

# Deeper Roots, Stronger Futures

## Unlocking the Potential of Food Partnerships with Young People

July 2025



Working in partnership





# Introducing our report

This is a joint report from Co-op and Barnardo's, produced as part of our ongoing partnership to support the positive futures of young people across the UK. It is aimed at **national, regional and local policymakers** who want to understand the impact of food partnerships and how they can support and involve young people. It also provides helpful insight and tips for **food partnerships** who want to involve young people but do not know where to begin.

Co-op and Barnardo's are working together to support positive futures for young people. Our research has shown that over a third of young people worry about what their future looks like, with **1 in 5** saying that they or their family have had trouble accessing food in the last six months.<sup>1</sup>

Food Partnerships (FPs) can bring communities together to improve access to food, but not every community has one. Even those that do don't always involve young people or give them a voice. Our research found that only 49 of the 383 local authorities (13%) we contacted reported involving young people in the strategic design or delivery of a food partnership.

By removing barriers, fostering meaningful participation, and empowering young people, we can support positive futures for them and their communities across the UK. We're calling on our government, local authorities, businesses, and charities to take action, ensuring young people have a real voice – because their positive future is our shared responsibility.



**Shirine Khoury-Haq,**  
CEO of The Co-operative Group



**Lynn Perry,**  
CEO of Barnardo's

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**Helen Starr-Keddle, on behalf of Sustainable Food Places**

Sustainable Food Places supports 110 food partnerships across the UK, uniting councils, businesses, and communities to create a fairer, healthier food system through bold, joined-up action. Partnerships drive change on health, climate, economy, and food security, proving the power of collaboration. We believe young people must be at the heart of this movement: they are most affected by today's broken food system and have the vision, creativity, and leadership to transform it. We warmly welcome this inspiring report from Barnardo's and Co-op and are committed to using its recommendations to drive meaningful action locally and nationally for a better future.



**Andrew Forsey OBE, National Director of Feeding Britain**

The emergence of hunger and destitution over the past 15 years has been truly horrifying. For young people, the extent and severity of these phenomena have been particularly stark. Many a food bank has served a young person in precarious circumstances who is short of the money and wider support required to access, afford, and prepare decent meals on a regular basis. Yet when young people are given the chance to co-design initiatives which improve the affordability and accessibility of food – youth-led holiday clubs, and food clubs, for example – the results are stunningly good, with greater freedom, opportunity, and control placed into their hands. In that spirit, this report offers a map and compass for young people to lead our country out of the hunger crisis, once and for all.



**Barnardo's and Co-op Youth Advisory Group**

**Hamaam Shire (19), Rachel Hasson (24), Rebecca Woolford (24), Kyson Redd (22), Ola Anretiolaoluwa (20)**

We are part of the Barnardo's and Co-op Youth Advisory Group, made up of 13 young people who advise on the partnership. We have been involved in writing this report and conducting interviews with food partnerships. All young people should be able to get involved in our food system. It's time for decision makers to recognise the importance of food partnerships and the opportunities they provide children and young people in their local communities.

# Summary

**Food is vitally important for young people, supporting their growth, health and wellbeing. Despite this, 1 in 5 young people in the UK are in families that have struggled to access or pay for food.<sup>2</sup>**

Too many young people find it difficult to get the food they need in the places they live; almost **1 in 4** (23%) of the 42,000 young people who shared their views in recent research we conducted with VotesforSchools said they were unable to access healthy food in their community.<sup>3</sup>

Food Partnerships (FPs) play a critical role in this space. Their work in improving access to healthy food for young people is essential and young people want to play a role in them; **96% of Co-op members** aged 16-25 said they want to see more food partnerships and want to be involved in them.<sup>4</sup>

From Cornwall to the Highlands, FPs support a huge range of activity such as community fridges, coordinating local producers and providing meal programmes during school holidays. Many FPs operate on stretched resources and rely on passionate people who are driven to make their local communities better. In some areas, young people are already a key part of this picture but in many they are not.

Young people should play a significant role in local food systems because young people we spoke to for this report told us they care deeply about their local areas, the food that they eat and want to get more involved. Young people's involvement should encompass both benefiting from food projects and activities delivered by FPs, and having their voices heard in shaping FPs and local food systems.

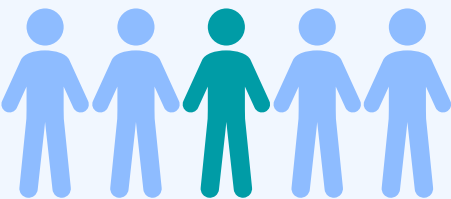
**These young people will be the cooks, producers and community leaders of tomorrow and they deserve a seat at the table.**

This report, produced as part of our partnership, spotlights new data on FPs and how they involve young people. It includes:

- Data from 362 local authorities, representing 95% of local authorities across the UK
- Interviews with 7 food partnerships
- 2 focus groups with organisations running community fridges
- 6 focus groups with young people aged 10-18 who are involved in Barnardo's and Co-op's services across the UK

The report highlights the benefits of engaging young people in FPs and the positive impact it can have on them. It includes actionable recommendations for UK Government, local authorities, businesses, charities and community groups to support their meaningful participation.

**1 in 5 young people are in families that have had issues accessing or paying for food**



## Conclusion

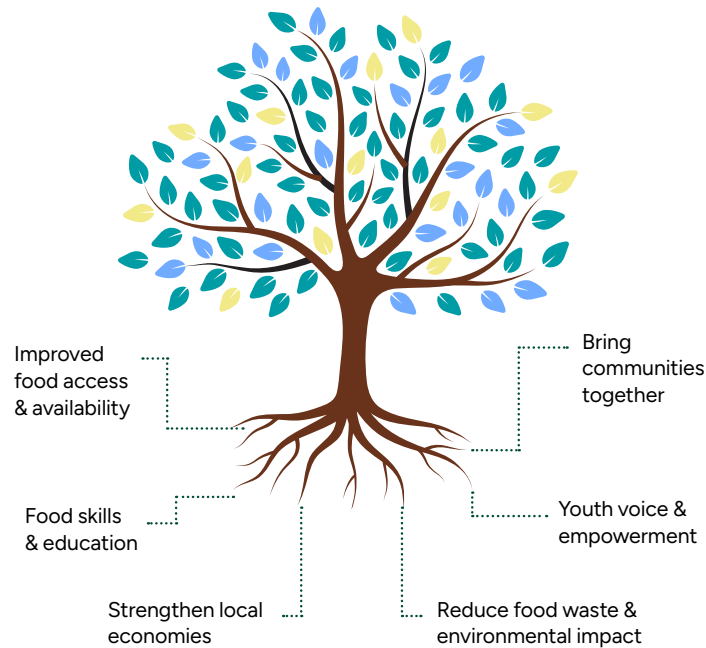
Involving young people in the food system is not just beneficial—it is essential for building a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food system. This report provides clear evidence that youth engagement strengthens local food networks, fosters food education, and empowers the next generation

of food system leaders. By implementing the recommendations outlined here, policymakers, local authorities, businesses, charities and community groups can help ensure that FPs become a driving force for positive change, with young people at the heart of the movement.

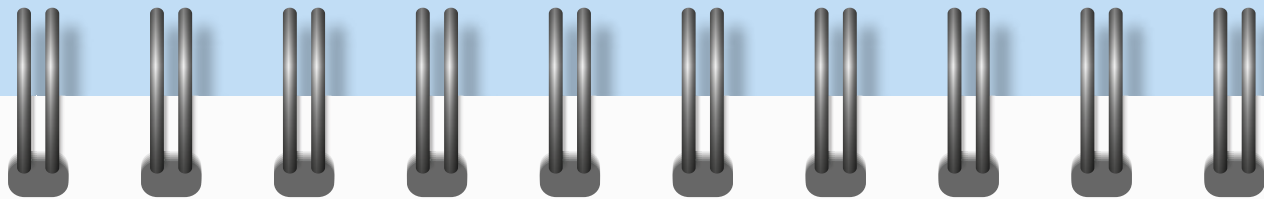
Key Findings

- Local Authority engagement with FPs:**  
Of the 383 local authorities contacted, only half (54%) said they were involved in a food partnership. Local authorities in the most deprived areas were 17% more likely to be involved in a FP than those in the least deprived ones.
- Limited Youth Involvement and Voice:**  
While some FPs successfully engage young people, participation is inconsistent. Only 28% of all 383 local authorities contacted were able to confirm that their FP directly benefits young people, and only 13% confirmed their FP involved young people in the strategic design or delivery of projects. Our data from local authorities found that only 743 young people across the UK have been directly involved in FP decision-making structures.
- Barriers to Engagement:**  
Young people face the same obstacles to involvement as adults, including transportation costs, scheduling conflicts, and lack of awareness about FPs. They also face additional barriers, including inaccessible formal structures with rigid formats and timings, and cultures that tell them that they aren't worth listening to and don't have anything useful to contribute.
- Successful Approaches:**  
FPs that have successfully engaged young people have done so by partnering with schools, youth organisations, and colleges, offering hands-on activities like cooking and growing projects, and ensuring meaningful youth involvement in decision-making.

How food partnerships can help young people



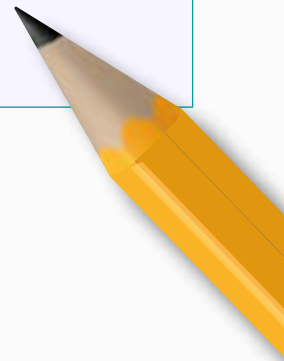
**Note on our methodology:** There is very little data available on food partnerships and how many exist across the country. It is likely that most food partnerships involve a local authority – which is why for this report we chose to conduct a Freedom of Information request aimed at local authorities to find out how many are involved in a food partnership in their area, and how many of those involve young people. It is possible that there are other food partnerships where the local authority is not involved, which is a limitation of our data. However, we believe this approach will provide a good indication of the overall picture, and we also believe this is the most comprehensive data currently available on this topic.



10 Steps for Food Partnerships to Involve Young People

To support FPs in effectively engaging young people, our Youth Advisory Group has developed 10 practical steps set out on page 28. In summary:

<b>Key principles at all stages:</b>  1. Safety and safeguarding  2. Diversity and inclusion  3. Look for good practice (including what's in this report)	<b>Before Engaging Young People</b>	1	Work with young people to understand their needs and barriers in your area.
		2	Identify and use existing youth networks, schools and colleges.
		3	Ensure there is clear purpose and value to young people's involvement.
	<b>While Engaging Young People</b>	4	Go to where young people are (schools, youth groups, community projects).
		5	Make participation hands-on and interactive.
		6	Offer leadership roles and decision-making power.
		7	Be flexible with timing and accessibility.
		8	Recognise and reward young people's contributions.
	<b>After Engaging Young People</b>	9	Demonstrate the impact of their involvement.
		10	Maintain long-term relationships and continuous engagement opportunities.





# What are food partnerships?

**Food partnerships (FPs) are networks that bring together organisations such as local authorities, businesses, charities, community groups, and individuals to create fairer, healthier, and more sustainable local food systems.**

Food partnerships are often small-scale, community-driven, and organically formed entities. It is therefore not possible to calculate exactly how many exist across the UK at any given moment. We believe that most food partnerships - particularly well established food partnerships - involve their local authority (see note on methodology above). Our research found that 208 of all 383 local authorities (54%) contacted were involved in a local food partnership. This indicates that at least 208 food partnerships exist across the UK.

## What Do Food Partnerships Do?

FPs carry out a range of activity where they operate – either in a city, town, borough or county. Their activities typically include:

- **Tackling food insecurity** – Supporting food banks, community pantries, and holiday food programmes to ensure access to affordable, nutritious food.
- **Promoting food education** – Running workshops on cooking, nutrition, and food growing in schools and communities.
- **Strengthening local food economies** – Supporting local farmers, food producers, and retailers to build sustainable supply chains.



- **Reducing environmental impact of food, including waste** – Partnering with businesses and community organisations to redistribute surplus food.
- **Shaping local food policy** – Working with councils to integrate food strategies into public health, climate action, and economic development plans.

## How Are Food Partnerships Organised?

FPs vary in structure depending on local needs and resources, but typically include:

- **A lead organisation or coordinator** – Often hosted by a charity, council, or community group, responsible for overseeing activities and partnerships.
- **A steering group** – A mix of local government representatives, food businesses, charities, and community leaders who guide the partnership's direction.
- **A wider network** – Schools, farmers, businesses, youth groups, and individuals who participate in projects, consultations, and advocacy efforts.

Some FPs are formalised through local government initiatives, while others operate as grassroots collaborations. Many are in national networks such as **Sustainable Food Places**, which supports over 100 partnerships across the UK,<sup>5</sup> and **Feeding Britain**, which supports a national network of 123 organisations focussed on tackling hunger.<sup>6</sup>

## Why Do Food Partnerships Matter?

FPs play a crucial role in building resilient food systems that works for everyone. They:

- Improve food access and affordability.
- Equip communities with food skills and education.
- Strengthen local economies and support ethical food production.
- Reduce food waste and environmental impact.
- Empower young people to shape the future of food in their communities.

# Key research about young people and access to food

**Many young people face barriers to accessing nutritious food in their community, yet their experiences are often overlooked. Evidence shows that young people want to be involved in their communities but opportunities can be limited.**

## Young people and nutrition

- **Parents struggle to afford healthy food:** A YouGov poll in 2025, commissioned by Barnardo's, found that 60% of parents who had to buy unhealthy food options because they couldn't afford healthy meals are worried about what they feed their child(ren).<sup>7</sup>
- **Children and young people in poverty eat less healthy food:** Children from the most disadvantaged fifth of the population eat 17% less fibre, 29% less fruit and veg, and 75% less oily fish – all foods identified as important for healthy development – compared with those in the least disadvantaged fifth.<sup>8</sup>
- **Malnutrition is on the rise** among children, contributing to their risk of serious illnesses. The number of NHS admissions for malnutrition amongst 0-17 year olds increased by 76% between 2007 and 2022.<sup>9</sup>



## Young people's access to food in their community

- **Young people often struggle to access healthy food:** In March 2025 Barnardo's and Co-op surveyed a representative sample of 2,000 young people aged 10-25 across the UK. The study found that over one in five (20%) are in a family that has either currently or previously had issues paying for or accessing food.<sup>10</sup>
- **Younger households are more likely to be struggling:** According to official UK Government statistics 21% of younger households are food insecure compared with 10% of households for all age groups combined.<sup>11</sup> Younger households are more than twice as likely to have used a foodbank in the 30 days preceding the survey compared with all other age groups.<sup>12</sup>

## Young people's interest in being involved in their community

- **Young people want to get involved!** Research by the National Lottery Community Fund found 18- to 24-year-olds were the age group most likely to volunteer in their community (71%), most likely to feel part of their local community (78%), and to see this as important (73%).<sup>13</sup>
- **But they don't always have the chance:** According to data from the Department for Education in 2019, 26% of secondary schools do not provide volunteering opportunities for their students,<sup>14</sup> with the most disadvantaged schools offering the least opportunities.<sup>15</sup>
- **Getting involved in their community contributes to wellbeing:** A 2022 survey of 2,514 young people (aged 16-30) from the Institute for Community Studies (ICS) and YouGov found that 63% of young people who have been involved in volunteering felt they belonged to a place-based community compared to 44% of those who have never been involved.<sup>16</sup>

# Partnership between Barnardo's and Co-op

In May 2023, Barnardo's and Co-op launched an ambitious partnership to bring local communities together to support the positive futures of 750,000 10–25-year-olds across the UK. This followed research from the partnership that found that a third of young people do not feel positive about their future.<sup>17</sup> Through 20 local services and online via social channels that young people go to for information and advice, we are helping young people to access food, improve mental wellbeing, and enable opportunities for their future.<sup>18</sup>

### Our research so far

In September 2024 we published our first policy report from our partnership, 'A recipe for success' which highlighted the challenges young people face across the UK in accessing food outside of home or school. Our research found that:

- 23% of 42,616 secondary school students who took part in a survey with VotesforSchools said they cannot access healthy food choices in their community.<sup>19</sup>
- 96% of Co-op members aged 16-25 wanted to see more food partnerships and want to be involved.<sup>20</sup>

In our report we set out six recommendations. This included our recommendation that local authorities and Government should work to establish a food partnership in every local authority area, directly involving young people from the outset.



### Why are we doing more work on this

After publishing 'A recipe for success' we decided to look more closely at food partnerships. The role of young people in FPs is under researched and while there are pockets of excellent practice across the UK, little has been done to bring this together. This report seeks to showcase some of that work and support those embarking on youth engagement in a FP.

At Barnardo's and Co-op, we are involved in community food projects that support young people and support food pantries and community fridges across the UK. While we do not run FPs, we do recognise their power – FPs can re-energise communities, create opportunities for young people and improve local food systems all for relatively low costs. We see this impact in many of the communities we work in. This approach aligns closely with many of the principles set out in the Government's Devolution White Paper.<sup>21</sup> The Government's forthcoming National Food Strategy also provides a unique opportunity to invest in and empower FPs, recognising the important role they play across communities in the UK.

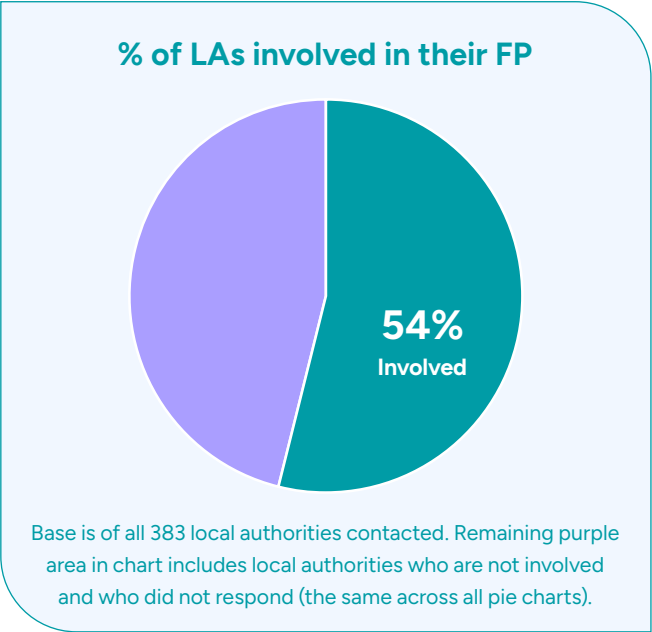
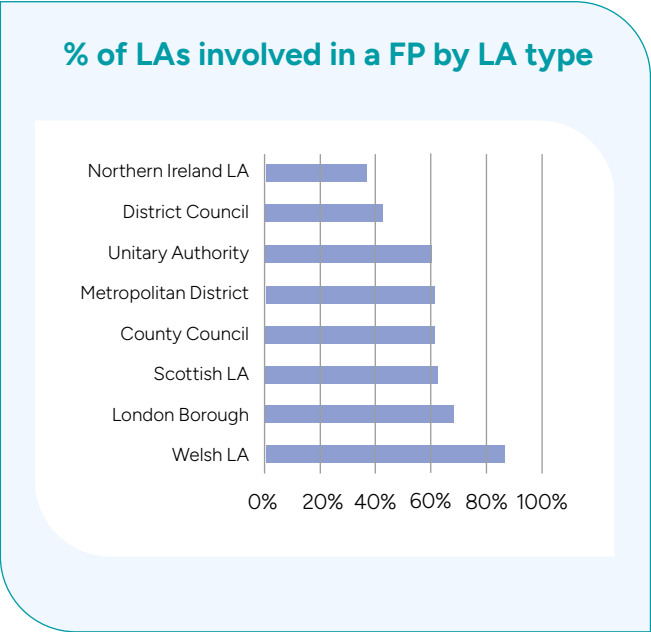
# New data on food partnerships

The number of food partnerships in the UK is not known – there is no formal register and many will be at differing stages of development, operating differently from area to area. We do know that many food partnerships work with their local authority enabling some insight to be gathered through Freedom of Information requests (FOI).<sup>22</sup> Please see note on methodology (page 6) and comment on number of food partnerships (page 8).



To build our understanding of what food partnerships (FPs) are doing to support or involve young people across the UK we sent FOI requests to all local authorities (LAs) in the UK in January 2025. We asked them whether they were involved in a food partnership, what this involvement looked like and how local authorities supported or involved young people. Of the total 383 councils contacted, 362 responded (95%). Only 208 local authorities (54%) were able to confirm they were involved in their food partnership.

### Local authority involvement with a food partnership





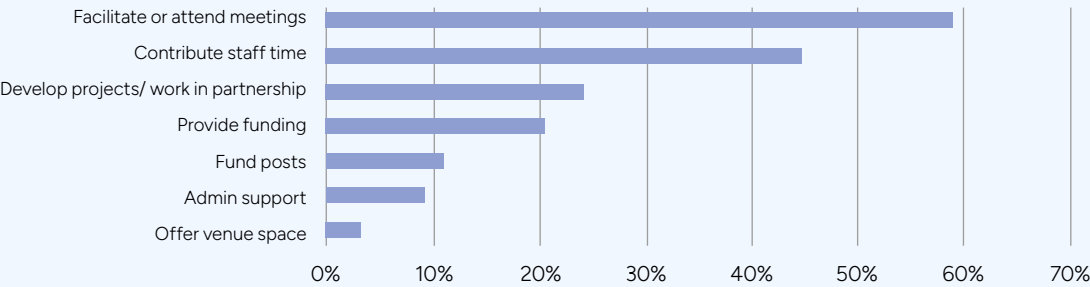
Largest political grouping in local authority<sup>23</sup>

% of local authorities involved in their FP

Scottish National Party	79%
Green	64%
Labour	58%
Liberal Democrats	52%
Conservative	51%
Independent	41%

Local authorities in the most deprived areas were 17% more likely to be involved in their food partnership than those in the least deprived. Of the 116 local authorities who told us they were not involved in their food partnership, only a small proportion (9%) were seeking to establish a food partnership or develop a cross-sector food strategy.

How local authorities support their food partnership



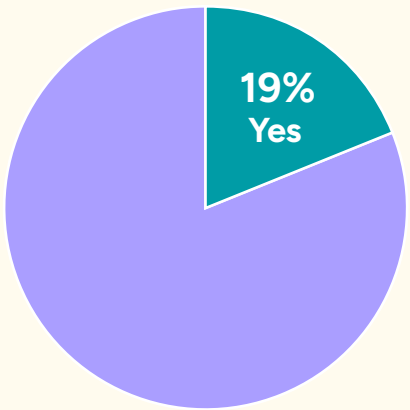
1. Types of Support Provided

- **Facilitation of Meetings & Networks:** A significant number of councils organise and lead food partnership meetings.
- **Funding Contributions:** Some provide direct funding, either through local budgets or external grants.
- **Staff Time & Expertise:** Many councils assign public health officers, sustainability officers, or other personnel to assist food partnerships.
- **Physical & Administrative Support:** Some provide venues, administrative support (e.g., agenda-setting, note-taking), or help with funding applications.
- **Policy & Strategy Development:** A few councils integrate food partnerships into wider strategies like climate action plans, public health initiatives, or food insecurity strategies.

2. Common Trends

- **Public Health Involvement:** Many councils involve their public health teams, particularly in food insecurity and sustainability initiatives. This can enhance the important role FPs play in preventing ill health such as through promoting healthy eating and improving wellbeing.
- **Collaboration with Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS):** Many food partnerships are hosted or coordinated by VCS organisations rather than councils directly.
- **Grant & External Funding Dependency:** Some councils rely on external funding sources (e.g., Shared Prosperity Fund, Welsh Government) to sustain their involvement.

% of LAs that support their FP financially

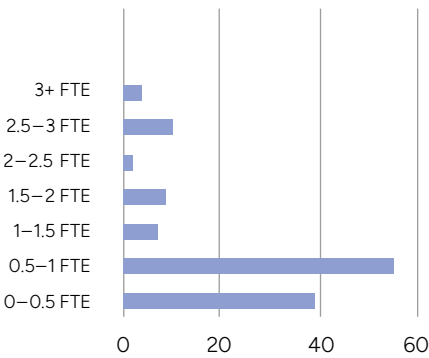


Base is of all 383 local authorities contacted.

Average yearly financial support from councils

£11,508

Amount of staff time dedicated to supporting FP



Average local authority staff time supporting FP

0.38 FTE\*

\*Full Time Equivalent



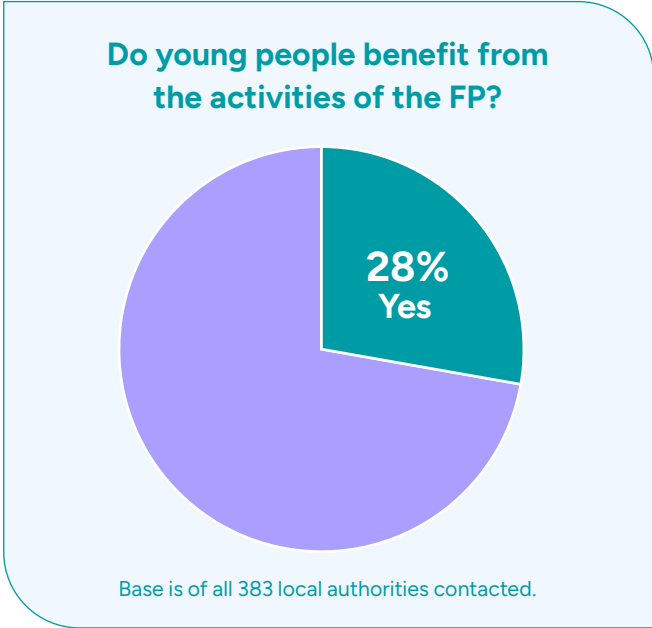
# How young people benefit from activities of food partnerships

Only 28% of local authorities contacted confirmed that their FP benefited young people (those aged under 25). This ranged significantly, from 2 young people to over 200,000 young people benefiting from the activities of the FP. Local authorities in the most deprived areas were 31% more likely to have a FP that benefits young people. Young people benefited in a variety of ways:

**1. Education & Workshops:** Many schools, colleges, and universities are actively involved in food education with food partnerships. This includes delivering workshops on healthy eating, food sustainability, and nutrition. Some authorities support young people in developing toolkits and campaigns on food misinformation. For example, Ealing Food Partnership partnered with University of West London, to host events educating students on healthy eating.

**2. Food Provision:** Many FPs helped to provide free school meals, food parcels, and supermarket vouchers. They also helped to deliver holiday food programmes, such as the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme. Some local authorities supported community pantries and social supermarkets through their FP, helping young people access affordable food. For example, in Blackburn, the food partnership promotes food equity by providing subsidised food boxes to young people experiencing food insecurity.

**3. Community Engagement:** A small number of young people benefit from food festivals put on by their FP, community food networks, and local consultations. This included activities in youth groups and local schools collaborating with councils to shape food policies. A FP in South Norfolk, called the Tastebuds Collective, involved 10 young people in numerous research projects and a small-scale branding competition.



**4. Growing Projects:** Some local authorities run food-growing initiatives in schools and communities with their FP. Young people take part in gardening, rewilding projects, and farm visits to understand food production. For example, a FP in Swansea, involved young people through volunteer placements which taught them seasonal food growing skills.

**5. Cooking Projects:** A number of FPs involve young people in cooking projects, inside and outside of school. In safe environments, young people were able to experiment and learn about different food and cooking techniques. Whilst bolstering young people's culinary knowledge and confidence, it also allowed them to bring home food they had cooked and share recipes they had learnt. For example, Hackney Food Network involved young people through cooking new meals and providing feedback on taste and quality of meat options.

**6. Financial Support & Policy:** Some FPs, with the support of their council, were able to secure grants to fund school cooking clubs, edible gardens, and youth-led food projects. Some FPs also supported research on food poverty and worked to improve policies like free school meal auto-enrolment. A few local authorities reported being in the process of reviewing governance structures to involve young people more in food system planning. Monmouthshire FP funds practitioners to deliver workshops to young people on cooking, healthy eating, budgeting and sustainability.



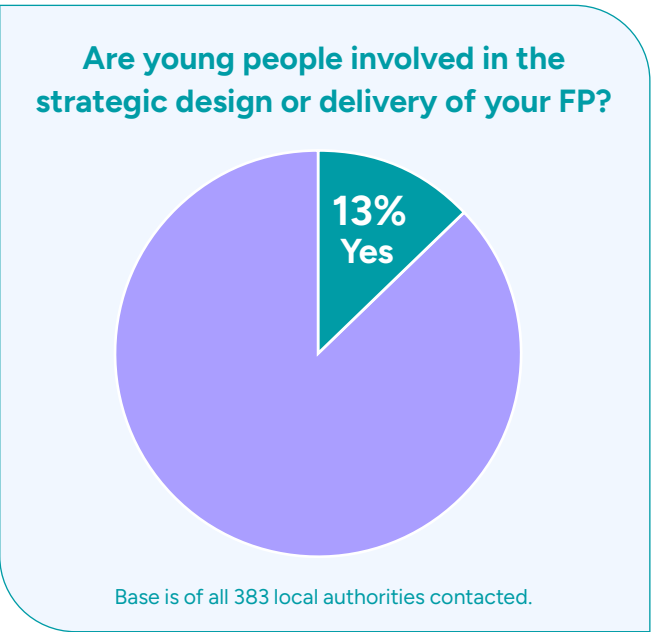
Young person cooking food at our service in Plymouth.



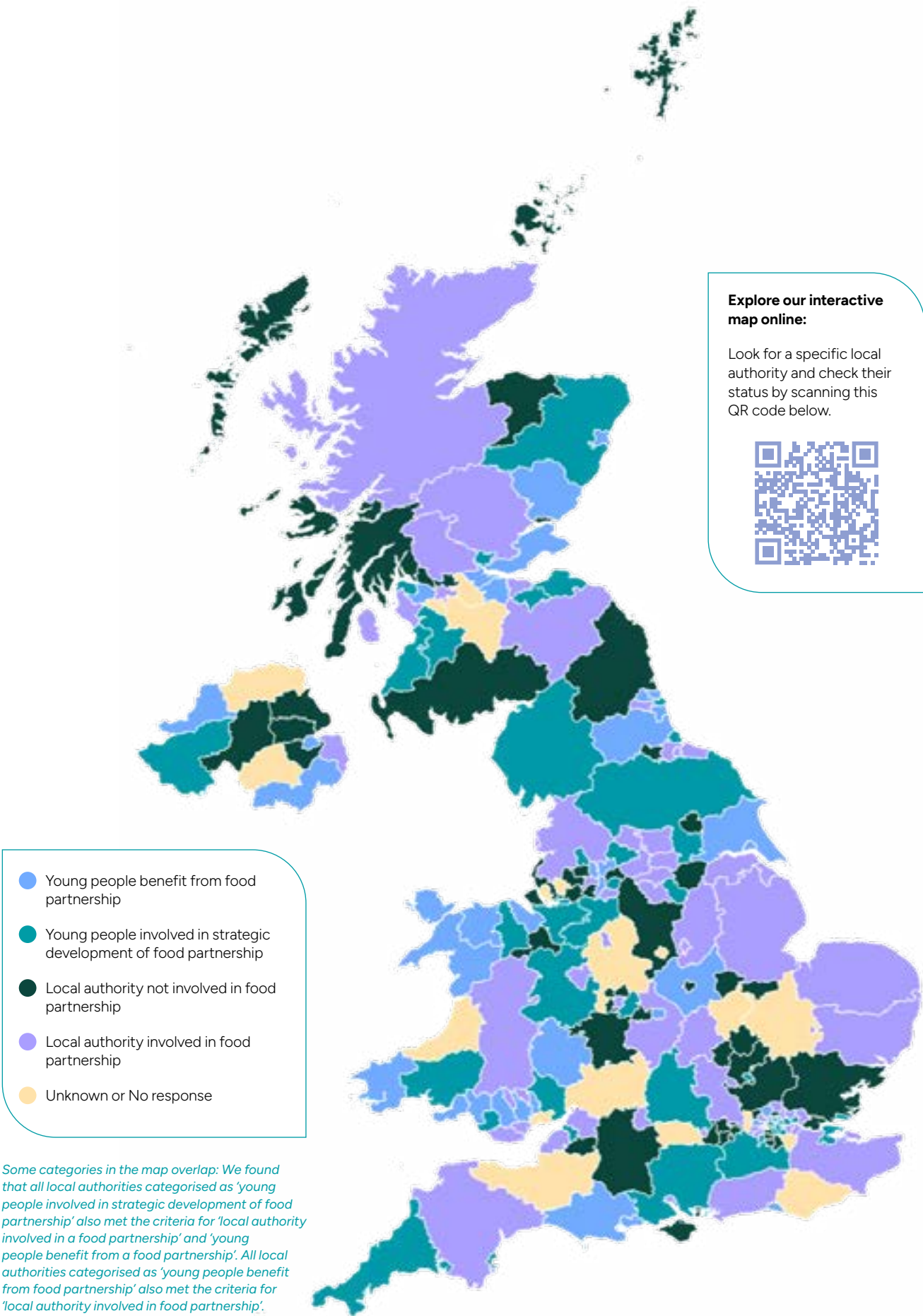
# How youth voice is reflected in food partnerships

Only 49 of the 383 local authorities contacted for this report (13%) reported involving young people in the strategic design or delivery of their FP. Across the UK, 743 young people were involved. Local authorities in the most deprived areas were 22% more likely to involve young people in design and decision-making than those in the richest areas. Young people contributed in a number of ways:

- 1. Consultation & Feedback:** Many councils engaged young people through surveys, focus groups, and discussion groups to gather their perspectives on food strategies, school meals, food justice, and sustainability. For example, in Lewisham, young people were consulted for the FP’s three-year action plan and in Rotherham the Youth Cabinet participated in a roundtable on food access.
- 2. Strategic Development & Governance:** Some councils involved young people directly in decision-making roles, such as being members of steering groups, youth councils, and boards. For example, in Birmingham, a young co-author contributed to the Food System Strategy and in North Ayrshire, youth representatives were involved in co-developing the FP’s operating model.
- 3. Campaigns & Awareness Initiatives:** Young people were involved in training, awareness campaigns, and advocacy work. For example, as part of Birmingham’s Full of Beans campaign older children led activities with younger children about the project and in Tameside, young people helped to shape the FP’s action plan.
- 4. Food Education & School Engagement:** Some initiatives focused on food education, sustainability, and hands-on learning through school programs and youth-led workshops. For example, School Food Charters were co-developed with young people in Brighton.



- 5. Events & Community Participation:** Councils hosted youth forums, food summits, and public events to engage young people in food-related discussions. This included Bridgend Food Summit where the youth council discussed food issues. In South Tyneside, students engaged in surveys and sustainability events.
- Overall Trends & Gaps:** Some councils have fully integrated youth voices, while others have only held one-off consultations. Few councils give young people decision-making power in food partnerships.



# What do young people want from food partnerships?

For this report we ran six focus groups involving 22 young people aged between 10 and 18. All are supported by services established as part of our Co-op and Barnardo's partnership in Cardiff, Portsmouth, Sedgemoor, Hurlford, Salford and Glasgow. Young people were asked to share their views on food in their local area and on how they would like to get involved in their local food systems if they could. All names in this report have been changed to protect anonymity.

## 1. Food access and affordability

Young people consistently mentioned the cost of food and highlighted how this limited choice for them in their community. This supports recent Barnardo's research which found that more than a quarter (26%) of UK parents had to buy unhealthy food for their child because they couldn't afford healthy ingredients or meals at least once every fortnight.<sup>24</sup>

"You can get like a chocolate bar for like 89p at your local shop... Yet, you can get a punnet of raspberries for like three pounds. Healthy food can be really expensive."

**Sarah (12) from Sedgemoor**

"A dinner lady in school started giving me extra money because she saw that if I got something at break, I wasn't able to get something at lunch."

**Jack (16) from Cardiff**

**Yeah, I want to eat healthy but I don't have the money. The cheapest food you can get is like an apple but beyond that it's too expensive.**

**Dean (12) from Sedgemoor**

Young people also talked about other reasons why accessing food could be difficult.

"I feel like there should be more foods from different countries... I want shops to get foods from other countries for the people that come from those countries that live here."

**Amber (13) from Portsmouth.**

The availability of culturally traditional foods was also identified as a barrier in Barnardo's SEEN report: 'Driving Healthy Futures: Fuelling Food Equity'.<sup>25</sup>



## 2. Hands-on Involvement: Cooking, Growing, and Food Projects

Young people enjoyed active participation in food-based activities, expressing interest in learning to grow food and get involved in social kitchens and community fridges.

"I feel like there should be more food projects like this place where children can go. I get so excited so I really want more places like this, it's so much fun, you meet loads of new people."

**Anna (13) from Portsmouth**

Many of the participants enjoyed their experience at cooking clubs run as part of the Barnardo's and Co-op partnership.

"It feels kind of nice to be actually able to cook [at the Barnardo's/Co-op project]. My mum doesn't think I'm responsible enough because I've burned my hands too many times to count. It's sparked my interest a bit more to learn."

**Jess (16) from Cardiff**

"We made these cupcakes in our project and it might sound disgusting but we used carrot and banana. But oh my gosh, they were so good."

**Maya (10) from Sedgemoor**

"Doing the cooking club is very beneficial, because I didn't know how to cook before these lessons. So after I've done these lessons, I've given the recipes to my parents and my dad's learned how to make it."

**Stephanie (13) from Portsmouth**

"When I first heard about it [the cooking project], I thought it was going to be not the freshest quality of food and something quick to take away but then I realised it was way more than that and we really paid attention to what we were doing, it was great."

**Cara (13) from Glasgow**



Some young people talked about their experience learning about food in school. Their negative experience backs up insight gathered from young people in Barnardo's recent report, 'Nourishing the Future'.<sup>26</sup>

"The only thing I learnt at school about food is the food pyramid. They only taught us that there's a sweet section that you should only have a little bit of."

**Ben (12) from Sedgemoor**

"At school there's a right or wrong answer. But at youth groups it's not judgemental, you can learn about food and say whatever you want. No one's going to slag you off there but in school there's a lot more to it."

**Emma (16) from Hurlford**





3. Interest in engaging with local food networks

Some young people felt ignored by decision-makers in their local area, including councils and policymakers. Those who took part had not heard about food partnerships but were interested in sharing their views and shaping their local food systems.

“A lot of people don’t like listening to kids, because apparently they’re not intelligent enough, but it would be nice if they did listen to kids, because it affects us as well, it’s not just adults.”

**Bilal (17) from Cardiff**

A number of participants reflected positively on their experience of being listened to as part of the Barnardo’s and Co-op partnership in their community.

“Young people like us barely get heard. So, it’s nice to have [a project] at school that we can help to shape.”

**Amy (11) from Salford**



Young people at our Plymouth service ‘Takeaway Tuesdays.’

“I thought setting up our [community pantry] project was quite exciting - that we were being listened to and that we had the chance to change our community. That doesn’t happen enough for young people, I wish there were more opportunities to do that.”

**Katie (16) from Hurlford**

“We started building [our food pantry] and now we’re actually able to help people. There are so many people that are struggling in Hurlford. Yeah. They’re deciding - do I pay this bill or do I get food. So being able to help people with our pantry – it’s so good just knowing that what we’ve done has made a difference.”

**Zack (17) from Hurlford**

**I don’t really feel like we’re being paid attention to... Nobody listens to children anymore because they just think that we’re too young to make a decision especially about food but it’s a big part of our lives.**

**Sarah (12) from Sedgemoor**



# Insights from food partnerships

## The opportunities and challenges of engaging young people

For this report we also interviewed seven food partnerships to understand how their work supported or involved young people. This included Shropshire Good Food Partnership, Acorn Food Network in Derry/Londonderry, Rochdale Food Partnership, Our Manchester Food Partnership, Monmouthshire Food Partnership, Hull Food Partnership and another urban food partnership that wished to remain anonymous. We also ran two focus groups with organisations that run community fridges – while these fridges are not the focus of this report, their experience of engaging young people can be applied to food partnerships.



### 1. Barriers to Youth Engagement

While all food partnerships we interviewed were interested in engaging young people, there were some practical and logistical challenges that could make this more difficult:

“The biggest barrier we get for engagement on the site with young people is transport costs... we did a questionnaire of every school across the district, and that was the number one barrier that schools have to access places like Acorn Farm.”

**(Acorn Food Network, Derry/Londonderry)**

“If we had our way, we would just find the right young people in environments where they are. But we are run through a board and it meets during the day. So that’s not going to work [for young people].”

**(Hull Food Partnership)**

“We generally tend to do [a food partnership meeting] in May and the young people we support to attend generally don’t come because of exams. So I think maybe there’s a lesson there. If we are really going to try and proactively engage young people, we need to be thinking about things like school holidays and exams.”

**(Food partnership in urban area)**

### 2. The Importance of Meeting Young People Where They Are

Successful engagement requires going to places and spaces where young people naturally congregate rather than expecting them to attend formal meetings:

“Young people are not going to meetings where people are taking minutes, formal things like that. It’s kind of not fun if you’re 18.”

**(Food partnership in urban area)**

“We’ve got to find what those opportunities are that young people do want to take part in. Some schools will want you to come and do activities around food and growing, and they might be one-off activities or time-limited.”

**(Hull Food Partnership)**

“If we are going to work with schools, we need some kind of understanding of how schools work, what the system is these days for getting into schools and engaging with young people.”

**(Monmouthshire Food Partnership)**

### 3. Utilising Existing Infrastructure and Partnerships

Rather than recruiting young people independently, food partnerships found success by collaborating with schools, youth organisations, and local youth oriented groups.

- “The local Youth Service has done a lot for us... there’s always someone who can help unlock young people for you.”  
**(Food partnership in urban area)**
- “Don’t try to recruit young people directly yourself... work through local schools, youth provisions, or voluntary youth organisations.”  
**(Hull Food Partnership)**
- “We’ve had students who have gone to farms for the first time. Kids who had never been in an area like that before. Imagine a child growing up in an urban area... we had kids go to a farmer’s field where they could see the horizon for the first time.”  
**(Shropshire Good Food Partnership)**

### 4. Ensuring Meaningful Involvement in Decision-Making

For engagement to be effective, young people need to feel their input has a tangible impact and is focussed around a specific project.

- “We want young people to have a direct input, from the food policy work we do to the projects we deliver... our first step is going to be setting up focus groups in schools.”  
**(Rochdale Food Partnership)**
- “All of this requires multi-step processes—we’ve got to trust kids to connect with food and engage with food in more than just a fairy cakes and pizza kind of way.”  
**(Shropshire Good Food Partnership)**

### 5. Youth as Change Agents for Food Systems

Young people bring fresh perspectives and can influence household food choices and local policy if empowered appropriately.

- “Young people can potentially have quite a big influence on what happens in the home... they could be quite influential.”  
**(Rochdale Food Partnership)**
- “The young people created recipes based on family traditions, then came to the community fridge and saw how they could get ingredients like apples for apple tart. It was a hands-on experience that made food systems real for them.”  
**(The Playtrail, Derry/Londonderry)**



# Recommendations

## What we know

Our research shows that just over half (54%) of all 383 local authorities in the UK are able to confirm that they are involved in a food partnership. Young people we spoke to for this research said that they wanted to share their views and help to shape the food system in their local area but did not feel this is easy to do. Food partnerships play an important role in strengthening local food networks, often at low cost, creating opportunities for young people to create a sense of belonging and ownership in their communities.

### Local authorities should:

- Support the establishment of a food partnership in every local authority area, bringing together local government, businesses, charities and community groups to promote access to nutritious and sustainable food. This approach should be flexible in how partnerships are structured and resourced, to reflect different local contexts.
- Support food partnerships to directly involve young people in their food partnership, embedding the 10 steps set out in this report and utilising existing youth voice mechanisms that already exist within local government.

## What we know

Food partnerships are already playing an active role in communities across the UK and ‘play a vital role in public health’.<sup>27</sup> Devolved nations have taken steps to support FPs. In 2022 the Welsh Government allocated £2.5m funding to support every local authority in Wales to develop a food partnership.<sup>28</sup> An interim analysis of the funding by the University of the West of England found the scheme had accelerated development of FPs in Wales and provided a platform for organisations to respond more strategically to local food issues.<sup>29</sup> The Scottish Government introduced the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act in 2022.<sup>30</sup> It includes provisions requiring local authorities to create, implement and consult on local food plans. The Act has been welcomed by existing FPs in Scotland.<sup>31</sup>

### UK Government should:

- Set out plans in its forthcoming National Food Strategy to ensure there is a food partnership in every area by 2030 and that young people are fully included in all food partnerships. This should articulate how local delivery through councils will be supported.

- Ensure the Government’s forthcoming Youth Strategy reflects the important role FPs can play in supporting and involving young people, including how this can be embedded through existing local government activity.
- Work with the Local Government Association, Sustainable Food Places, Feeding Britain and other organisations to promote best practice on food partnerships.
- Review how the Welsh funding model for food partnerships could be emulated across the UK to support the role out of FPs at low cost.
- Assess whether legislative changes, such as those set out in the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act, could be emulated across the UK to drive devolved leadership on improving local food systems.

## What we know

Effective food partnerships involve active local businesses, charities and community groups, working alongside local government. This can range from providing help with sourcing and selling local food and reducing waste to connecting young people with opportunities and initiatives from a food partnership.

### Businesses, charities and community groups should:

- Get involved in their food partnerships, starting with establishing links with local business networks or existing voluntary and community sector forums.
- Make the case for involving young people in their food partnerships using the evidence and tips from this report.

Young people preparing food at our service in Hurlford



# Reflections from our Youth Advisory Group

Our Co-op and Barnardo's Youth Advisory Group is made up of 13 young people aged 16-25. They help to inform, shape and influence all aspects of our partnership. Five members focus on policy and advocacy took part in interviews with different food partnerships. Below they share their key reflections from the interviews and what they learned from taking part in the research.



**Rebecca Woolford (24)**

My interview with my food partnership was extremely informative and showed me the scope of what FPs can do. Their focus on educating young people, for example on 'gleaning' was really interesting – this is where leftover produce in a field is harvested. Giving young people the chance to visit places like farms to see what farmers do and trust those young people to connect and engage with food was great to hear about. My key takeaway is that some FPs are already doing vital work to empower young people and take responsibility for shaping their food systems.



**Hamaam Shire (19)**

My interview with my food partnership showed me just how important a food partnership is to those who struggle the most, and more importantly how impactful it was to involve young people at the heart and start of it all. It's tricky to name just one important takeaway from my interview but I think I'd say the amazement of how far FP's can help community cohesion – that really stood out to me.



**Rachel Hasson (24)**

My main takeaway from my interview with Acorn Farm was that it is vital that we create more awareness, funding and capacity for FPs. In order to meaningfully engage young people at all levels of FPs we desperately need to break down barriers to youth participation. FPs are already doing great work, but they need more support in order to increase their impact on children and young people.



**Kyson Redd (22)**

Interviews with my food partnerships really highlighted some of the challenges that can come up when engaging young people in established and developing food partnerships. I was really impressed with the creative ways that FPs were working to tackle food insecurity in their areas. My key takeaway was that while running youth focussed projects is great, FPs can really go the extra mile by involving young people in their decision-making when it's possible.



**Ola Anretiolaoluwa (20)**

This report really highlights the critical role of food partnerships in addressing food poverty and fostering youth engagement. Despite their potential, FPs can lack structured youth involvement due to logistical barriers and perceptions that can marginalise voices. The findings emphasise the need to take an inclusive approach with young people to empower them to shape sustainable, equitable food systems.



# Youth Advisory Group's 10 steps for involving young people in your food partnership

Below are our 10 key steps for involving young people in your food partnership. We developed these in a workshop and from the interviews with food partnerships where we live across the UK.

At all stages of involving young people it's important to factor in these key principles:

- Safety and safeguarding:** this is always the top priority when working with young people. Check out [NSPCC's safeguarding resources](#) as a good starting point to understand the basics.
- Diversity and inclusion:** Young people are all different and a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. Consider protected characteristics and cultural differences – this may mean taking a different approach or way of working.
- Look for good practice:** You don't need to reinvent the wheel! We've included some examples in this report. Speak to other organisations like [Sustainable Food Places](#) and [Feeding Britain](#) to find out what's happening out there already. Check out [Barnardo's Voice & Influence Quality Standards](#).

Before Engaging Young People	1	<b>Work with Young People to Understand Their Needs and Barriers in Your Area</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Before launching youth initiatives, assess young people's specific needs and challenges in your area. Consider issues like transport, cost, and timing conflicts (e.g., exams).</li></ul>
	2	<b>Identify and Use Existing Youth Networks, Schools and Colleges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Consider partnering with schools, colleges, youth centres or charities instead of recruiting young people from scratch. These organisations may already have relationships and trust with young people.</li></ul>
	3	<b>Ensure There Is Clear Purpose and Value</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Young people should see a clear purpose in their involvement. Define specific roles, projects, or outcomes to avoid tokenism.</li></ul>

**Case Study: Hull Food Partnership**  
engaged young people by delivering healthy and sustainable eating workshops through established youth clubs. Identifying organisations that already had trusted relationships made it easier to run sessions that were both engaging and impactful.

"We are cautious of involving young people unless it's going to be a worthwhile and meaningful experience for them."  
**(Community Fridge Project)**

While Engaging Young People	4	<b>Go to Where Young People Are</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Don't expect all young people to come to formal meetings — consider engaging young people in schools, colleges, youth clubs, or online.</li></ul>
	5	<b>Make Engagement Interactive and Hands-On</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Involve young people in practical food activities such as cooking classes, growing projects, or community fridges. <i>"Taking part in the food project made me happy. It was something I was looking forward to. It makes me feel better because I know it's for a better cause."</i> <b>Zara, young person from Salford</b></li></ul>
	6	<b>Offer Leadership and Decision-Making Roles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Move beyond consultation—allow young people to shape or lead projects, design initiatives, or contribute to food policies.</li></ul>
	7	<b>Ensure Flexibility and Accessibility</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Be mindful of young people's schedules, offer multiple ways to engage (online, in-person, informal settings), and aim to cover costs like transport. Make an effort to ensure environments aren't intimidating and unnecessarily formal.</li></ul>
	8	<b>Recognise and Reward Contributions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Show young people that their involvement matters by providing incentives like training, or certificates for their CVs.</li></ul>

After Engaging Young People	9	<b>Show the Impact of Their Involvement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Report back on how young people's contributions shaped decisions, ensuring they feel valued and heard. <i>"I thought there was no way the pantry was going to take off, but it is really making a difference."</i> <b>Katie (16) young person from Hurlford</b></li></ul>
	10	<b>Keep the Relationship Going</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Youth engagement shouldn't be a one-off. Create long-term opportunities like youth ambassador roles or ongoing advisory groups. <i>"It would be brilliant to have children's views because they're the ones who are going to be growing up with these systems."</i> <b>(Our Manchester Food Partnership)</b></li></ul>

**Case Study: A food partnership who wanted to remain anonymous** in an urban area worked with young people to shape their local food strategy. They recruited young people to their food board which meets quarterly. Young people also took on the role of community researchers and engaged with schools. This provided unique insight which influenced the strategy development.

**Case Study: Shropshire FP** has created lasting opportunities for young people, ensuring ongoing engagement beyond one-off events. For the past 3 years they have run a food trail during school holidays, offering workshops, farm tours and funding for chefs to host cooking clubs, keeping young people actively involved throughout the year.

# About Barnardo's and Co-op

The following individuals and organisations contributed to the creation of this report:

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## About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong. .

## About Co-op

Co-op Group is one of the world's largest consumer co-operatives, operating across food retail, funerals, insurance, and legal services. Owned by over 6 million active member-owners, Co-op exists to meet their needs and champion the causes they care about.

With more than 2,300 food stores, 800 funeral homes and a wholesale business supplying around 6,000 additional outlets, Co-op employs 54,000 colleagues and generates annual revenues of over £11 billion. It is a recognised leader in ethical business and community-led programmes, creating long-term value for members and communities across the UK.



# Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Co-op and Barnardo's (March, 2025), Youth Opportunity Research

<sup>2</sup> Co-op and Barnardo's (March, 2025), Youth Opportunity Research

<sup>3</sup> Barnardo's and Co-op (2024) [‘A recipe for success’](#)

<sup>4</sup> Barnardo's and Co-op (2024) [‘A recipe for success’](#)

<sup>5</sup> Sustainable Food Places (2024), [‘Impact Report: Our Journey 2019 to 2024’](#), page 5

<sup>6</sup> Feeding Britain (2025), [‘What we do’](#)

<sup>7</sup> Barnardo's (2025), [‘Nourishing the Future: making healthy food accessible for every child’](#), page 3

<sup>8</sup> National Food Strategy (2021), <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

<sup>9</sup> NHS (2023) [Admissions for scurvy, rickets and malnutrition](#) – NHS England Digital

<sup>10</sup> Co-op and Barnardo's (March, 2025), Youth Opportunity Research

<sup>11</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), [‘Family Resources Survey’](#), Table 9.4. See also: UK Parliament (2023), [Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals](#), page 8

<sup>12</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), [‘Family Resources Survey’](#), Table 9.15

<sup>13</sup> National Lottery Community Fund (2022), [‘Press release: Community Research Index 2022’](#)

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2019) [The School Snapshot Survey: Winter 2018: Research report](#)

<sup>15</sup> Cullinane, C. and Montacute, R: Sutton Trust. (2017) [Life Lessons: Improving essential life skills for young people](#)

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Community Studies (2022) [Volunteering Journeys](#), page 12

<sup>17</sup> Barnardo's and Co-op (2023), [‘Youth Opportunities Tracker: Fairer Futures’](#)

<sup>18</sup> Barnardo's (2023), [‘Barnardo's and Co-op Partnership’](#)

<sup>19</sup> Barnardo's and Co-op (2024) [‘A recipe for success’](#), page 12

<sup>20</sup> Barnardo's and Co-op (2024) [‘A recipe for success’](#), page 14

<sup>21</sup> MHCLG (2024), [‘English Devolution White Paper’](#)

<sup>22</sup> We would like to note here the limitations of our FOI data. While most food partnerships will be engaging with their local authority, some active food partnerships may be operating independently of their local authority and therefore not appear in our dataset. Our dataset therefore only provides a partial lens on the activities of food partnerships and only includes those working with local authorities.

<sup>23</sup> The table only includes parties that had a majority in more than 5 local authorities

<sup>24</sup> Barnardo's (2025), [‘Nourishing the Future: making healthy food accessible for every child’](#)

<sup>25</sup> Barnardo's SEEN (2024), [‘Driving Healthy Futures: Fuelling Food Equity’](#)

<sup>26</sup> Barnardo's (2025), [‘Nourishing the Future: making health food accessible for every child’](#), page 27.

<sup>27</sup> Local Government Association, [‘Maximising impact: the vital role of food partnerships in public health’](#)

<sup>28</sup> Sustain (2023), [‘Wales: Food partnerships well equipped to coordinate government funding’](#)

<sup>29</sup> University of the West of England (2023), [‘Local Food Partnerships in Wales: Interim Report June 2023’](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Good Food Nation \(Scotland\) Act \(2022\)](#), Section 10 (not yet in force)

<sup>31</sup> Sustainable Food Place (2023), [‘The Good Food Nation Act in Scotland: weaving together policies for a fair, just and sustainable food system’](#)



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