical work of numerous organisations across the city. The commitment and the progress made by individuals and organisations over many years enabled working groups to form and function within a short timeframe.

Working group meetings were advertised online, in print and through community media channels. They were open for anyone to attend. Targeted invitations were sent directly to organisations identified by the ShefFood Coordinator. This involved proactively approaching underrepresented groups, organisations, and networks. Each group comprised 15–30 individuals. Most participants were either employed by or volunteered with organisations involved in Sheffield's food system. These organisations included Sheffield City Council, large and small food business, and civil society organisations (Table 1).

While the working groups did involve several representatives from local authorities, there were many organisations and local authority departments that did not take part. We choose not to name here specific departments in the council, but it was notable that some were forthcoming and willing to participate in working group meetings while attempted communications with others went unanswered. The scale of the process also meant that invitations were sent via email, in contrast with ShefFood's general approach to building face-to-face relationships across the city including with elected and non-elected officials within the council. We believe this made it more likely that invitations were ignored or rejected by contacted organisations and groups. This

Table 1. Sample of working group membership.

Working group	Example participating organisations
Food Ladders	Community-led food projects, Sheffield City Council, Voluntary Action Sheffield, Citizens Advice, The University of Sheffield
Food Health and Obesity Board	Sheffield City Council-led programme leads (e.g. on healthy weight, breastfeeding, Holiday Activities and Food Programme), NHS representatives, universities and civil society organisations.
Good Food Economy and Procurement	Institutional caterers, Local and Mayoral Authority Business Support teams, local business leaders
Growing and Composting	Individual, community and commercial growers, Sheffield City Council parks and countryside team, University of Sheffield
Good Food Movement	Diverse food organisations including community-based organisations, Sheffield City Council, food businesses, and residents

means that the process could only ever result in a partial expression of the local institutional landscape.

Each working group was managed independently but had a comparable structure and process. The groups were facilitated by volunteers, except for the Food, Health, and Obesity Board and the Food Ladders working groups, which were convened as part of the work of the Public Health Team in Sheffield City Council and Voluntary Action Sheffield respectively. Each meeting had a facilitator and a notetaker, who were paid the living wage. The facilitators each had existing relationships amongst the working group participants and were able to speak with members individually to ensure that any access or other needs could be met and that they felt trust within the meeting. Food was provided and travel expenses were available to participants, but they were not compensated directly for their time. In the Food Ladders working group, childcare was offered with the aim of removing one barrier to participation for individual users of food provision services. However, the opportunity was not taken up as the individuals that took part in the meetings were overwhelmingly those employed or volunteering with food provision services rather than service users. This was an important limitation of the development process and vulnerable populations in particular were underrepresented in the working groups.[3]

The working groups met on two or three occasions between January and May 2023 for two-three hours. Each meeting was held in a different venue and location. This meant that no single organisation or site could be perceived as the host or owner of the process. It also allowed us to showcase a range of food-related businesses and services across the city; some meetings were held in social enterprises, others in churches, others in council-owned buildings. We also believe this approach contributed to making the process more inclusive, by moving around the city to areas, for example, with poor public transport links.

The working group meetings brought together a diversity of participants, from small community meal providers cooking for 15 each week, to Sheffield Teaching Hospitals who cater for 60,000 each week. The process represented a conscious effort to enhance participation in local food policy making and to accommodate the needs and perspectives of diverse groups that collectively represent Sheffield's food system. An important tension was attempting to ensure both representation of diverse organisations and diverse groups within the city. The meetings were participatory and discussion based; combining short presentations, group work, and discussions using post-its and flipchart paper to share and record information. The facilitators, notetakers, and the authors produced summaries of discussions that were sent to all attendees following each meeting.

At every stage we reflected on the limitations of the working groups to reflect the full social and spatial diversity of the city. In some cases, this was about the challenge of engaging particular communities within the city. Recent research, for example, has emphasised the importance of food as a mechanism of care for Sheffield's African Caribbean Community Association (SADACCA) (Ortiz et al. 2023), which did not participate in the working group meetings. Equally children and young people under the age of 18 were not well-represented in the process, although they were not excluded and

one contributing organisation, BiteBack 2030, specifically represents children and young people on food policy issues. Those with lived experience of food insecurity were under-represented within the development of the plan. Under-engagement with some groups was partly related to time and resource constraints, but more importantly reflected wider dynamics of marginalisation and exclusion in Sheffield, and local food policymaking elsewhere. The lack of social diversity was compounded by a lack of spatial diversity; contributors disproportionately came from the southern and western, more affluent, areas of the city.

The first meetings aimed to celebrate successes in Sheffield's food system. Participants were encouraged to reflect on what they had achieved in the past year, such as a change in policy or practice, the development of new projects or relationships, or new commitments made. Achievements were recorded on post-it notes that were grouped thematically and discussed together.

The second meetings focused on identifying actions to take forward. Facilitators asked: "What is one thing that your organisation is working towards in the next few years that will contribute to a more sustainable food system for Sheffield?" Responses were recorded on post-its and grouped according to themes that had been identified in the first meetings. Our threshold for an action was whether we were able to identify *who would do what, when and how.* At the end of each meeting these actions were recorded for inclusion in the plan.

Through the meetings, we identified numerous shared goals and actions that we made more possible and more likely to succeed simply through introducing one organisation to another and creating the time and space for informal discussions to take place. Creating spaces for personal relationships to form between council and non-council participants was key, reducing the perception of the council as a paternalistic and distant organisation and helping to build foundations for future collaboration. For example, Actions 7 and 8, which focus on food growing education in schools brings together Eat Smart Sheffield, funded by Sheffield City Council, with informal education networks and growers in the city, who were not previously collaborating on this issue, despite common aims. In this sense, the published plan is a snapshot in time of existing and emerging networks and relationships across the city. This is a key strength and a limitation as the published plan can only give a partial and momentary account of the rapidly evolving organisational landscape.

The working group sessions were structured loosely, and facilitators were conscious to give time and space for variation and for discussion of issues that participants felt were important. These tangential discussions formed key inputs to the published local food action plan. For example, a section of the plan, "Our vision for Sheffield's food system", emerged from these tangential, unplanned discussions. This represented a challenge of facilitation, and it is important to recognise that the published plan captures what could be covered in wide-ranging discussions between diverse groups.

Four of the five working groups held an additional meeting, which focused on identifying potential synergies and collaborations around the proposed actions, as well as longer term visioning for the city's food system. At the end of the working group meetings, all the notes, post-its and minutes were compiled by the authors. Synergies and cross cutting themes were identified and mapped by the authors with the help of workshop notetakers. These initial reflections were sent out to all working group members for further discussion and input. In total, we identified almost 100 specific actions that were deliverable by 2030.

Beyond the authors, a small number of organisations and individuals participated in two or more working groups. This helped to link discussions across groups and identify common themes and areas for collaboration. This meant they were able to identify shared challenges and potential synergies between actions across the groups.

Foremost the meetings represented a process of relationship-building and engagement between civil society, local businesses, and local government actors. This reflects broader changes in the relationship between the council and CSOs in Sheffield that began during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw greater collaboration between sectors on issues such as the Sheffield Race Equality Commission (2022). Through the working group meetings, we aimed to extend this collaborative approach into the food systems domain.

The plan was drafted directly from the actions identified in the working group meetings. Each action was associated with one or more organisation and working group that would be involved in its delivery. After the removal of duplicates and grouping of closely related actions, seventy-three specific actions were included in the plan. The actions were further grouped in terms of their aims. For example, Table 2 highlights actions 60-62, focused on the potential of existing properties and infrastructure for social kitchens, which contribute towards a common aim and will be delivered by the same partners and working groups. This approach – building a strategy "upwards" from the actions that can be delivered – contrasts with many local food strategies in the UK, which focus on mapping current and planned activities against a locally developed vision for food system change.

While the breadth of actions is an important strength of the plan, there is significant heterogeneity between the actions in terms of scope, ambition, risk, and resource requirements. For example, action 32 reiterates the council's existing statutory commitment to Net Zero, whereas action 28, on diversifying local food procurement across anchor institutions, has the potential to impact the production and distribution of 150,000 meals per week. This reflects the "bottom-up" approach to writing the plan in which we prioritised fidelity to the working group meetings over coherence or alignment of ambition.

The aims-actions were further grouped into five strategies. These strategies were useful for manageably communicating the plan and for emphasising commonalities between clusters of actions. It was also a useful way of demonstrating how the actions cut across multiple thematic working groups to ensure that they did not become "silos". The five cross-cutting strategies are:

- Strengthen food networks by developing skills and learning together
- Build collective capacity to share and use data on Sheffield's food system
- Participate in making and delivering ambitious local food policy
- Build an inclusive food movement
- Leverage spaces for food initiatives

The process of transforming the summaries of the working group meetings into a single publishable document was doubtless partial and imperfect. However, an important mechanism of accountability for the lead authors was the process of obtaining consent from every named organisation with regards to every action that named them.

Nevertheless, power dynamics between participants and between the organisations that they represented doubtless permeated the entire process in ways that are not easy to account for. Despite efforts of the facilitators to ensure that all voices were heard, and all inputs recognised,

Table 2. Sample actions from the local food action plan for Sheffield.

Aim	#	Actions	Partners	Working groups
Assess the potential of existing properties and infrastructure for social kitchens.	60	Develop an up-to-date map of kitchens (and their specifications e.g. size, condition) where communities in the city could take ownership.	Food Cycle, Lunch Clubs, Open Kitchen, Sheffield City Council, Sheffield Community Land Trust, ShefFood, Voluntary Action Sheffield	Food Ladders Good Food Movement
	61	Overlay potential community kitchens map with the Sheffield Food Provision Map of existing social eating spaces to identify gaps in provision.		
	62	Raise awareness to find those that want access to kitchens and support them with accessing kitchen spaces.		

the meetings did not occur in a vacuum. Significant power imbalances exist between participating organisations that did not disappear in the working groups. Sometimes these imbalances took the form of epistemic authority; the voices of particularly experienced and knowledgeable contributors potentially, tacitly outweighed the contributions of others. The meetings occasionally brought together employers and employees, as well as large and small organisations in contractual relationships. Participants in the process were disproportionately those involved in the food system already, for example senior staff from food-related business and local authority programmes, meaning they had greater agency to shape food systems change than members of the public.

While it is clear that multi-dimensional inequalities exist within the city, multidimensional inequalities also exist across the public institutions, private businesses, and civil society organisations that are working to address them. This is not unique to Sheffield. But we see in the case of Sheffield is how creating the conditions for personal relationships to form across organisations, normalising cross-sector interaction, debate and discussion, and building capacity for collaborative working can be productive steps towards addressing these relational inequalities.

The plan was launched at a public event in June 2023, attended by over 150 members of the working groups, elected members of local government, academics, and members of the public. The published plan (Treuherz, Yap, and Rowson 2023) has since been widely distributed online, including through academic and CSO channels including the SFP Network. At the time of writing, many of the actions are already underway and all working groups continue to meet regularly. Attendance continues to be high and expanding. We can see the growth of Sheffield's food movement in the signatories to ShefFood's Good Food Charter, through which organisations join the partnership, and which grew from twelve signatories in 2022 to over 80 today.

The published plan has an imprecise relationship with the council-led food strategy, *Fairer, Healthier, Greener*. We believe this has been a strength. The plan makes explicit reference to the aim of embedding and building on the vision set out in the local food strategy across the city. And many of the same individuals were involved in the development of both documents. Many of the actions will make a direct contribution to the vision set out in the council's strategy including developing food strategies within anchor institutions (Action 33), increasing the number of fruit trees in Sheffield (Action 72), and developing assets to source food sustainably for community-based organisations (Action 29).

However, in contrast to *Fairer, Healthier, Greener*, the local food action plan has no statutory basis; it is legitimated only through the public commitment of organisations that contributed to its development. That the plan did not need to be officially endorsed contributed to a sense of possibility and ambition that often cannot be achieved in the context of formal policy documents. For example, in *Fairer, Healthier, Greener* the council committed to, "Share learning and good practice amongst partners such as the local NHS and our Universities, many of whom are already taking action to improve the food they serve" (Sheffield City Council 2022, 17). The plan extended and amplified this commitment by drawing commitments from a wider range of institutions, including commercial caterers and colleges. Additionally, because the plan did not require formal endorsement, more ambitious and less orthodox language could be used. For example, actions 46 and 47 focus on drawing on "lived experience" and "grassroots organising" to enhance local food policy.

Additionally, the lack of statutory basis means that there is no effective monitoring or recourse if the plan is not enacted. This limitation was recognised early and discussed throughout the process. Ultimately it was decided that a monitoring framework would require substantial further resourcing and, more significantly, could potentially limit the participation of some large organisations that may be less willing to publicly commit to actions.

There is also evidence that the process of developing a plan has had an impact on some of the participating organisations. Sheffield College, for example, removed all sugary drinks from their menus following their participation in the Good Food Economy and Procurement Working Group alongside procurement managers, caterers, and public health teams that had not previously met. This speaks to the idea of networked governance in so far as the published plan draws together

many decisions and commitments that were made independently, but which broadly contribute towards common food systems goals.

Our experience demonstrates the challenge of building genuinely inclusive approaches to local food systems governance that both represents and benefits all communities in the city. Following the publication of the plan, ShefFood and FixOurFood have continued to collaborate to conduct research on the "how" of inclusive food policy and build relationships with organisations, communities, and individuals that were underrepresented in the action plan.

Discussion: the potentials of local food action plans as networked and territorial food systems governance

Recognising, then, some of the strengths and limitations of the local food action plan in Sheffield, as well as the opportunities and challenges that emerged through its development, what does this example suggest regarding the potentials of local food action plans as emerging spaces of food systems governance?

Firstly, in order to consider this an act of governance we must take a necessarily broad view of what constitutes food systems governance. We might, for example, think about governance as a process of decision-making with regards to how food systems work and what they do (Yap, 2023). This does resonate with scholarship on networked governance approaches. However, it also risks becoming so broad as to lose analytical potential.

This challenge notwithstanding, it may be more fruitful to think about the potentials of local food action plans only in relation to the wider set of documents and instruments that constitute the contemporary UK food policy landscape. When looked at alongside the council strategy, as described above, the strength of the local food action plan seems to be in its complementarity, its capacity to foster personal relationships, and the social infrastructures, in the form of working groups, generated through its development.

Through this reading, the local food action plan can be understood as an example of networked governance that is inherently place-based. The proximity of locations, workshops venues, participating organisations, and resulting actions makes it more likely for personal relationships and collaborations to emerge. At the same time, it makes it potentially less likely that such an approach could be replicated at a significantly bigger spatial scale, and certainly not at the national level.

We suggest that this is an important limitation of local plans. But it is not critical. Despite rising political support for dedicated food policy in the UK, exemplified by the publication of the Government Food Strategy in 2022, national food policy lacks coherence and ambition (Doherty, Jackson, et al. 2022). It is important not to overstate the potential of local food policy to transform food systems; ambition at the local level need to be matched at a national level. However local food policy is delivering significant impacts, and it is important to make visible and learn from innovation and leadership from the local level. Local food action plans can have a catalytic effect that focuses and enhances latent desire for food systems change, sustaining this momentum will require broader political and financial commitments to be made.

This issue of scale also speaks to a further set of challenges and opportunities with regards to place-based governance; the selective readings of locality that can emerge through a place-based process. The published plan partially speaks to the ideas of local and place-based food systems in ways that transcend territorial, institutional and administrative boundaries; the local food systems discourse in Sheffield is inherently linked to particularities of location and topography, of patterns of urbanisation, and processes of deindustrialisation in ways that are difficult to fully account for. And yet, in common with much of the literature on local food policy, the emphasis is on the urban-centric social and political construction of place over the ecological. However, the plan can also be read as a projection and an expression of food territory – of power and collective agency to shape food systems within an unbounded spatial area – by and for Sheffield's food networks.

The distinctions between territory and territoriality are useful for understanding the place-based nature of local food action plans, as both a product of place and a spatial expression of collective agency in place.

Market gardens and smallholder farms exist within a few miles of the city centre and the city is located next to substantial areas of Grade 3 (good to moderate) agricultural land to the north and east. However the working group participants were overwhelmingly urban, and many of the actions included in the published plan reflected "urban-centric" food systems concerns such as public health, food poverty, inequality, and food procurement, with very limited engagement with issues such as environmental land management, resource stewardship, or approaches to food production.

Working groups did include individuals and organisations that operate beyond the city's boundaries, such as local farmers and national organisations that operate in Sheffield. However, this falls significantly short of a territorial approach to food policy that we define as one that is both socially and ecologically responsive. Territorial food policy, in this sense, would be sensitive on one hand to river catchments, topographies, and soil structures and on the other to institutional, economic, and social context across rural and urban areas. This resonates with scholarship that has promoted a political ecology lens as a way of making visible and engaging critically with the intersections of social and environmental systems (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017). By this definition, the local food action plan represents only a partial approach to territorial food policy, which potentially reproduces urban bias in food policy and may even contribute to the alienation of rural and urban areas.

While we reflect that the development of the local food action plan succeeded as a place-based, networked, and complementary form of local food systems governance, it did not fully achieve a key aim to diversify and pluralise Sheffield's food movement. This suggests that, if the process were to be translated to another context, issues of inclusion and participation need to be foregrounded in the project design stage, and where possible, the entire approach co-designed with under-represented communities.

A final reflection concerns the role of universities and research funding in supporting food systems change in practice. In some respects, research funding was vital to the delivery of the action plan, it provided the resources necessary to pay organisers and facilitators in the process as well as delivery costs such as venue hire and travel expenses for participants. However, the university acted more as an enabler than a leader of the process. The plan was possible only because of vibrant and long-standing networks involving public, private, and civil society actors, as well as a pre-existing willingness to enhance the local food system. This suggests that universities can play a key role in directly supporting food systems change in contexts where progressive networks have already emerged, but may struggle to do so if these networks have not been established.

Conclusions

Our aim has been to critically reflect on what the Sheffield example reveals about the potentials of emerging spaces of local food governance. This reflection has found that local food action plans represent an innovation in the local food systems governance landscape that have the potential to be complementary to and enhance the impact of other forms of local food policy. They offer an opportunity to build multistakeholder food policy that has the potential to be more inclusive, and more ambitious than policy developed by local authorities. However, we have identified several limitations in the Sheffield process that represent significant challenges for the development of local food action plans and other local food systems governance innovations elsewhere.

The first is with regards to developing the process and the stakeholder groups in ways that reflect socially and ecologically sensitive forms of place. This is a practical challenge, related to participation and project design. But it is also a conceptual challenge that demands continuous collective engagement with conceptions of place and territory that can complement the development of an action

agenda. The second is with regards to diversity and inclusion; ensuring an inclusive process demands a deep and sustained engagement with the dynamics of marginalisation and vulnerability in place, as well as a proactive approach to engaging underrepresented communities.

We are too close to the process and to the publication of the local food action plan to be able to determine its impact on Sheffield's food system (the plan contains actions that will take place from 2023 until 2030). Its legacy is uncertain. Nevertheless, numerous contributors to the development of the plan have affirmed the impact of the process on the food systems governance landscape in Sheffield, not least through building collective capacity to work with local authorities. As described in this article, we have identified numerous initiatives and collaborations that emerged from or were galvanised by the working groups' process. However, there is an inherent limit to the impacts of these initiatives if they are not matched by similar ambitions, commitments, and resourcing at the regional and national levels.

Further work is required also to understand the conditions that enabled the local food action plan to be developed and the conditions under which it can be enacted effectively. Conditions that have shaped the plan include previous institutional and organisational arrangements, patterns of urban development and management, and wider trajectories of deindustrialisation, gentrification, mutual aid and self-organisation in the city. We recognise that these conditions and many others shaped plan in ways that we cannot fully account for. Further work is also required to understand how the institutional organisational and personal networks developed or enhanced through this process shift and change through time and with what consequences for local food systems governance in Sheffield.

Finally, further research is required to understand how this process can be effectively translated to other contexts and how translocal networks of local food partnerships might network, multiply, and integrate local food action plans as consequential socially and ecologically sensitive approaches to local food systems governance in a way that contributes to the broader national, and even international food systems governance landscape. These challenges notwithstanding, this process demonstrates the opportunities and limitations of local food action plans as an emerging form of local food governance that shapes and is shaped by local food territories.

Notes

1. The project was granted ethical approval by the Health Services Research & Management Proportionate Review Committee at City, University of London (Reference ETH2223-1009).
2. The term "food ladders" was coined by Megan Blake (2019a, 2019b) to refer to community scale interventions aimed at building local level resilience in the face of food insecurity. The food ladders working group focuses on food provision and wraparound support for vulnerable groups.
3. Based on this experience, issues of equity, representation, and inclusion in food policy have been the focus of subsequent collaboration between ShefFood and FixOurFood, to be outlined in further outputs.

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ORCID

Christopher Yap http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8629-2360

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