



CIVIL FOOD RESILIENCE IN SUSSEX

Author: Ali Ghanimi,
Head of Partnerships and Programmes
Brighton & Hove Food Partnership



BRIGHTON & HOVE
FOOD
PARTNERSHIP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The Sussex Food System	5
Summary of Key Challenges	8
Local Initiatives Strengthening Food Resilience	9
Recommendations	10
Conclusion	12



INTRODUCTION

“The UK’s post-War food system, while revolutionary in its time, is no longer fit for purpose. To safeguard our future, we must prioritise resilience at every level – from local communities to national frameworks. Food resilience is not just about surviving a crisis but thriving despite it.”

- Just in Case: 7 steps to narrow the UK civil food resilience gap

Civil food resilience is the capacity of communities to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions in their food systems. This report evaluates Sussex’s current landscape and makes recommendations to strengthen long-term regional resilience.

How food secure is the UK?

The UK is one of the least food self-sufficient countries in Europe, producing just over half of its food. According to the Government’s UK Food Security Report (2025), the UK remains highly dependent on imported food, particularly fruits, vegetables and seafood and there has been a notable decrease in food security among households.

The Food Foundation’s Food Insecurity Survey (2025), revealed that 14% of households (7.3 million adults) were affected by food insecurity and 1 in 9 households with children not on Free School Meals had smaller meals or skipped meals due to affordability or access issues.

Recent national analyses highlight systemic vulnerabilities in the UK food system, with the Just in Case report [Lang, Neumann & So, 2025] calling for legislative, logistical, and infrastructural reforms to close the UK’s “civil food resilience gap.”

New UK analysis, published in the Journal Sustainability, consulted more than 30 food system experts from academia, government and industry. They highlighted the many existing chronic issues including the climate crisis, low incomes, poor farming policy and fragile just-in-time supply chains, “have created a tinderbox for a food crisis in the UK”.

Shocks such as extreme weather events, cyber-attacks or international conflict, the analysis found, could tip this vulnerable system into a full-blown food crisis, which could lead to increased social tension and hidden market sales of unsafe food and, in the worst-case scenario, civil unrest or riots.

While our food system is highly efficient, it is also highly centralised and brittle which reduces our resilience to shocks. Nine big retailers account for 94.5% of all retail food in the UK which are 'fed' by just 131 distribution centres. Should these retail giants be targeted, like the Marks and Spencer cyber-attack of November 2025, the impact on the public would be considerable.

Yet, while many other countries have emergency stockpiles in case of war, food contamination or climate shocks, the UK government's advice to households is to have three days' worth of food in their cupboards. The government has no plans to improve the UK's self-sufficiency, and refuses to set a target for food production.

The escalating conflict with Iran has exposed another critical dependency: energy. Modern agriculture is deeply reliant on fossil fuels - not just for transport, but for fertiliser production. A fifth of world crude oil and half the world's fertiliser passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Disruptions here affect everything from crop yields to food prices. UK food prices are already 38% higher than pre-Covid levels and food inflation is predicted to rise to 10% this year as a result of the conflict.

In 2022 the UK was self sufficient in 60% of domestic food production, a reduction from 78% in 1984





THE SUSSEX FOOD SYSTEM

In 2021, Sussex had 220,071 hectares of farmed land (3,145 holdings). Cereals dominate crop production, accounting for 27% of farmland, while general cropping and horticulture occupy 14% and 3% respectively. We have no clear data of how much food produced in Sussex is consumed here. Research indicates the proportion is likely low due to supply-chain centralisation and lack of infrastructure. Many Sussex farms, especially dairy and

livestock, are tied into national buyers or contracts (e.g., Supermarkets and Arla milk contracts), meaning they do not primarily serve the local market. Labour shortages across horticultural trades, meat processing and food production have become a persistent structural issue since 2020. Brexit and COVID-19 have disrupted migrant labour pipelines and 1 in 4 food and farming workers are due to retire in the next decade.

Structural Vulnerabilities

Food insecurity has persisted amid cost-of-living pressures, described as a continuing food emergency. There are significant areas of deprivation along the coast, and up towards the north of the county. Fareshare Sussex and Surrey, and UKHarvest alone provided enough food for more than 12 million meals last year. Brighton and Hove Food Partnership provides the most comprehensive picture of food insecurity in the county, tracking food bank use since 2014 through the city's Emergency Food Network Report. In the last decade there has been a 400% increase in the number of food parcels provided in the city, and an

almost 300% increase in the total number of local food support services operating.

Half those seeking food support do so on an ongoing basis. Because the survey only takes account of the people who come forward to seek food support the high numbers (5,800 people per week) are likely to be only the tip the iceberg. National surveys like Hunger in the UK 2025 show that over half the people who experience hunger and food insecurity do not seek food support and instead go without essentials.

Climate Resilience and Nature Recovery

Of the UK's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, 38% is generated by our food system (including food imports). The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Farming practices and climate change were the biggest causes of wildlife decline on our land, rivers and lakes.

UK farm yields are increasingly shaped by more volatile and extreme weather patterns. Last year Britain had the hottest and driest spring on record, and the hottest summer, with drought conditions widespread. Recent winters have brought record or near-record rainfall leaving Sussex farmland submerged and food rotting in fields. Three of the five worst harvests on record have now occurred since 2020. As a result, the production of the five staple arable crops – wheat, oats, spring and winter barley, and oilseed rape – fell by 20% compared with the 10-year average, according to the analysis by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU).

A University of Sussex analysis on Sussex's Local Nature Recovery Strategies (2025) argues that food is the missing ingredient, and that food production, nature recovery, and land use planning must be integrated to avoid reinforcing inequalities and ecological harm. From a food resilience perspective, people's ability to access healthy, affordable, nature-friendly food is shaped by these broader structural issues.



Planning

There is a conflict between Planning and food security. Land is not strategically protected for food growing, yet the more land we lose to development, the less food we can produce, thereby decreasing our resilience. Planners do not tend to treat food systems as critical infrastructure, like energy, water or transport. There is no benchmark data on what land for food production is lost, nor how much food we produce locally/regionally, and where it goes.

Local authority planners and the South Downs National Park Authority can do more to protect agricultural land and give higher priority to food production through local land-use planning. They can:

- Enable small-scale, agrecological farming and market gardens.
- Increase community food growing through policies like a “Right to Grow” on unused public land.
- Use tools such as Local Plans, and planning guidance to support food access and production - such as Brighton and Hove’s [Planning Advice Note for Food Growing and Development](#).
- Assess land for its potential to support food growing as part of planning decisions.
- Design neighbourhoods for walkable access to fresh, healthy food.
- Include food considerations in housing, public spaces, and transport planning.

Given the vulnerability and sustainability of our current global supplies, and because as a nation we are not eating enough for a healthy diet, more fruit and vegetable production in the UK is needed. Shortening supply chains brings food closer to consumers and builds better understanding of how our food is produced.





Regional Food Economy and Infrastructure

A [report by Sustain](#) (2022), set out to map local infrastructure in East Sussex and Lancashire and found a lack of data on what was available. It highlighted concern among food producers of the ever-decreasing amount of local infrastructure and that farmers wanted more facilities for processing, storage, packing and distribution.

The increasing centralisation of food supply-chains forces producers deeper into national and global markets they cannot control. This often leaves them reliant on one buyer which [squeezes their profits](#), sometimes leaves them producing food at a loss or with food they are unable to sell, contributing to [food waste](#). Nearly one-third of English [farms were loss-making in 2023-24](#).

[Greater Brighton's food scoping report](#) (2022), identifies structural bottlenecks that limit the region's food production resilience, as well as areas of opportunity in horticulture, livestock, fisheries, and supply chain diversification. Sussex possesses strong potential for SME-led innovation, circular economy models, and climate-aligned livelihoods, but requires strategic coordination to overcome infrastructure gaps.

Initiatives like [Sussex Grazed](#), have highlighted the importance of shortening supply chains to enable more sustainably produced food while exposing the risks to current food infrastructure such as the county's one [remaining small abattoir](#).

In summary

The key challenges for civil food resilience in Sussex

1. Fragmented supply chains with barriers in scaling and distribution.
2. Climate-related crop risks, biodiversity pressures, land-use change and extreme weather increase production uncertainty.
3. Limited local processing and storage infrastructure.
4. Over-reliance on emergency food provision.
5. Socioeconomic disparities and cost-of-living pressures disproportionately affect food access for low-income communities.



LOCAL INITIATIVES STRENGTHENING FOOD RESILIENCE

Food Partnerships as System Anchors

Sussex has developed an extensive network of local food partnerships which serve as vehicles for both emergency response and long-term systems transformation. Their activities include the development of local food strategies and plans, coordination of emergency food networks, teaching food growing and cookery skills, reducing food waste, shortening local food supply chains, supporting farmers to transition to more sustainable food production and campaigning for better local food infrastructure.

Sussex and South Downs Local Food Plan

Initiated by the Arun & Chichester Food Partnership, [this plan](#) aims to expand agroecological local food production and strengthen regional supply chains. The project includes establishing baseline data, convening food system actors, and drafting multi-year action plans—with a national goal to grow agroecological food markets tenfold by 2030.

Community Food Hubs and Waste Reduction

West Sussex County Council funds [countywide community food hubs](#) in partnership with UKHarvest. In 2024/25, these hubs prevented over 181 tonnes of food from going to waste, providing 50,687 residents with low cost access to surplus, nutritious food. The programme runs monthly in each district and integrates public education on waste reduction and wellbeing.

While West Sussex's community food hubs have funding to 2027, East Sussex relies more on smaller community organisations and pantries which have faced funding uncertainty, highlighting vulnerability in grassroots food resilience without long-term support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

for strengthening local food resilience

Establish a Local Food Resilience Committee

To de-risk local food supply chains, unify district-level partnerships and guide planning, monitoring, and cross-county investment. To include representatives from food partnerships, councils, supply chain businesses, voluntary sector etc.



Integrate Food into Community Risk Registers

Risk assessments should include food supply and food insecurity risks, assess gaps and vulnerabilities in the food system, consider local conditions and community responses.

Map Food Assets Across the County

Including farm/farm clusters, wholesalers, food infrastructure, potential food storage facilities, community food projects, markets, distribution networks.



Develop and Promote a Sussex-wide Food Strategy

Incorporate commitments on community food resilience and supply chain security, underpinned by further research into food vulnerabilities, crisis impacts and resilience measures.

Expand Agroecological and Regenerative Food Production

Support policies that scale up regenerative farming, soil restoration, and conservation grazing projects (e.g. Sussex Grazed). Strengthening these systems reduces reliance on imported food and enhances ecological health.



RECOMMENDATIONS

for strengthening local food resilience

Ensure Planning Facilitates the Availability of Land for Food Growing

For example through [A Right to Grow](#) policy. Green belts around towns and cities should be considered as food resilience zones.



Invest in Processing, Storage, and Distribution Hubs

Develop mid-tier infrastructure to support shorter supply chains, allowing small farms to supply schools, care homes, local retailers, and independent markets at scale.

Invest in Food Education and Skills

Food education should be an integral part of the school curricula, while accessible, professional courses should be developed for sustainable farming and agri-food jobs that are at risk of disappearing in the next decade.

Integrate Food into Climate and Nature Strategies

Ensure Local Nature Recovery Strategies explicitly align with food system transformation goals, recognising the interdependence between nature, food access, and social justice.



Strengthen Community Food Security Mechanisms

Implement a “[food ladders](#)” approach to supporting households through and out of food insecurity. These models are holistic, sustainable, build financial skills and support community networks while restoring individual dignity and agency.

Build Public Awareness and Civil Engagement

Run regional campaigns to encourage consumption of locally produced food, echoing the [Sussex Six](#) initiative and related campaigns. Promote and encourage community food coops and initiatives such as [Community Supported Agriculture](#).



CONCLUSION

In the new national food strategy policy paper, the Government sets out the importance of an approach grounded in place.

“The UK food system is made up of many smaller food systems at a national, regional, community and household level... Food is often at the heart of communities... One size does not fit all. We need to unlock expertise, energy and experience at a local level to deliver improved outcomes where they are most needed.”

Sussex has a strong foundation of food partnerships, agroecological initiatives, research expertise, and community mobilisation. However, strengthening civil food resilience requires coordinated, systems-level action that bridges environmental recovery, economic development, and social justice. By investing in local infrastructure, transforming food procurement policies, integrating food into climate and nature strategies, and supporting community driven approaches, Sussex can lead the way in building a resilient, equitable, and sustainable regional food future.

