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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN TRANSFORMING THE UK FOOD SYSTEM

OVERVIEW AND POLICY PAPER



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Social Enterprise Food Systems Projects (SEFS) 2022–2025

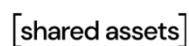


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with

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing summarises evidence from the Social Enterprise Food Systems (SEFS) project (2022–2025) on how social enterprises are contributing to healthier, fairer and more sustainable local food systems, and it identifies policy actions to strengthen and scale their impact.

The UK food system faces interconnected challenges: diet-related ill health, food insecurity, widening inequalities, and environmental pressures, intensified by the cost-of-living crisis. Existing policy approaches have tended to rely on top-down, technical or behavioural interventions, which often fail to engage communities that may benefit most from a transformed food system.

Evidence from the SEFS project shows that social enterprises offer a complementary and often more effective route to impact. Because they trade for social purpose and are embedded in local communities, social enterprises can deliver food-related interventions that are trusted, culturally sensitive, and integrated with wider support for health, wellbeing and social care.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Across six in-depth case studies in England, Wales and Scotland, the SEFS project found that social enterprises are engaging underserved populations around food, avoiding stigma or patronisation, particularly low-income households and minority ethnic communities. They do this by being embedded in local communities and integrating food with other policy priorities, including early years provision, health and social care, mental health, transport, and community development.

Social enterprises are also building partnerships across public, voluntary and private sectors to address food access, affordability and sustainability in place-based ways. By combining social innovation with trading income, they are enabling continuity of services beyond short-term grant cycles.

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE APPROACHES WERE CONSISTENTLY FOUND TO BE:

- Innovative and co-produced with communities
- Multifaceted, combining food with other determinants of wellbeing
- Empowering, rooted in local understandings of food and culture
- Collaborative, working through networks and partnerships
- Financially robust, using mixed income models

KEY CONSTRAINTS LIMITING IMPACT

Despite their effectiveness, social enterprises face challenges and structural barriers that limit their contributions to food system transformation. These include short-term and fragmented funding, misaligned with the long-term nature of community engagement, alongside centralised public sector decision making. While there is potential for social enterprise to contribute to public procurement, these systems have tended to favour large suppliers and undervalue social and environmental outcomes.

Awareness of the potential of social enterprise can be limited amongst policy makers and those making decisions about public procurement, and this is exacerbated by the challenges in evidencing impact.

There is growing demand for the services of social enterprises driven by poverty and cost-of-living pressures but this outstrips available resources. Social enterprises are able to find innovative approaches to meeting the needs of communities but there is limited support for social innovation, compared with technological or 'Big Science' innovation. Without policy action, there is a risk that proven, community-rooted solutions remain small-scale and fragile, rather than contributing to much needed system-wide change.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND PRIORITIES

Social enterprises are already delivering practical, scalable solutions to some of the UK's most pressing food system challenges. Policy that better enables, connects and invests in these approaches can accelerate progress towards healthier, more inclusive and environmentally sustainable food systems at local and national levels. The findings point to five policy priorities:

1. Recognise social enterprises as key food system actors, not peripheral providers.
2. Embed sustainable food provision across different areas of public provision and support, including by breaking down policy silos between health, education, social care and transport.
3. Support social innovation alongside technical and market-led innovation, particularly where food intersects with wellbeing and disadvantage.
4. Reform procurement and funding mechanisms to reward social and environmental value and encourage collaboration between key actors and community led partnerships.
5. Strengthen the financial sustainability and scaling capacity of social enterprises through appropriate business, advisory and investment support.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence from numerous studies of the harm caused by the false economy of Big Food.¹ The scale of change needed to transform UK food systems for health, social justice and environment requires fresh ideas, new organisational models and collaborative approaches that can meaningfully engage individuals and communities. This paper examines the distinctive contributions and wider potential of social enterprises – businesses with a core social and environmental purpose – and identifies a range of policy and practice recommendations for enhancing their unique contributions to a more healthy and sustainable food system.

Existing top-down approaches to the challenge of sustainable food provision and diet have failed to tackle the crisis of poor dietary health and unsustainable food production. Public health and behaviour change interventions are often perceived as preachy, patronising and stigmatising by vulnerable people on low incomes and minority ethnic groups. Social enterprises that are rooted in an understanding of their communities are found to be providing community growing spaces and distribution schemes, leisure and fitness centres, children’s nurseries and other community-based services.

This requires ‘social innovation’ to meaningfully engage communities and other key actors with new strategies, organisational designs and collaborations for meeting urgent and under-addressed social and environmental challenges. However, social innovation is often overshadowed by calls for ‘technical fixes’: “...we get very excited about big science and forget about ... social innovation.” Henry Dimbleby, Evidence to Environmental Audit Committee, 19th April 2023. Social enterprises offer a potential alternative – using business models for social impact while being deeply embedded in local communities. There are examples of tackling food issues found in a very diverse range of social enterprises many not known to be previously focusing on food but realise that tackling wellbeing and inequalities requires addressing food system change too. These social innovations can build on social enterprises’ understanding of community needs and make healthier or sustainable choices the easiest choice.

This work is a collaboration of Middlesex University, University of Surrey, Glasgow Caledonian University, Shared Assets and Social Enterprise UK. It is part of UKRI’s [Transforming UK Food Systems Programme](#) and builds on the work of the [Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity \(CUSP\)](#). Six partner social enterprises were involved in the design and delivery of the project: [Community Transport Glasgow](#) (tackling access to affordable food), [Cultivate Powys](#) (local growing and social prescribing), [London Early Years Foundation](#) (nursery chef initiative), [Selby Trust in London](#) (food and community

¹ E.g. Jackson, T. (2024) *The False Economy of Big Food and the case for a new food economy*. Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC): <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/the-false-economy-of-big-food>

hub), [Social adVentures in Salford](#) (therapeutic growing and local food hub) and [Windmill Hill City Farm Bristol](#) (growing space and community hub).

The project aimed to understand and support the contribution of social enterprises (SEs) in catalysing local food systems that are healthy, sustainable and inclusive by addressing the following research questions: How are SEs enabling community engagement around food and wellbeing? How can scientific analysis of diet and food life-cycle assessment help to assess and improve the impacts of SE services and innovations? How can different SE models and innovations be scaled up or replicated for wider beneficial impact across the UK?

In all six case study locations we carried out up to five interviews with SE leaders, key staff, and other stakeholders to understand the nature of their organisation, its mission and purpose, and their beneficiaries and partners. We also discussed their governance framework and processes of decision-making. The interviews also enabled us to learn about their food-related services and the impacts of those, as well as any barriers to and needs for support for transformational change. With the help of community researchers based in each SE, we also carried out focus groups with SE beneficiaries to learn about their food practices as well as the synergies and differences between beneficiaries' understandings of healthy and sustainable food and experiences of working with a social enterprise.

2. AREAS OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ACTIVITY

We identify the following key areas of social enterprise activity related to transforming food system.

- Educating about healthy diets e.g. within early years provision (LEYF), health / fitness / recreation services (Cultivate, SA, Selby, WH), growing/horticulture (Cultivate, WH, SA).
- Therapeutic services and social prescribing using gardening/growing, cookery classes etc (Cultivate, SA, WH).
- Community cafes and catering – bringing people together socially as well as generating income (Cultivate, LEYF, SA, Selby, WH).
- Addressing food poverty and basic needs – food banks/hubs and enabling access to affordable food (CTG, Cultivate, LEYF, SA, Selby, WH).
- Local and organic growing – increasing access to fresh food and supporting other local growers and ethical suppliers (particularly Cultivate and WH + LEYF, SA, Selby with some growing).
- Influencing policy and practice – by working with other organisations and food networks within the locality/region and beyond.

It is important to understand how populations conceptualise healthy and sustainable food, as reforms of the food system must resonate with local people. From our focus groups, we found out that both in the social enterprises and among local beneficiaries, healthy food was understood as food that is nutritious, while sustainable food was food with low-environmental impact. In all groups, cost, quality, and convenience determined choices for food provision and preparation. However, the social dimensions of food provision and consumption were also highlighted as key to social and individual wellbeing, as well as to connection and belonging. Hence reforms must ensure that the food system can deliver both nutritious and environmentally sound food, but also enhance human connections in the process.

3. SOCIAL ENTERPRISES ENGAGING PEOPLE AROUND HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD

Effective and socially innovative approaches are often combined with other forms of support provision for health/wellbeing/social care

Cultivate have an integrated approach to promoting healthy and sustainable food in Powys, Wales but barriers are considerable, including poverty combined with the cost-of-living crisis, people's mental health issues, and lack of knowledge, particularly among children and young people:

“There's a Newtown Food Surplus [...] the queues are really quite huge at times. That's the emergency food. So, we are supporting a lot of local people through that [...] we are getting people who are taking food away from that project that doesn't need heating because they are choosing to turn off their ovens.”

“...fresh food is three times more expensive. [...] people can't afford it and definitely, if you go to the top-end foods, delicatessen or something, it is pricey food, no question but it does make you live longer, it makes you happier and makes you healthier, but it is a barrier.”

“Knowledge and skills of food – some of the things you hear about what school kids say when you are pointing out a type of fruit and they don't know what it is. A lot of children are growing up, and they've never had a proper cooked meal cooked for them”.

Selby Centre found increasing demand for their Food Hub in London and were seeking to address the root causes of food poverty through other 'wraparound' support services. Food

Hub managers/volunteers have had to develop an understanding of cultural backgrounds and dietary preferences and have integrated this into the recipe cards designed by community members and provided with food parcels.

Healthy eating/sustainability was not found to be of interest for some intended beneficiaries, but Selby see potential to build on links between food and other services that are in demand, such as gyms and sports:

“Health and wellbeing forms a key part, especially with sports activities, and that’s why people are there for their health and fitness and wellbeing. So, it can easily be tied up or wrapped around that service along with the food you are receiving, helping nutrition.”

Windmill Hill City Farm have a mixed user base visiting their sites in Bristol where there are services provided, a chance to engage with nature and growing spaces, and a community café. Each year there are over 250 families using the nursery; 200 people using health and social care services and 2,500 school children visit. There is a focus on engaging with minority ethnic communities (including trafficked/slavery victims) using collaborations with BAME community organisations

“So, one of the reasons we do the cooking and the woodworking is there are different communities that you can really engage in those activities that don’t seem to be interested in our gardening and our animal care, for whatever reason, whether that’s cultural...”

London Early Year’s Foundation (LEYF) is a chain of social enterprise nurseries and has been exploring ways of engaging with parents to ensure more healthy and sustainable food consumption. LEYF’s carefully researched approach to good nutrition is centred on balanced diets, teaching/modelling healthy food behaviour to help children judge portion sizes, avoid added sugar, salt and saturated fats:

“We are influenced by Eat Better Start Better [...] we go through all about how to plan a menu, balancing the four food groups, balancing the right amount of energy for the right age.”

“Crucially, we think of the chef as that catalyst, the first driver, that can then encourage and share their practice and their learning from Chef Academy with nursery staff, with parents, with the children and ideally it cascades across the various groups.”

One creative approach offers food packages with ‘homework’ to disadvantaged families: “[We give them] recipes with the food in the bag and just say, ‘This isn’t a hand-out, but this is just for home learning with the children.’” They have a positive approach to cultural diversity, broadening food tastes/experiences by asking parents to bring traditional recipes to create a nursery recipe book.

Social adVentures is a social enterprise in Salford providing wellbeing services and health care. They have a mixed user base made up of retirees, families with young children, mental health support seekers, and disadvantaged communities. Food runs through most activities and is seen as a way of connecting people – i.e. a strong social dimension.

Food services include meals in nurseries (partnership with Appetito), a food club, café, vegan cookery classes, and community garden for mental health. In their early years setting, parents and children are engaged through training sessions, menus, feedback invites and regular events. Children are taught about healthy diets and contribute to meal preparation. The cost-of-living crisis is putting increasing pressure on the Food Club which has been gaining popularity with new sign-ups every week, including people suffering from drug addictions and young families.

4. WAYS OF LEARNING AND LISTENING

Effective engagement and influence requires multi-faceted and sensitive approaches that are possible in social enterprises due to their closeness to and understanding of the needs of the communities they serve and able to sustain long term relationships because they are not reliant on specific grants that suddenly end. The social enterprises show how they can build on prior experience and learning about the needs, situations and cultures of diverse community members.

They can avoid being overly didactic and proselytising, and instead, explore new pathways to engagement and influence by innovating, adapting and refining methods of engagement in light of experience. They were collaborating with knowledgeable community organisations and support networks. A key capability is combining and balancing ‘show’ and ‘tell’ approaches according to context, making it fun and interesting for all involved.

- **Windmill Hill** use and experiment with multiple approaches: customer surveys; social media; feedback/discussion within courses and other forums/events; annual ‘Big Listen’ week of sounding out local community, designed to be creative, enjoyable and interesting.
- **Social AdVentures** have been relying on less formal approaches and a user co-production group helps identify service/communication gaps; the user community is also included through a newsletter and ‘open door’ policy/Welcome Host. Some users still lacking confidence are encouraged to use feedback sheets etc.
- **Selby’s** smallness (23 staff) and inclusive culture enables flexible engagement with numerous stakeholders. A previous review of ways of working to improve strategic

governance and engagement practices resulted in a Community Engagement Framework and forums to better inform and involve partners.

- **LEYF** – a larger organisation (814 employees): Staff Council inputs to Executive; parents' feedback/suggestions is collected via an annual survey and informally to nursery teams throughout the year; staff opinions are collected via a bi-annual survey; project leads inform/update at Board meetings; nursery chefs regularly meet together and with Chef Trainer; similarly, nursery staff meet regularly to decide on programmes and feed back to chefs/managers.

5. PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Partnerships are crucial in all cases – with funders, suppliers, delivery partners, onsite tenants, other community organisations:

- **Cultivate** partner with Cwm Harry Land Trust and 4-5 local growers as well as the Open Newtown initiative. They are looking to further develop partnerships with local growers to supply public sector procurers
- **CTG** partner with Scottish Pantry Network and Glasgow Community Food Network. They were also designing transport/distribution for Glasgow Sustainable Food System. Initial funding enabled the development of relations/partnerships and CTG sought further resources to collaborate with other partners to continue services.
- **LEYF** partner with City Harvest to access food that might otherwise be wasted, are part of a network coordinated by Impact on Urban Health and hold information sharing meetings with organisations such as First Steps Nutrition Trust, and the Food Foundation.
- **Selby** has broad base of partnerships/networks with other community organisations, faith groups, business donors, food hubs and support from Haringey Council. This is building upon broad base of partnerships and redevelopment alongside new 'Urban Village' with help of £20m Levelling Up fund grant. Onsite tenants are crucial in realising a more integrated approach to linking healthy and sustainable food provision with other aspects of community wellbeing.
- **Windmill Hill** partners with public service funders of health/social care services, and charitable funds. Local organic growers supply the café and farm shop (e.g. Community Farm, Farm Red Meats, Sims Hill) and they work with other community organisations to access and support BAME groups. They are part of partnerships such as the Sustainable Food Places programme and the Bristol Food Network CIC – an accredited Social Enterprise Place

- **Social AdVentures** partner with FoodCycle, FareShare, Apetito, FoodCycle and the Manchester charity The Bread and Butter Thing. They are also part of the Salford Food Bank Club network.

6. CHALLENGES FOR SCALING UP IMPACT

The lessons from the six case study organisations were shared in workshops involving other SEs across the country. Social enterprises were found to face a number of common challenges related to the difficult contexts in which they work, their small size and limited access to resources.

Small-scale local growing can struggle with commercial viability at a small scale, particularly with the dominance of supermarkets, accessibility of and connectivity between local producers and potential customers etc. Hence social enterprises invest in combined efforts with other local producers (Cultivate, Windmill Hill) and development of a cohesive transport strategy (CTG). There are further challenges related to the affordability of local/organic food

Shortage of volunteers and donations to meet community needs – many volunteers joined during Covid, but numbers have since declined. Donations are decreasing as economic crises worsen and due to changes to supermarket policies on sell-by dates (CTG). At Selby, a next step is to develop a more strategic approach to building up their volunteer base.

Limited resources/funding to respond to the scale of need during the cost-of-living crisis. Social enterprise rely on their trading activity but need business models that allow them to generate a surplus to reinvest in other activities. Public sector contracts can be important but social enterprises often find community needs greater than the funding provided, and their funders have unrealistically high expectations.

Engaging and involving local communities – despite being embedded in their communities, social enterprises can still struggle to engage certain parts of their community within initiatives around healthy and sustainable food. This is particularly an issue for disadvantaged groups and those for whom healthier diets and environmental sustainability are less of a priority

Food banks are seen as a *necessary but insufficient* response to food poverty, e.g. Selby's 'wraparound' services provide more holistic support for health/wellbeing, education, training and digital skills. There are now moves towards changing Food banks to a Food Club or a low-cost supermarket to which people take out membership.

Support ecosystems that respond to local and regional differences are lacking. These need to combine advisory services, financial support and a conducive policy from central and local government.

Measuring contributions to social/environmental value to better demonstrate impacts. Social enterprises are looking for ways to tell their story and demonstrate their impact. This is needed to support learning within the organisation and to attract partners that support or fund their work.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The six social enterprise cases demonstrate a range of creative responses to the challenges of unhealthy diets, food poverty and environmental sustainability. Effective approaches are found to have the following elements:

- **Innovative and co-produced** – building upon the extensive knowledge, experience and creative ideas of staff and community members
- **Multifaceted** – combining advocacy of good nutrition and sustainability with other dimensions of wellbeing and related public/community services
- **Empowering** – challenging people’s relationship with food while also being understanding of varied circumstances, vulnerabilities and diverse food cultures
- **Collaborative** – working in partnership and sharing with other organisations and sources of support: social/community sector, public, private/philanthropic
- **Financially Robust** – through diverse income streams from customer sales, public procurement, grants etc that support their social and environmental aims

Good Practice Guide: Building on this research, the SEFs project has developed a [Good Practice Guide](#). This contains some questions to help social enterprises think through the tensions of starting a business that puts food system transformation alongside other objectives and being commercially viable. It explores ways to scale based on good practice that has emerged through the SEFS project, and signposts to other sources of inspiration. The aim is to support the sprouting shoots of a more equitable food system as it expands and flourishes.

This project therefore provides valuable lessons in **engaging** local communities in food systems transformation. These strategies can be applied by others seeking to improve food security and nutrition in their areas, fostering inclusive and equitable food systems.

By highlighting the importance of cross-sector **partnerships** between social enterprises, community groups, and policymakers, the project’s outcomes can guide future collaborations. Other organizations may use these insights to build partnerships, strengthen relationships, and collaborate on larger scale food system interventions.

Further Research and Innovation: The transdisciplinary approach to research in SEFS sets an example for future studies on food systems and social enterprises. Other researchers can build on these insights to explore new methods, interventions, and policies for transforming food systems to be more sustainable and health-focused.

Policy and Advocacy: The findings from the project can inform policy recommendations, particularly in the area of food system governance, sustainability, and health. The research can be used to advocate for more supportive policies and funding for social enterprises focused on food systems, leading to greater government support and integration of SEs into national and local food strategies. We can identify policies around the 5 key elements of effective social enterprise approaches:

- Innovation
 - Innovate UK grants to support both technological innovation and social innovation and include social enterprise/not for profit models
 - Food innovation happens outside the food sector – e.g. in education, health, social care, transport – Support social enterprises as bridges and connectors of silos
- Multifaceted
 - Food policy cuts across silos of national and local government departments – Ensure food issues are addressed in education, health, social care, and transport policy.
 - Social enterprise activity in food procurement and menu design can bring behaviour change in nurseries, schools, universities, hospitals etc but there needs to be greater attention to social value in assessing tender documents.
 - Tackling food poverty requires tackling poverty not lowering food quality. Social enterprises are well placed to address these challenges.
- Empowering
 - Encourage social enterprise mutual organisations owned by staff and beneficiaries through advisory services, tax breaks and access to finance
 - Social enterprises that are rooted in their communities can develop public health strategies based on local understandings, thus reducing the risk of being perceived as preachy and stigmatising.
 - Social enterprises can engage people in food debates using games and conversations
 - Increase access / choice of local and healthy food systems by using variable business rates to attract social enterprise to operate on our high streets
- Collaborative
 - Encourage collaboration between organisations in invitations to procure food
 - Supporting the sharing and replication of innovations through providing advisory support

- Encourage co-funding of initiatives and use government funding to leverage in wider sources of social investment.
- Robust social enterprise business models
 - Encouraging social enterprise in procurement and ensure social value included in all bid assessment
 - Provide business advice to start-ups, innovators and diversifying social enterprises
 - Promote social investment but requires support to create investment readiness (and market readiness)

PUBLICATIONS COMING FROM THE SEFS PROJECT

- Key action areas for transforming the UK food system: insights from the Transforming UK Food Systems (TUKFS) Programme project portfolio | Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B | The Royal Society:
<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/rstb/article/380/1935/20240166/235112/Key-action-areas-for-transforming-the-UK-food>
- Exploring social innovation for transforming food systems | Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B | The Royal Society:
<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/rstb/article/380/1935/20240156/235069/Exploring-social-innovation-for-transforming-food>
- Innovation for Food Systems Transformation: Lessons from the TUKFS Programme:
<https://ukfoodsystems.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Social-Innovation-for-Food-Systems-Transformation-Lessons-from-the-TUKFS-Programme.pdf>
- Good Practice Guide for Social Enterprises Working on Food, Wellbeing and Sustainability July 2024: <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/food/sefs-good-practice-guide/>
- Further details and reflective blogs are available at the project website:
<https://cusp.ac.uk/SEFS>

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