



Bury: A Local Food System Revolution



Executive Summary

Over the past five years Bury Council have worked alongside the Soil Association and pioneering individuals across the region, reworking their food system by harnessing a deep understanding of the vital interconnections that influence and impact decisions around food throughout their community.

Key achievements include the delivery of **Food for Life Served Here** Gold certification across all 56 local authority schools, leading to procurement changes, including a shift to 25% organic produce and the use of local suppliers such as **Organic North** and **Dunsters Farm**. These changes have not only improved food quality but also generated a one-off cost saving of £50,000 while strengthening regional supply chains and feeding thousands of children a day.

Environmental gains have also been significant. Using the **Cool Food Pro environmental calculator**, schools demonstrated measurable reductions in carbon emissions, improvements in water quality, and increased biodiversity protection through menu changes. In parallel, the borough achieved a Sustainable Food Places Silver Award

in 2024 and holds the **Green Kitchen Standard**, reflecting excellence in sustainable food and kitchen practices.

The combination of these interventions highlight the impact of connecting strategic leadership, evidence-based frameworks, and grassroots engagement. Bury's experience demonstrates that systemic food transformation is achievable at a local level, delivering tangible benefits for health, the environment, and the economy.

At a time when school food and health inequalities are in the spotlight once more this collaborative approach at community and strategic level offers insights into what can be achieved when working together towards a common goal.



Introduction

This report examines the transformation of Bury’s local food system, outlining the strategic approach, key interventions, and measurable outcomes achieved since the introduction of the borough’s food strategy, Eat, Live, Love Food 2020–2025.

Developed by Bury Council with collaboration from the Soil Association, the strategy marked a turning point in addressing long-standing health and environmental challenges linked to food.

At the time of the strategy’s development, Bury faced a range of interconnected issues, including rising population pressures, significant health inequalities, and increasing rates of obesity among both children and adults. Dietary patterns were below national averages for fruit and vegetable consumption, and disparities in health outcomes were evident across different communities within the borough.

Recognising that food systems are complex but central to public health and sustainability, Bury adopted a whole-system approach. This involved aligning policy, procurement, education, and community engagement to create a healthier and more sustainable local food culture. The report explores how this vision has been translated into practice, highlighting the role of partnerships, structured frameworks and, foremost, pragmatic and passionate local leadership in driving change.

Timeline on the Soil Association frameworks and memberships engaged with Bury Council and Bury Food Partnership



Bury Vision for Food:

For Bury to be at the forefront of promoting and celebrating good food for all, through a knowledgeable, connected, supported and vibrant food culture.

Implementing the Bury Food Strategy:

The team in Bury wasted no time in starting to implement the core actions identified in their Food Strategy. Francesca Vale, Public Health Practitioner at Bury Council, had been involved with various Soil Association programmes across the years and joined **Soil Association’s My Food Community** leadership programme in 2021 as one of the original cohort. Funded by the National Lottery as part of the Food for Life Get Togethers programme My Food Community brought together good food champions across the UK and to learn, connect and take action to build leadership across the food movement. Adopting the My Food Community leadership techniques and building a strong local network, Francesca set about creating the **Bury Food Partnership**, and achieved their **Sustainable Food Places Bronze award** in 2022.

Under the leadership of Francesca, the Bury Food Partnership has prioritised fostering an environment that supports the development of innovative ideas. Entrusting responsibilities to members with relevant expertise, empowering them to identify new solutions and experiment with different approaches.

Francesca Vale, Public Health Practitioner – Bury Council says:

“Bury Food Partnership is a positive space to connect, challenge and help shape the way Bury sources good food for all. Working across multiple agendas, the topic of good food for all is not seen as standalone. Our collaborative approach gently nudges the food system to ensure access to healthier and sustainable food becomes the norm, rather than the exception. We take pride in celebrating positive action; as each has led to further connectivity, opportunities and policies which strengthen our food culture for the better.”

Decision-making within the Bury has been optimised through working hand in hand with the teams across Soil Association, and utilising many of the charities frameworks. These frameworks such as **Food for Life Served Here** catering certification, **Green Kitchen Standard** and **Sustainable Suppliers Scheme** have not only facilitated clearer, more efficient decisions but also enhanced members’ dedication to the partnership’s objectives and solidified trust as a core value among all stakeholders. Trust, in particular, has become a foundational element of relationships throughout Bury.

Complexities of restructuring the food system

When operating in an area as complex as the UK and global food system, there is no singular solution, rather a vast range of interventions structured around frameworks across the whole food system that make sustainable and lasting change. Within the Soil Association's food programmes and policy areas, these interventions are set out across three distinct impact areas:

- Enabling resilient supply chains
- Empowering local changemakers
- Transforming food environments

The transformation of Bury's food system will be examined through the lens of Soil Association's Food impact framework, mainly, with relation to Resilient Supply Chains.

Soil Association Food - Impact outcomes



Resilient Supply Chains

The Soil Association supports resilient supply chains through the work with caterers, suppliers and producers across the supply chain, opening routes to market for more diverse, sustainable and higher welfare produce.

In the process of developing the Food Strategy in Bury, the Soil Association were consulted across a range of areas. A central focus quickly emerged: supporting Bury Catering Service, the local authority-run provider, to begin its Food for Life Served Here certification journey.

Manager, at Bury Catering Service and his team, Food for Life Served Here certification represented more than a badge, it was an opportunity to fundamentally improve food quality, resilience and long-term sustainability. However, achieving the bronze level required a significant cultural and operational shift.

Bury Catering Service operates under contract for 56 schools, delivering more than 10,000 meals daily through on-site cooking. Like many local authorities, maintaining operational viability and achieving break-even status were constant pressures. Before beginning the Food for Life Served Here certification, although menus met school food standards, less than 60% of food was freshly prepared (to reach bronze certification a minimum of 75% was required). The Central Production Unit was producing Christmas dinners as early as June, and tight supplier contracts left little room for quality, flexibility or negotiation.

For Andrew Cowan, Senior Operations



Andrew Cowan



Prue Leith at City Hall – Celebrating 15 years of Food for Life Served Here

To reach Food for Life Served Here bronze, the team undertook:

- Comprehensive ingredient reviews
- Menu redevelopment
- Changes to cooking methods and kitchen equipment

The early stage of the transformative work was the most challenging part of the journey for Andrew, but rather than focusing on what couldn't be done, he used his passion and determination to identify what could be done. It required rethinking established systems and rebuilding confidence among teams. With close collaboration from Caron Longdon, Head of Business Development at the Food for Life Served Here catering certification, Bury Catering Service successfully achieved bronze certification, laying the essential operational foundations for further progress.

Once the Food for Life Served Here bronze standards were embedded, attention turned to silver and the transformation of their procurement pipelines. Existing supplier arrangements and contractual structures could not support the higher standards for sustainable and organic sourcing while maintaining financial viability. A new approach was required.

“
Bury catering service are trailblazers in the industry
Prue Leith
 ”

Access to organic for all

Inspired by a visit to Copenhagen through the European Union Cascade Cities peer-learning programme where chefs demonstrated school menus prepared with 90% organic ingredients, Andrew Cowan's team at Bury Catering Service began to harness its purchasing power more strategically.

The team introduced a dynamic purchasing framework with bespoke standards designed to open opportunities to smaller, local distributors and suppliers. **The tendering process was reweighted to prioritise social value, sustainability and climate action, not simply cost.** Only suppliers able to meet these enhanced standards and demonstrate a strong track record were selected, ensuring procurement aligned with Bury's broader objectives for resilience and community benefit.

This shift proved transformational. One of the principal distinctions between the bronze, and the silver and gold Food for Life Served Here certification levels, lies in organic ingredient spend, with silver requiring 5% and gold 15%. Through its reformed procurement strategy, Bury Catering Service not only met these thresholds but exceeded them, **achieving a 25% organic spend at gold level while generating a one-off saving of £50,000, and the equivalent of 757 tonnes of CO2e annually by reducing food waste**, demonstrating organic food

can cost less despite facing the challenge of overcoming the assumption that it is more expensive.

What could have been perceived as a cost pressure became instead an economic development lever. **The new approach strengthened relationships with local suppliers, advanced sustainability goals, increased organic sourcing and supported climate-friendly practices, all while maintaining financial resilience.**

Through this progression, from operational overhaul to achieve bronze, to strategic procurement transformation for silver and gold, Bury Catering Service embedded sustainability at the heart of its model, connecting the practical delivery of school meals with the wider vision set out in Bury's Food Strategy.

Achieving Food for Life Served Here Gold certification was the cherry on the top for Bury Catering, the hard work was done. It has resulted in a strong and dedicated workforce, valued relationships with suppliers and a

catering service driven by economic and social value.

When reflecting on the catering achievements Andrew says: *I have worked in the public sector at Bury Council for 5 years now and within private hospitality for over 25 years as a Head Chef.*

To have received national recognition for achieving the Food for Life Served Here Gold & Green Kitchen Standard certifications (The only council in the UK to currently have this for all our schools) along with a recent nomination for Public Sector Educational Catering Award and Sustainability Award, is a ringing endorsement of all the hard work put in by the team and colleagues across our catering service, however the accolade I cherish the most is seeing the joy and love of food being built in front of our eyes, when children and young people get access to healthy and delicious food when they need it the most in their lives.

Caron Longden, Head of Business Development at Soil Association Food proudly presented their certifications, saying: *Working with the team at Bury has been inspiring in so many ways and in challenging times, especially for food providers, has reminded me what is possible when food is put right at the heart of strategy development and becomes a focus of improving lives across a local community from multiple agencies. The enthusiasm and determination shown by Andrew, Francesca and the wider team has led to far reaching food system change, moving from a fragmented catering model to a resilient, joyful approach to food across Bury with everyone involved from kitchen teams to suppliers working together to change things for the better. I'm excited to see what happens next. I'm looking*

forward to supporting their journey, working in partnership, alongside the Soil Association Food team'

Bury Council is one of the largest employers in the town; the catering's team key aim was to have a skilled workforce that aspired to come into the sector and stay. Transitioning through the Food for Life Served Here certification levels, staff numbers in the department are as steady as they have ever been at 246 strong, with a flourishing career development pathway.

Staff retention at Bury Catering remains consistently high. Employees report feeling valued, and the service regularly receives direct feedback highlighting the positive contributions teams make to the school day. Staff surveys indicate strong job satisfaction and acknowledge the important nurturing role catering staff play within schools. Team members actively encourage pupils to try new foods and expand their palates. School cooks participate in a wide range of school activities, from supporting themed events to hosting their own special occasions, often inviting parents and carers to attend.



Caron Longden presenting Andrew Cowan with FFLSH Gold and GKS certifications

Procurement Case Study



By going through the Food for Life Served Here (FFLSH) process, the team identified that a Bury based family business could supply schools with the ingredients required to meet Food for Life certification standards.

This included meeting core FFLSH requirements such as palm oil traceability, Fairtrade sugar, avoidance of GM ingredients, exclusion of harmful additives, and sustainably sourced products.

Working with a local supplier also brought practical benefits. Dunsters Farm offered bespoke delivery routes using smaller vans that avoid school drop off and pick up times, reducing congestion, emissions and carbon use. Today, 35% of all stock in the Bury warehouse is purchased within 20 miles. Schools also benefit from an automated ordering system that ensures kitchen teams can easily restock and avoid shortages.

Beyond their supply role, Dunsters Farm actively contributes to the community and sustainability work. They have planted a memorial forest, sponsored growing equipment for school eco clubs, and are leaders in carbon literacy training for staff and suppliers. They are on track to achieve a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. While some waste is inevitable, the company works with Fareshare and local charities to divert surplus food away from landfill.

At the start of the year, the Dunsters Farm team completed Food for Life Supplier Scheme training with programme lead Gay Darke. The session provided essential knowledge on the certification standards and demonstrated how meeting these standards strengthens the resilience of local supply chains.

Organic North



Sean Ruffell, Managing Director at Organic North, praised Bury Catering Service for bringing Organic North produce into public procurement for the first time.

Previously supplying only the private sector, Sean saw strong potential in developing this new partnership and was keen to explore how it could grow. Organic North operates on low margins, underpinned by strong ethical principles and transparency with its farmers. What Bury Catering Service could offer in return was scale and stability through its school's contract, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.

Sean also supported the transition beyond supply, contributing to parent communications by helping fund a leaflet run to explain the move towards greater organic sourcing.

For some school cooks, the arrival of organic, unprepared fruit and vegetables in their kitchens came as a surprise. The shift required new skills, more preparation time and a different mindset. Andrew and Sean embraced this change as an opportunity rather than a barrier, working closely with catering teams to build confidence in fresh preparation and adapt meal planning accordingly.

Sean Ruffell from Organic North said: The relationship that we've enjoyed with Andrew and the catering team in Bury over the last couple of years has been crucial in us being able to get our first organic vegetables in schools. In the team at Bury we found tenacious individuals that clearly care deeply about the quality of food that they feed the kids in their schools. We are currently developing some ideas together on how we can now potentially supply every school in the borough and that's about the most exciting thing we've ever been involved in as a company.

Working with the Local Authority in Bury has given us the confidence that even without subsidy or government support, it is possible for us to become the key fresh produce supplier to many schools in the North of England. To have the opportunity to provide organic produce into schools in the way we have is unprecedented.

Food for Life Supplier Scheme

The Food for Life Sustainable Supplier Scheme connects suppliers with Food for Life Served Here caterers, offering standards training, technical product support, networking opportunities and a directory listing.

Members also receive a certificate of accreditation and resources to strengthen tender applications.

As part of the scheme, Organic North and Dunsters Farm both took part in in person standards training. The session equipped suppliers with a deeper understanding of certification requirements and how meeting these standards can strengthen local supply chains.

Reflecting on the training, Lucy Denham from Dunsters Farm said: "The training was not only informative but fun too. Everyone was fully engaged throughout, which was great! Our competitiveness definitely came out in the knowledge quiz and sorting activities."

Main ingredient changes from Food for Life Served Here Bronze to Gold

Pre-Bronze	Bronze (2022)	Silver (2024)	Gold (2025)
60% of menu freshly prepared	75% of menu freshly prepared in school kitchen	Organic Yoghurt	Organic Eggs
Semi-prepped veg e.g. carrot batons	50/50 blend of all carbohydrates on menu	MSC Fish	Organic Fruit
	Increase in % meat content of products and meeting higher animal welfare standards	Increased fruit-based dessert options	Organic Veg
	Seasonal fruit salad each day		Organic Yoghurt
			Organic Pasta

Transforming Food Environments

Green Kitchen Standard



Bury Catering Service have been the first Local Authority in the UK to achieve the Green Kitchen Standard. Successful certification against the Green Kitchen Standard requires organisations to demonstrate good all-round management performance in energy, water and waste in their day-to-day operations.

Key elements of Green Kitchen Standard are:

- Having environmental policy covering the catering operation including waste, water and energy
- Strong operating procedures include having both food waste and oil collected for processing with food being converted into compost.
- Effective procurement systems ensure that all paper disposables are made from 100% recycled material and no disposable crockery or cutlery is used.

- Total life costs are considered when purchasing catering equipment and processes are in place to ensure refrigeration systems run at optimal temperatures.

Food waste is an area Bury have committed to take action to reduce. A programme of staff training is being rolled out and impact being tracked through the Cool Food Pro environmental calculator.



It's been inspiring working with Andrew and the team at Bury Catering Services on Cool Food Pro. They've made the most of the support offered, from in-school workshops to staff training, helping both their team and pupils better understand the impact of food on the climate.



Deb Taylor, Programme Manager for Cool Food Pro

Cool Food Pro in Bury Schools



Soil Association's Cool Food Pro is a free online environmental calculator created with support from Deloitte. It helps caterers reduce food-related emissions across five key areas: seasonal menus, serving less but better meat and fish, organic sourcing, local procurement, and cutting food and plastic waste.

Since 2024, the Cool Food Pro team has partnered with schools in Bury to drive sustainable food practices and improve environmental outcomes.

The Challenge

School catering contributes significantly to carbon emissions, food waste, and environmental impact. Bury schools needed practical tools and education to:

- Measure their food-related carbon footprint
- Reduce plate waste
- Transition to more sustainable sourcing

Cool Food Pro actions:

Cool Food Pro implemented a whole-school approach across Bury:

- **Full Programme Adoption:** All 56 catered schools signed up to the platform
- **Student Engagement:** Workshops delivered in three schools focused on food waste awareness
- **Behaviour Change Initiatives:**
 - Pilot food waste resources at Heaton Park Primary
 - Lunchtime engagement at St Stephen's Primary
 - Ongoing tracking at Woodbank Primary using the calculator

• Sustainable Procurement Pilot:

In collaboration with Organic North, Parrenthorn High School transitioned from conventional to 100% organic fruit and vegetables.

Results & Impact

• Food Waste Reduction:

Woodbank Primary is targeting a 53% reduction in plate waste, saving approximately 21kg CO2e. per month, equivalent to driving 98km by car.

• Organic Switch Impact (Parrenthorn High School):

- 16,166 kg of vegetables switched to organic (over a 3-month period)
- Estimated 2 tonnes of CO2e. saved annually
- Equivalent to 8,915 km driven by car per year
- 100% improvement in water quality
- 35% increase in biodiversity, particularly bird species

• Borough-Wide Engagement:

- 56 schools measuring and managing emissions
- Increased awareness among staff and pupils



Sustainable Food Places – Growth, Collaboration and Impact

Bury became a **Sustainable Food Places** (SFPs) network member in 2021. The Sustainable Food Places programme, of which Soil Association is the lead partner (alongside Sustain and Food Matters), is active in more than 120 places across the UK, covering around a third of UK local authorities.



Using the **six SFP key issue themes**, Bury proactively catalyse partner activity across the food system. This process in and of itself acted as a constructive means to track and drive further activity.

Bury were awarded the Sustainable Food Places Bronze award in 2022 and achieved the prestigious **SFPs Silver award for Bury in 2024**.

A vital part of being a Sustainable Food Place is around a joined-up approach to the local food system, as well as enabling access to healthy and sustainable food for all. As part of reaching SFP Silver, Bury implemented a number of additional initiatives beyond the work with the Soil Association. These included:

- **Prioritising Healthy Start uptake**, reaching 69% (above the national average of 66%)
- **Auto Enrolment:** Bury implemented an eligibility verification process alongside an automatic enrolment service for families already receiving Council Tax and/or Housing Benefit, thereby ensuring that children receive the support to which they are entitled without requiring a separate application
- **Pilot of household support fund** to bridge the gap from free infant meals to primary school meals for those most in need
- **School Grid** - The catering service implemented a platform designed to streamline the process of school meal ordering. This ensured that each child receives their preferred meal, the catering team can accurately prepare the required number of portions, parents feel confident in the value of pre-selected two-course meals, and reduces food waste

Bury is shining as a leading example of how local food system change can come to life, supported by Soil Association programmes including **Food for Life Served Here, the Sustainable Suppliers Scheme, Green Kitchen Standard, Cool Food Pro, My Food Community**, and the **Sustainable Food Places** journey. With passionate local changemakers, like Francesca, Andrew and Sean, backed by expert guidance from the Soil Association, and peer learning opportunities like the EU Cascade Cities programme, are helping to drive this progress. Together, they are building resilient supply chains, championing local, seasonal and organic food, and creating healthier, more sustainable food environments, showing what's possible through collaboration, shared learning and a clear, collective vision.



Andrew Cowan presented with Public Sector Catering Award for Sustainability - April 2026



Andrew and Francesca in Milan

Food for Life

The Future

The future vision for Bury Catering Service will next focus on how every pupil in Bury can access silver or gold standard meals across all catering contractors in Bury schools. Bury Food Partnership has their eyes on the gold award and are well-positioned to support the other nine boroughs across Greater Manchester included the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on their Sustainable Food Places journey.

Greater Manchester have recently enlisted the Soil Association to undertake a mapping exercise to better understand the public sector catering provision across the combined authority in order to plan what may be possible in the future to transform local food systems.

Co-written by Chandra Merai (Health Education Trust) and Soil Association.

Find out more about Food for Life
www.foodforlife.org.uk

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