



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

Food after COVID-19: Building a Fairer, Sustainable Food Economy in the Liverpool City Region

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Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. The COVID-19 crisis has amplified many of the existing issues in the food economy, particularly around access to food. Individuals' and households' access to food has been diminished through issues such as loss of income and self-isolation. Food supply stands on a permanent knife-edge, reliant on just-in-time supply chains.
2. The crisis has shown that often the best responses have come at a community level. Whilst government has placed multinational corporations at the forefront of its COVID-19 response, it has often been local community organisations and businesses that have been on the front line, providing some of the most innovative and effective responses to the impacts of the pandemic. There is much to be learned from their experiences and expertise.
3. Establishing a food recovery network for stakeholders in the sector can provide a means of co-ordinating a response across the Liverpool City Region (LCR). Similarly, creating a food policy council for the LCR can provide a way in which food strategy can be built democratically and with diverse participation, specifically from marginalised communities that are affected the most by inequitable food access.
4. In the long term, a rights-based approach to food should be established within the LCR. A right-to-food approach rejects charity as the solution to issues around food poverty, and instead looks towards policies that ensure universal access to sufficient, adequate and culturally appropriate food produced and consumed sustainably, while preserving access to food for future generations.
5. Reshaping and re-democratising the LCR's food economy can form an important part of a fairer and environmentally sustainable recovery from the present crisis.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the long-standing importance of the food economy running smoothly. However, the crisis has also magnified many of the issues with it that existed prior to the pandemic. Individuals' and households' access to food has been diminished through issues such as loss of income and self-isolation. Food supply stands on a permanent knife-edge, reliant on just-in-time supply chains. The way in which we consume food is focused around the interests of multinational suppliers, [rather than livelihoods for producers and workers](#). These are issues that the current, market-focused food economy has been unable to address before the COVID-19 pandemic and should not form

a part of how we “build back better” from the crisis.

Whilst in recent years an underlying confidence in market-driven solutions has been the focus of successive governments, solutions can instead be sought through progressive regional food policy that follows a rights-based approach to food. A return to business as usual means a return to the conditions that have created the possibility of [7.7 million adults](#) going hungry or relying on food banks due to a lack of money.

Instead, through an engagement with many of the resources already present within the Liverpool City Region (LCR), a democratic, people-centred, environmentally-just food economy can be

established. A food economy that provides region-wide access to healthy, affordable, sustainable and culturally appropriate diets should form a key part of the LCR Economic Recovery Panel's plans for emerging from the crisis with, in the words of the Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram, "a thriving economy that is fairer, greener and more inclusive than what went before" (LCRCA 2020).

2. Recognising the diversity of the food economy

Currently, eight supermarkets account for nearly [92% of grocery sales](#) in Great Britain. Yet during the COVID-19 crisis, we have witnessed both the resilience and the innovation that other businesses and organisations have had in providing food for their communities. This has taken a variety of forms: from community-based mutual-aid groups, to social enterprises, to local independent businesses. These organisations are both geographically and socially connected to the areas that they operate in and have the knowledge and ability to meet the unique needs of their communities during crises.

The threat facing the LCR's businesses as a result of the pandemic and subsequent fall in trading is well-highlighted elsewhere. This, combined with the region's relatively low levels of [business density](#), means that there is a looming threat of mass unemployment. With the food economy comprising [4 million workers](#) across the UK (or 14% of the workforce), how it recovers from this crisis is paramount to the overall economic recovery. But we must look beyond employment levels when considering the food sector post-COVID-19. The food sector is a mass-employer, but many of these jobs are exploitative and pay below the living wage. A people-centred food recovery needs to consider how workers at various levels of the food sector, from

production to supply, are treated within their workplace.

Beyond for-profit businesses, the social and solidarity economy forms an important part of how people and communities have been responding to the crisis at a local level. LCR is blessed with some of the most innovative social and solidarity food organisations in the UK. During the crisis we have seen bakeries convert their businesses into production centres for [local food relief](#), community centres focusing their resources towards food hampers, hot food deliveries and wellbeing checks for [locals](#), and organisations forming a networked food hub to provide [online food relief](#) in their local area. Their expertise and local knowledge will be vital in building a fairer, more sustainable, more locally attuned food economy post-COVID.



Sign recently displayed by Squash, a pioneering, eco-friendly, community-led food space in Liverpool (Credit: Squash)

3. Building back better and the Liverpool City Region's food economy

The following measures provide a starting point for thinking through how to build a fairer and more sustainable food economy within the LCR.

Shifting our understanding around food access

The COVID-19 crisis has seen a huge expansion in food charities across the UK, with demand increasing by [100% in one third](#) of food aid organisations from March 2019 to March 2020. In the LCR, the Community Support Fund has proven invaluable in supporting those most in need during the crisis. Whilst these organisations and initiatives should be commended for the work they have done, food provision based around charity should not be central to plans to build back better. Food aid is a means of plastering over holes within the food system instead of addressing the root causes of their existence.

Furthermore, access to food should go further than assessment based on an individual's calorific intake and instead look through a paradigm based around health and wellbeing provision. Good food provision in the LCR means universalising access to healthy, nutritious, high quality, fresh and sustainable produce. The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) can play a key role in this, coordinating a response across the sector.

Food should be recognised for its role as a key tenet of the "Foundational Economy". Advocates of the foundational economy argue that regional investment should focus on the aspects of the economy that provide goods and services that are deemed to be necessities, such as healthcare, housing or food (Foundational Economy Collective 2018). Focusing on the sector rather than areas

of potentially higher growth might mean reframing how we understand economic progress, moving towards economic success based around people and planetary wellbeing rather than growth.

Instead of looking towards a food aid system based around charity, a long-term aim within the LCR should be to implement a right-to-food for its citizens. A right-to-food approach rejects charity as the solution to issues around food poverty, instead looking towards establishing policy that ensures universal access to sufficient, adequate and culturally acceptable food that is produced and consumed sustainably, preserving access to food for future generations (De Schutter 2014). This can be achieved in three ways:

- a) through income or self-employment
- b) through social transfers, or
- c) through citizens producing their own food.

All of these should be considered when developing a future food strategy for the LCR.

Creating an LCR Food Policy Council

Forming democratic, participatory food structures in the LCR can provide a means to network a food recovery across the region, exchange ideas and experiences, and build a more sustainable, people-centred food economy. A City Region food policy council provides an additional way in which those who are engaged within the food sector can contribute to the development of region-wide policy on food. Examples of such councils in the UK and elsewhere are shown in Figure 1.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2020a) has recently found that deliberative, democratic structures are

Figure 1. Food policy councils around the world

Bristol, UK: In 2010, Bristol City Council launched the report [Who Feeds Bristol?](#), exploring how the city could positively influence the food system and feed its citizens in a fairer and more sustainable way.

Bristol became the first UK city in 2011 to establish a food policy council. The policy council consists of a cross-sector food partnership that coordinates different stakeholders in the food sector to address food issues and to help bring about sustainable and just solutions.

The food policy council, as well the interconnected Bristol Food Network, have helped the city map and publicise local community food organisations, facilitated the development of community food shops and local cooperative food buying groups, and aided the establishment of a food procurement network focused on sustainable food.

Ghent, Belgium: In 2013, Ghent launched its food policy [Gent en Garde](#). The policy builds on five main objectives: (a) shorter, more visible food chains, (b) sustainable food production and consumption, (c) adding social value to food initiatives, (d) reducing food waste, and (e) transforming food waste into raw material. Ghent's food policy is also heavily integrated within its plans around climate change.

The city also developed a food policy council, comprised of members from agriculture, NGOs, academia, retail and catering to act as a regular sounding board for food policy.

Ghent has been a world leader in developing sustainable food strategy. This includes the development of schemes such as local, environmentally friendly school meals, a fair food festival, a system to distribute food surpluses to social organisations, and a specialised service that assists agricultural and horticultural companies to change their practices.

Toronto, Canada: As well as serving as a means to provide advice to the city on matters relating to [Toronto's Food Strategy](#), the Toronto Food Policy Council advocates for community food security strategies and acts as a network fostering dialogue between stakeholders. It also helps to connect grassroots initiatives with city policy makers.

Actions taken through the strategy include the [Community Food Works](#) and [Grab Some Food](#) programmes, which provide innovative solutions to issues such as unemployment, skills development and access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations.

well-suited at all levels of government when considering values-based dilemmas, complex problems that involve trade-offs, and long-term issues.

Similarly, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2020) recommends that broad public participation will be necessary post-COVID-19 to address existing inequalities in the food system. Establishing a food policy council in the LCR, that brings together stakeholders from the agricultural sector, charities, social enterprises,

catering, universities and suppliers alongside representatives from the LCR Economic Recovery Panel and citizens from the City Region, would prove beneficial in establishing and maintaining a functional food strategy for the combined authority moving forward. This allows for tangible solutions to be formulated across the various sectors in the food industry, and establishes more inclusive and locally attuned sustainability framings (e.g. Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015).

Creating a food policy council in LCR would also allow for the development of further collaboration at national (e.g. [Sustainable Food Places](#)) and international (e.g. [Milan Urban Food Policy Pact](#)) level between bodies, meaning that the LCR can benefit from wider knowledge exchange from around the world in terms of best practices.

Olivier de Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, argued in 2014 that the greatest deficit in the food economy is in its democracy. At the scale of the LCR, addressing this means allowing those that work in the food sector to help shape policy, as well as building strategic regional partnerships. Doing this, by establishing a food partnership or network, creates the structures where links can be established between producers and consumers that go beyond prices and markets and become more focused around the wellbeing of people and planet. If implemented correctly (such as within the structures of a food partnership), it can also widen participation for disadvantaged groups and communities in the region. A city-wide food partnership, Liverpool Food People, existed from 2014 until 2018, and made some valuable headway but was underfunded from the outset and relied heavily on the third sector without sufficient resources. Food networks and policy councils will be vital in coordinating a response to the crisis, but they must be appropriately resourced.

The importance of experimentation should not be discounted from the LCR recovery. Beyond formalised structures, we need to think of creative ways to engage with grassroots food initiatives, small food businesses and the array of predominantly invisible community initiatives that make up the food economy, to allow them to contribute to shaping the LCR's future food economy.

Supporting existing community food projects and helping to establish new ones

Groups such as community food projects, food co-ops and community supported agriculture (CSA) often work specifically to increase access to sustainable food in disadvantaged communities. Public bodies within LCR should work with these existing groups and share resources and expertise through establishing a food network. As part of this support, local community food organisations must be given the autonomy to help shape their communities and allowed the resources to do this. These projects provide space for diverse experimentation in possible food futures for the City Region (Wilson 2013), undertaking activities that a diverse range of stakeholders within the LCR should both foster and learn from.

Organisations that are based within the social and solidarity economy are going to be extremely vulnerable during any recession in the coming years. Many will not be supported by the [£750 million](#) in funding for charities set aside by the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, on 8th April 2020. In order to assist in the LCR's food recovery, they will need initial and ongoing support.

4. Food and sustainability

Food should be adopted as a cornerstone of the LCR sustainability plans. The food system contributes between [21 and 37%](#) of total global greenhouse gas emissions, meaning that in order to build back the economy through green development, food must be considered central to plans. Future food strategy should be embedded within the City Region's climate plans. The crisis provides a unique opportunity to reset and re-evaluate, and when considering climate change, action should not discount any possibility.

Committing to planning around sustainability and equity within the regional food economy provides a pathway to addressing many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). Whilst the foremost aim of food strategy is to address Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), a democratic, fair and sustainable regional food economy also works to tackle Goal 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption), Goal 13 (Climate Action), Goal 14 (Life Below Water) and Goal 15 (Life on Land). Progress on many of these goals has stalled during the crisis, and sustainable food planning should play an important part of future strategy in the region around the SDG's. Action taken now should reinforce and not distract from the urgency of implementing sustainability measures in the food sector (OECD 2020b).

5. Concluding thoughts

The LCR encompasses the city of Liverpool as well as peri-urban and rural communities, the latter whose relationship to food production and consumption is very different than those in the city. The development of a regional food recovery plan must include actors from all around the city region, but also prioritise those most marginalised by the current food system.

Through the development of proper democratic structures within the food sector, LCR can establish a food economy that begins to work for all citizens in the region. With developments around COVID-19 currently evolving rapidly, presented here is an introduction to how the LCR can begin to develop a fairer and more sustainable food strategy, rather than a list of prescriptive solutions.

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