



## Interview with Leon Ballin, program manager of the British food network Sustainable Food Places

Sustainable Food Places website: [www.sustainablefoodplaces.org](http://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org)

*Intervista effettuata il 25 ottobre 2024, a cura di Egidio Dansero (Università di Torino), Riccardo Bruno (Politecnico di Torino) e Joel Solé Lamich (Università di Cordoba).*

Leon Ballin has over twelve years of experience with the Soil Association, one of the founding organizations of Sustainable Food Places. He is currently the program manager of the network, which is made up of several partner organizations. In the past, he served as a food coop coordinator for Sustain, another founding member, and assumed responsibility for network coordination a few years after its beginning in 2011.

### How did your food network emerge?

It is an origin story; it is not a hundred percent clear, but sometimes around 2011. There was someone from each of the three partner organizations, the Soil Association, who I work for; Sustain; and Food Matters. So one thing to say about Sustainable Food Places is that it is a partnership of other organizations. Thus some members of those food organizations were coming together, and they were thinking about “how do we really make an impact?” Mostly because we’ve never had anything like a national food strategy in the UK, and we still haven’t. So it was about how can we make a difference? And there was a thinking about what would look like a place-based level. And then there was a bit of research, and they looked into the American Food Policy Councils and the German ones and other networks and so on, and thought they needed something like a food partnership to make a difference. But that needs to have a bit of rigour with it. Therefore it needs to be cross-sector. You’ve got business, the

community sector, and the public sector (local governments), all working together. That was one thing that seemed to work with a bit of research that they did. And also that it needs to be a whole food system approach. That if you’re only looking at one part of the system, say health or farming or any other... If you’ve got a system that needs changing, then you need a systems approach. And if you just focus on one area, you end up pushing the problem somewhere else. That was the idea. And they thought, “What do we do now?” And they went for a bit of funding. They got a little bit of funding. This is before I started. And then for two years, they floated this idea, called it Sustainable Food Cities. They got, I think, six cities together to say, “We’ll engage; we’ll try and make this work.” So existing food activists in those cities, that included local authorities in some cases, gave them a little bit of funding and said, “Let’s see what happens with this food partnership idea.” And it seemed to work. Things seemed to have a greater impact from that collective action in these cities than if they were all working individually. That took about two years (2013/2014).

That's when I started. So then we went into phase two of the program, which got some more substantial funding, and we were able to become Sustainable Food Cities, properly as the support network for those emerging local food partnerships. And then we had phase three, which is the last five years, again, with quite substantial funding. And so the whole thing has grown quite a lot. And we've just heard actually two weeks ago that we've got a phase four, which will last three years, but with a much reduced amount of funding. What our funders are looking for now is that our network and our movement take control of the program itself. Therefore a much more devolved and democratized setup.

### **You have already talked a little about it, but which kind of financial support have you received?**

So initially, and all the way through, there's a funder called Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. They're actually very big, they are like the third or second-biggest funder in the UK. But they're under the radar a bit. Not many people have heard of them. You can see them on their website, but they're an unusual setup. I think they were set up by a sort of benevolent banker back in the 1920s, and then, the money from this sort of investment fund goes into this charity that is dispersed to good causes. A little bit unsure about where the money comes from, to be honest, but that's true of most funders. So they have supported us all the way through. They supported us for 10 years with quite substantial funding. I think it was 2 million in phase one, 3 in phase two, and 2.5 million in phase three. And now 3/4 of a million sterling for three years for the final, well, for them will be the final phase. They're not going to fund us anymore, they've given us a lot of money. In phase 3, we also got money from the national lottery, which matched the Esmée funding, that was another 2.5 million to make a 5 million pound program in phase 3, which was 2019 til this year (finishes in a month). Lottery again, we're unsure. But that's where the money comes from. It's profits from gambling. So we're a little

unsure about that ethically. But that's the way it is. And a lot of phase 3 was grants to our members, a lot of that money was then redistributed to grants to our members around the UK. We've also had little bits of funding with partnerships with academia and research institutes. But our members around the country have to find their own funding as well. So it's that model. However, we're now actively looking for more funding because we want to go beyond this next phase. But not from Esmée. There are other funders out there.

### **Which are the network's goals?**

I'd say the primary goal is that we have a food partnership in every local authority area across the UK. We don't define our food partnerships, they can be a different geography other than a local authority area. And that works in many areas. So a food partnership in every county and city, probably every town (we don't do villages, they are too small). That is one of our goals. And the other goal is that they're supported and funded locally. Well, the ultimate goal is a more sustainable food system, I suppose. So that's our goal, a food system that works for people, works for the planet, and is equitable, healthy, supports food producers, is also culturally appropriate, exciting, fun, and sharing, thus like a good food movement. But to get there, we think we need a food partnership in every authority area. A mechanism to support those food partnerships. And we also think there should be a national food strategy. So that in Westminster, but also in each of the devolved nations (so Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales), there should be a strategy that helps direct food activity. Because there isn't. It's all done a bit here and a bit there, all left to the free market. And we think food is different from other areas, so it shouldn't be left to the free market. These two are the main goals, really, to achieve.

### **Because you mentioned the national level, are you doing any kind of advocacy or activities to go further here?**

Yes, so we've got 111 members across the UK. It's about to go to about 115 members, which is 111 places, with an active food partnership, doing good stuff. One of our roles as the program is to amplify their voices at a national level. And we do that in various ways. We lobby directly to government. We're doing that in about two weeks. We go to Parliament once a year for our day of action. And we bring together all the members of Parliament that we can get, usually quite a lot, and we talk about food and say why it's important that they support certain food policies. We bring together our members as well, and they can meet their MPs and lobby directly. So we do some direct lobbying. Also when there's a consultation out around procurement or health, or whatever that's related to food, we engage with that consultation on behalf of our members. We support our members to be able to do lobbying and public affairs work locally, and support them to engage nationally. So we do it as the program. It's actually more powerful when you hear from a hundred places around the UK say something, than this program says it. Therefore we tend to go down that route.

We've had some successes. We've helped influence the Good Food Nation Act in Scotland. Also, we managed to influence the Welsh government to give money out to every food partnership in Wales, where there wasn't one, so to set one up. Wales is way ahead of England. We also did have a national food strategy that was put to parliament, led by someone called Henry Dimbleby. That looked like it was going to become policy, but then it got scrapped at the last minute. We thought we were nearly there. But that's government, isn't it?

### **What kind of members do you have in your network? It's made up of?**

It's pretty diverse. To join Sustainable Food Places, what we ask is that you have an active food partnership that is cross sector. So you've got people around the table from local government, from the community, and from business. And that you're at least trying to take a whole food systems view. We know that's really difficult. There's always local priorities, for instance, the big priority across the UK at the moment is food poverty. So we understand that some things will be prioritized and other things might be further down the list. But that's what you need to join. We have membership criteria and we have probably two membership rounds a year. And if you don't meet it, we just say, "Do a bit more work, come back and join". So it's not that easy to join. But the places that join, they're all food partnerships. Some are led by, or at least hosted by, the local authority. I'd say about 40%. The majority, about 60%, or just under, are led by a community organization, a third sector organization. Very occasionally, we get a business lead, very rarely, I think we've got one or two. So they're diverse in that way. They're also in very different areas. We've got everything from the city of Birmingham, which is the biggest local authority in Europe (it's enormous), right to somewhere such as Rotherham, which is a very small city near where I am in Sheffield. We've got some towns, seaside, coastal places, boroughs (like London boroughs), and quite a lot of counties, where they have very interesting rural affairs. Also, we have some members that do not quite fit the political boundaries, like the one that calls itself North Lancashire. There's a bit of an area, but that's what they want to do, and that's fine. We do also have members that work at a city-region level. So there are members in London boroughs, such as Brixton or Lewisham, and we've also got a greater London member that does work that all those boroughs can't do together. And the same in Manchester. We've got a greater Manchester member, and then separate Manchester borough members. So it's quite

a diverse mix. If you've got a food partnership, you meet the criteria, and you can join basically.

### **Have you institutionalized the network in some way, like a document, manifesto, statute?**

We do quite a lot of communications, and in that, there is the kind of our ethos and so on. There's quite a bit on the website, on the landing page, that says this is what we're about. We haven't got a manifesto as such, but we do make statements about the food system, about different parts of the food system, and about diversity. We've got an anti-racism statement, for instance. An actual, I'd say we haven't. I mean, it's quite unusual, because we're now a partnership between six organizations. Because our nation partners in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are also full members in this next phase of work. It's quite hard having six partners, but it's great. So I don't think we have a single charter or manifesto. Our members do. We recommend that they have a charter or manifesto, but we don't. Maybe we haven't found the need to. It's a good question, actually. Maybe we should get one.

### **Who is managing the network nowadays?**

The network is managed by a team within those partner organizations. My role is to manage that team, so I'm the program manager. And then we have different roles within that. We have someone who's a network coordinator, a communications lead, and so on. We have our colleagues in Sustain who run our campaigns. Our colleagues in Food Matters who look at our relationship with academia, and also run our diversity strand. So there's a whole bunch of us that have different roles within the program. And that's the operational team. We get together quite regularly to talk and plan and communicate, either face-to-face or online. We also have a program management board, which is led by senior people in each of our partner organizations. So we've got a board, an operational team,

and that's how the network is managed. The big difference that we're looking at in the next three years is moving some of that governance to our members. That is a much more member owned management way of working, which will be challenging but really exciting as well.

### **How the network is related to the experiences of individual places?**

Our structure for joining and our support that we offer, other than the things that I keep mentioning, the idea of being cross sector, taking a food systems approach, we don't really stipulate. We know that everywhere is going to have to do things their own way. So if you went to a partnership meeting or a network meeting, such as in Camden in London, it's going to feel very different to going to one in Fife, in Northern Scotland. We just say, "You do what's best for your locality. You know your needs. You know your population and your demographics, your communities. So you adapt to that. And we support you to do that." In this sense, sometimes we set up separate networks. We have a separate counties network because they want to talk about farming and land use, thus we support them with that. Places come together around issues as well. The big issue in the area might be food poverty, or it might be housing, that sometimes relates to food, such as food access. So we don't stipulate how a local food partnership manages itself. We've got a lot of support materials around. We do an awards program, which is an evidence proof of changing your food system locally. And it's a bronze, silver, gold way of doing that. At the beginning of those awards, we say, "talk about your place. What's different about your place?" And then that helps inform how we read the rest of the awards application. But there you'll see very, very different short paragraphs about that place and their food system. And they're hugely different. So we really just create the space for them to operate. And then they do that best. They're the experts, not us. An example might be where I live, in Sheffield, an old ex-industrial town, where there's a food partner-

ship. The issues we've got here are around communities that we used to have in work and are now very marginalized. There are a lot of food access issues here. Whereas if you went somewhere like Oxfordshire, which is a county, their issues are a lot of stuff around farming and who's going to take the farm on next, that transition. Also, how is the land being used, and so on. So they just adapt depending on where they are.

### **What kind of activities do you carry on within the network?**

We do quite a lot of online stuff. We have something called "our coordinate catch-up," a monthly drop-in session, where the lead from each of our places can come and talk about anything they want. We have online sessions around very specific areas. For instance, procurement, which is always very difficult because it's quite complicated; or around making a good food movement; or about community engagement... So we do a whole range of online sessions. We also do a lot of peer-to-peer activity. I'd say that's probably our strongest thing. So we actively put one place in touch with another. We'll pay for them to exchange and have a visit. I think that's where they learn the most or get the most out of. Thus we do a lot of peer-to-peer support. We also have a toolkit that anybody can use and access (you don't need to be a member). We have physical meetings. We try and do regional meetups. Such as in the Northeast of England, where they meet quite regularly as a group. All the members around there, that seems to be really valuable. We have an annual conference, which we just had. We produce quite a bit of support materials as well. Also, I'd say what's really strong, and actually it doesn't really cost hardly anything, is our email forum. It's based on a platform called Rise Up, which is a community activism email forum platform. And there, anyone can ask anything. It might be something like, "Oh, do you know a vegetarian catering coventry?" Or it might be, "How do you engage national government with procurement?" It can be anything, huge range. And you get really good answers. It's not just our membership, actually, it's a bit

wider. You're free to join, by the way. And it's good answers, no chitchat, lot of expertise. That's a brilliant thing. We really like our forum. We have a newsletter, a bit of social media, quite a lot.

Our resources on our website are free to anyone who wants to connect with it. And your network is welcome to use that, or connect with any of our members, actually. If a city wants to connect with a city, we can support that. The problem is, we used to do a lot more of this work, and then Brexit happened. So our European connections have gone down, because there's not that sort of collaboration between the academic networks in Europe and the UK anymore. It's a real shame. And yeah, we welcome these connections.

### **We saw on your website you also organize a prize. How was it called? Sustainable Food Cities Award.**

Oh, yes. We love the awards. They're quite hard to manage. But they are, as far as we know, the only evidenced whole food system place-based award in the world. So they're quite hard to achieve. You have to show evidence. Thus the award is for the place. But we also want to see that the food partnership has made a difference. And very often, the food partnership is making a difference by connecting different people up and organizations up, or creating space or catalyzing activity. It's quite hard to evidence, but we still ask them to do it. And they do. So they submit an award application, and certain members of the team assess it. They either get an award or don't. And they're really successful. Locally, our members find it really useful for getting play in and getting momentum from different stakeholders because it's something to focus on, isn't it, an award? And politicians love awards, so that helps get the politicians on board.

Membership and awards are the two kinds of benchmarks for where a food partnership is at. They have to join, which says something about

what they're doing. And then, if they want, they can go for a bronze, silver, or gold. Bronze is really evidence of an active food partnership and some work going on. Silver is the sort of thing you might put on a national stage. And gold, we think it's for international level activities. That's really tough to use. All our gold award winners have been in existence for around 10 years. So it takes quite a while to get that. But you can see all the awards, click through and actually read them, if you want as well<sup>1</sup>.

### **You already mentioned it, but can you explain a bit more what is your idea of a local food policy?**

It's an interesting one because there is a limit to what can be achieved locally without any national framework. So that's always going to be a challenge. But a good local food policy or strategy should, first of all, should be well consulted on. Thus, you can't have somebody from the local authority sitting in a dark room writing it and then saying, "here's your food policy". It won't work, never does. It has to be collaborative. So there are some things that a local authority can do, that no one else can do, like planning, some procurement, public health, all those kinds of things. But then there are some things that the community can do much, much better than local authority. Such as community engagement, building a good food movement, getting into communities and making a difference where the local authority might not be welcome. And then there are some things that business can do. What does a really good high street look like for food? That kind of thing. So first thing is, if you're going to have a local food strategy or policy, you have to engage everybody that wants to engage, that it's going to affect. And it can't be owned by any one organization or sector. And then we say, "Be realistic and be ambitious." Thus you need some stuff that's just going to be really good, and you can do really quickly. Or it's stuff that you're already doing, maybe. So it inspires confidence in people. But then also be ambitious. Maybe make a

decision, for instance, about what you put in your vending machines in a health center. Or think about land. What land can you free up for people to grow on, either as a local authority or a landowner...? Therefore it's a mix of the two. We've seen people who have food policies or strategies locally that don't get actioned. They just sit on a shelf somewhere and then everyone forgets about them. So the policy is just the start. If you don't have a clear action plan with who's going to do what and when, and they could be held to account, then they don't really work. I mean, a good example is what's happening in the Food Policy Pact. A lot of cities signed up to that and then did absolutely nothing. We've been talking to them recently. And there's the Barcelona Challenge<sup>2</sup> stuff going on as well, which is quite interesting. But how do you hold leaders to account if they sign up to stuff? So it's a similar problem. We have this thing in the UK where local authorities were declaring a climate emergency. Declare a climate emergency and then do absolutely nothing. Thus we produced a tool to check them to see if they were and hold them to account, called Every Mouthful Counts. And this was post-COP26 because that was in Glasgow. We thought that would be a good opportunity. So the main thing, I would rather see a relatively so small, not too ambitious, food policy that gets enacted, than this amazing document that solves the world's problems and then nobody does anything with. Besides, we do support local areas with developing food policies. We can get local and say, "Look, this is how we would do it." This is how we would consult. Some places find it useful, some don't. Our relationship with local authorities is generally very good. I'd say every food policy has a good relationship with their local authority, or with a bit of it. Maybe not all of it, a bit of it. Because if you don't, it's really difficult. We try and get local authorities to work together within their local authority. Quite often a food partnership meeting, and there'll be someone from planning, someone from health, someone from business, and from the local authority. And we'll say, "have you ever all been in a

1 Sustainable Food Places Awards website. [www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/awards/](http://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/awards/)

2 <https://thebcnchallenge.org>

room together?" And they go, "no". "So that's why you need a food partnership." They've never even met each other. Thus, working and joining up within local authorities is one thing that we try to support. But we have good relationships with local authorities.

There's also a national organization called Local Government Association. They bring together all local authorities and support them as a network. So we've got a good relationship with them as well. And that's quite helpful. And then national government depends on who we're talking to. Got a little bit of a relationship with DEFRA, which is the food and farming bit of national government. I mean, you probably read the news. Our government's just been chaotic for a long time. I mean, who do you talk to? We're hoping for a bit more stability now with the Labour government. And we'll get some conversations going.

### **What are the relationships with the world of research and the grassroots associations or businesses?**

Our relationship with researchers particularly has changed. Our main support locally was usually public health and the local authority. They were very interested in the negative health impact of diet and they knew that they weren't really getting anywhere with their policies. So they wanted to try a systems approach, that is wider determinants of health approach. And a good way to do that is to have a food partnership. They are still very supportive, but their budgets have been cut quite a lot. But increasingly, we've found that our relationship with research institutes is really, really good. And the research in the universities or research funding, there seems to be a bit of a change. It used to be quite extractive, like "we'll come and study you. You won't get anything out of it. We'll go away and write a paper." But now we've had quite a few relationships either with the program or with our members where it's been much more practical. Thus looking at the impact by doing. They've actually put money in to have active research that benefits the food partnership and the local

population, but also gets really good data and research for them. So that's grown quite a lot. And it's going to grow even more. We've got some really good contacts with quite major research institutes in the UK. They've got a lot more money than local governments. There's one called UKRI, UK Research and Innovation, which will give out large amounts of money for research. We've been working with them on a few projects, one called Fix Our Food, one called Bean Meals, which is quite interesting around procurement. So that's a growing relationship. The difficulty we've found is you've all got to speak the same language, and not everybody speaks the language of academia, do they? And applications can be quite complex. And so there's a bit of navigating. We've got someone called Callum, who works with us and is also an academic.

### **The name of the network first had the word "cities" and now you have "places". Why this change?**

I think cities made sense to start with. They're very well defined, and you sort of know where you are with them. But we already had members that were in cities. I think the first one was County Durham, but also the London boroughs; they're not cities. They're boroughs within cities. And so they were saying, "It feels a bit weird as calling ourselves cities." At one point, we thought that we could have a sustainable food borough or a sustainable food county. And then we thought, "Forget all that; we'll just call it places." So we made that change, and then we had funding specifically to go and get non-cities on board, which we did and worked quite well. Thus it just felt like a natural expansion, to be honest. It wasn't a difficult move at all. And also, if we talk about food, you've got to talk about food production. Food production generally happens outside the cities, so it just makes sense to include that.