



## Making the case for a place based systems approach to healthy and sustainable food

Public Health professionals' assessment of Sustainable Food Cities

“Existing evidence indicates that making healthier foods more accessible and increasing provision of low cost healthier food could be effective interventions, but these are likely to be more effective as part of a whole system approach to diet and obesity.”

*Spatial Planning for Health: An evidence resource for planning and designing healthier places – Public Health England*

# Foreword

**This report shows how Public Health leaders from major urban centres in the UK are making use of the Sustainable Food Cities model to address fundamental challenges in the links between the food system and the health of populations.**

With poor diet a growing contributor towards the burden of ill health, there is little question on the urgent need for a coherent policy response towards food. Yet food has proven a fiendishly complex field for action. Some of this is due to the host of competing interests involved and the need for decisions at every level of governance, from the global to the neighbourhood.

Through this thicket, many Public Health leaders in local government are clearing a pathway for change – often working with ingenuity and the sparsest of tools. Much of this work has been to shift the focus away from a narrow obsession with the dietary choices of individuals and towards the need for local market regulation and incentives, action across whole settings and appropriate services for groups facing unequal harms.

The Sustainable Food Cities model was designed to further extend the scope for action, as well as to build and consolidate this work (*see box p 3*). By putting wider social, environmental and economic aspects of the food system into the frame, Sustainable Food Cities mirrors the new ‘ecological public health’.

Public Health strategies need to build in a long-term approach to protecting and enhancing the ecosystems on which food systems depend. From an ecological public health perspective attention should also be directed towards people employed in all elements of the food economy. This is a matter of promoting the health, wellbeing, working conditions and voice of those potentially well placed to shape change.

The research in this report indicates that the Sustainable Food Cities model offers a route through which Public Health professionals can foster a place based systems approach to food and health. A key aspect of this is the opportunity to network with new public constituencies, exchange ideas and convene partnerships that go beyond diet-related aspects of health. The research also suggests that strategic action on the environmental, social and economic dimensions of food resonate with contemporary Public Health practice in local government and that the Sustainable Food Cities model can bring conceptual clarity and practical assistance for action on these issues.

**Mat Jones**

*Associate Professor of Public Health  
University of the West of England*

For a full version of the report please visit: <http://sustainablefoodcities.org>

# Background

**There is growing interest among local, national and international Public Health bodies in the potential value of place based approaches to food and health that can complement and help to integrate traditional interventions focused on settings and individuals.**

These place based approaches recognise and attempt to respond to the complexity of how food culture, the food environment and the food system influence behaviour change and are being trialled in both Public Health England's 'whole systems approach' to preventing and tackling obesity and the Healthy Towns initiative. Diet-related ill-health, however, extends well beyond obesity and it is only now coming to be recognised that broad placed based approaches that consider wider social, economic and environmental aspects of the food system, as well as health, can have a profound impact on people's long-term health and wellbeing.

Place based approaches to changing food culture and the food system in the UK are still at an early stage of development and, though they are supported by a growing body of academic literature on systems change theory and processes, robust evidence for their efficacy in driving significant and sustained improvements to health and well-being will take time to emerge. In the absence of such longitudinal studies, in summer 2017, Sabrina King, a postgraduate student at the University of the West of England, undertook a series of interviews with 27 middle-to-senior Public Health professionals on their perceptions of the value of the Sustainable Food Cities place based approach to changing food culture and the food system in contributing to key Public Health goals.

Public Health professionals are key stakeholders in the majority of current Sustainable Food Cities partnerships and it is from this group that the interviewees for this research were drawn.

## SUSTAINABLE FOOD CITIES

The Sustainable Food Cities (SFC) model has been adopted by more than 50 towns, cities, boroughs and counties across the UK that together comprise the membership of the Sustainable Food Cities Network. The model involves the establishment of a local cross-sector food partnership involving the Local Authority, Public Health, businesses and civil society organisations that work together to develop and deliver a strategy to make healthy and sustainable food a defining characteristic of where they live.

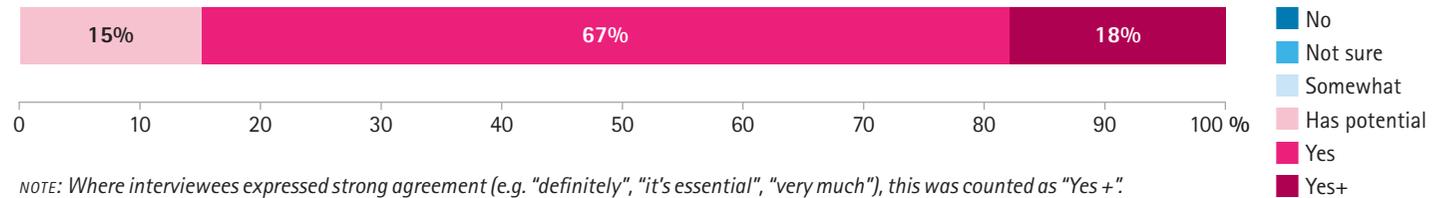
**By promoting a strategic, integrated and holistic partnership approach that recognises the importance and interdependence of the social, economic and environmental aspects of the food system, Sustainable Food Cities aims to support food culture and food system transformation and to build a multi-stakeholder 'good food' movement at a local level.**

Sustainable Food Cities also run national campaigns on specific issues in which all Network members are invited to participate and which, to date, have included healthy and sustainable food procurement, tackling food poverty and reducing sugar consumption.

# Findings

## QUESTION 1

Overall, do you feel that your local Sustainable Food Cities initiative helps, or has the potential to help, you to achieve your Public Health priorities?



**100% of interviewees felt their local SFC initiative either already helps, or could help, them to achieve their Public Health priorities.**

**"One of the key challenges (...) is how we engage differently with people taking a whole system approach to managing their weight in a healthier way, (...) historically we've focused on individual management to change, but actually this approach is saying: how can we look at the wider systems that impact on health and food in a more community-based and empowering way?"**

*Deputy Director of Public Health*

**The SFC approach is achieving "health by stealth", using one policy area to also get results in other areas: "the way that it does that is by framing the health benefits and gains that we want to see from a Public Health perspective in another window, (...) it's a model I'd like to see replicated in other areas of Public Health priorities" (e.g. housing, economic equality).**

*Senior Health Policy Officer*

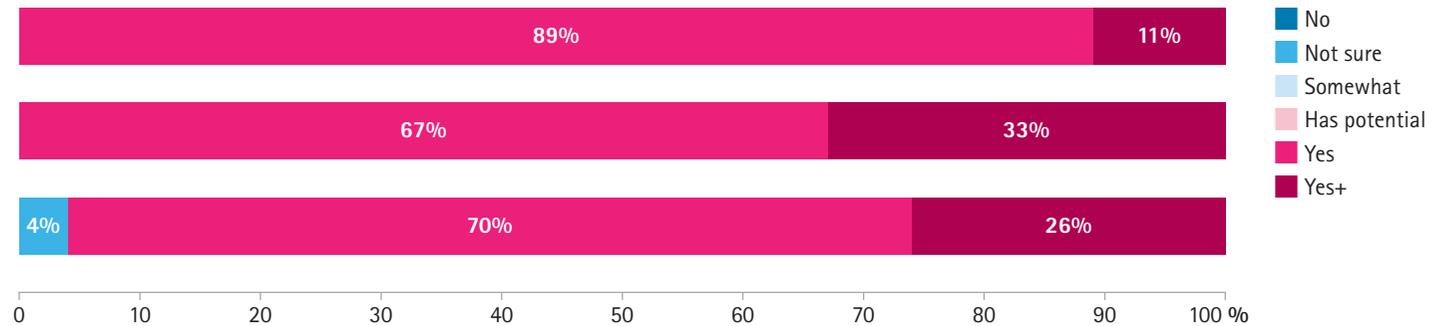
**"If we didn't have it in place then I would be doing work to have a similar type of partnership set up myself, so I think there's only advantages there from that point of view."**

*Director of Public Health*

**QUESTION 2**

**Do you see value in ...**

- a. Having a broad cross sector food partnership involving key public bodies, NGOs and businesses.
- b. Taking a holistic approach to food issues that covers a range of social, health, economic and environmental aspects.
- c. Having a dedicated local SFC coordinator in place to help coordinate and drive your local programme.



**100% of interviewees saw value in having a broad cross-sector food partnership and in taking a holistic approach to food issues.**

**“ [Having a broad cross-sector partnership is] fundamental, (...) no one organisation is able to achieve significant aims in terms of changing the food system on their own.”**

*Consultant in Public Health*

**“ Having a broad cross-section is a good idea, because everyone comes to the table with a different agenda, but they all overlap and they’re dependent on one another, and they all stand to benefit from it (...) I couldn’t imagine doing it any other way.”**

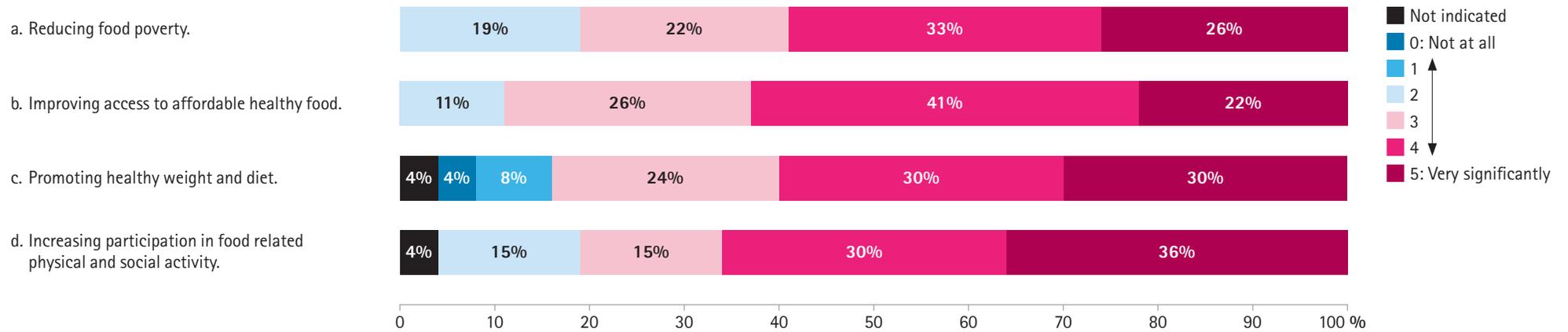
*Health Improvement Specialist*

**“ [It’s] absolutely essential that we have a coordinator for our local strategy and local food partnership, (...) our coordinator has done a lot of work contributing to the core strategy (...) to ensure that food related issues are being considered and embedded.”**

*Assistant Public Health Director*

**QUESTION 3**

**On a scale of 0–5, how much would you say your local SFC initiative contributes to, or has the potential to contribute to ...**



**The partnership “brought together a number of different organisations (...) to think together about how we could move from crisis management in relation to food poverty and emergency food aid to a more sustainable, forward-thinking, long-term approach”.**

*Consultant in Public Health*

**The partnership has done a lot of work on improving access to affordable healthy food – including: local food procurement (e.g. school meal service); land-use/ planning – helping people to grow their own food; helping local suppliers to sell produce locally.**

*Assistant Public Health Director*

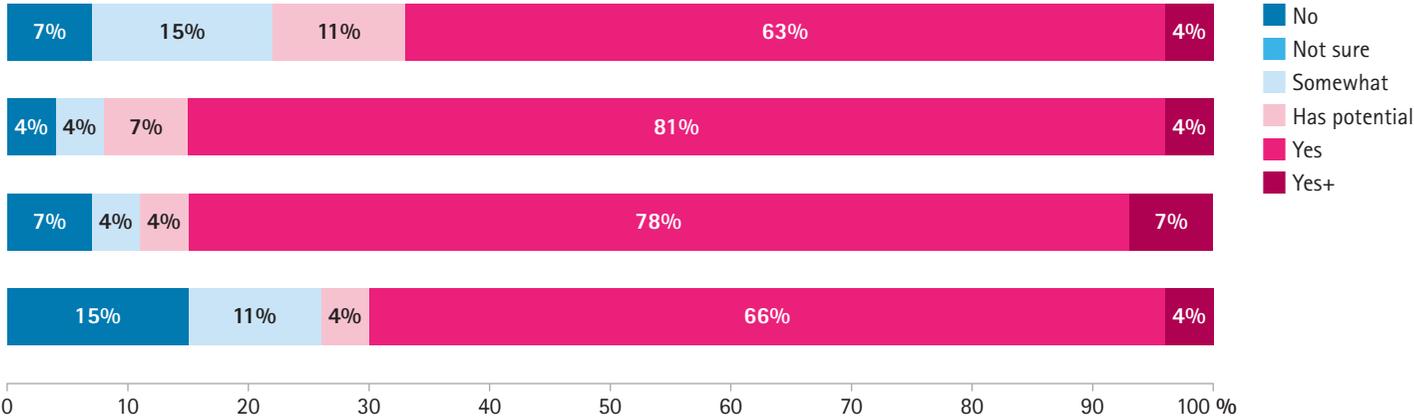
**The work the partnership is doing on healthy weight and diet (e.g. around green and open spaces and food growing) is likely to impact both physical and mental health. “The partnership are key partners in the broader work on healthy weight in the city”.**

*Consultant in Public Health*

**QUESTION 4**

**Do you think your local SFC initiative is helping to achieve Public Health objectives in any of the following ways ...**

- a. Helping to foster greater collaboration between organisations directly working on public health.
- b. Helping to foster greater collaboration between organisations and departments related to the wider determinants of health.
- c. Raising awareness of the importance of healthy food amongst the public, business and institutions.
- d. Driving new activity on specific public health issues.



**The partnership has broadened the thinking on the wider determinants of health (e.g. starting to think about what the local food economy means to the city).**

*Head of Health Strategy*

**Working on policies is “critical” to reducing the health inequalities gap. By taking a broad approach to implementation of a ‘healthy and sustainable food policy’, that links in with other pieces of work across the city and existing award schemes, the partnership has been able to spread the influence of this policy.**

*Public Health Portfolio Lead*

**“I don’t think the [holiday hunger] programme would’ve happened at all” without the partnership – this has now been rolled out to 20 local authorities with the potential to impact thousands of children and government funding has been secured for the next three years.**

*Consultant in Public Health*

Sustainable Food Cities is a UK-wide partnership programme led by the Soil Association, Sustain and Food Matters and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation that helps people to make healthy and sustainable food a defining characteristic of where they live. We can provide a wide range of support to help you establish a Sustainable Food Cities partnership and to develop and deliver a programme to transform your local food culture and food system.

For more information see our website <http://sustainablefoodcities.org> or email [info@sustainablefoodcities.org](mailto:info@sustainablefoodcities.org)

Sign up to our monthly newsletter <http://sustainablefoodcities.org>  
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**“Local authorities should ... identify any physical barriers to affordable, sustainable, nutritious food in their areas and develop an action plan to overcome them ... (building on) the work already being done by the Sustainable Food Cities Network.”**

*Recommendation 7 of 15 of the Fabian Commission's report 'Hungry for Change', 2015*



#### **Sustainable Food Cities Network members**

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Cork · Croydon · Doncaster · Durham · East Midlands · Edinburgh · Exeter · Glasgow  
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Researched and compiled by Sabrina King,  
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