

What Works in Liverpool and Merseyside?

Citizen Advisory Council What Works Here Inquiry, Liverpool and Merseyside
23rd – 24th November 2025

“Liverpool is an amazing place for the community... They have such a good relationship with each other, whether it's the farmers, the businesses, the actual people in the community, everyone seems to have a strong relationship with each other.”

Keira, CAC Member

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is developing a new food strategy to ensure good food for everyone. The Citizen Advisory Council (CAC) was established in May 2025 to ensure citizen voices are at the heart of this strategy, bringing together 30 people from across the UK with lived experience and diverse perspectives on the food system.

The **What Works Here Inquiries** are a pioneering example of how citizen-led work can inform government policy. This report collates the CAC's findings from the inquiry in Liverpool and Merseyside, offering an analysis and deep understanding of place, as presented to them by local leaders.

Grassroots collaboration and innovative community-led solutions have driven food system and economic change in Liverpool and Merseyside. Underpinning this, are strong partnerships between organisations and leadership that connect work across the food system. While the citizens' research uncovered solutions that could be adopted elsewhere, their findings emphasise the value of local coordination and community-built infrastructure. They found that resilient food systems require diversity: working with farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises, and local and regional partnerships to build on the unique strengths of the area. They observed where local and regional businesses can collaborate, how communities are finding ways to address food deserts, the ways sustainable food production is championed, and the economic opportunities for UK based and SMEs to grow and thrive. This work demonstrates how value can be retained and recirculated within the region rather than extracted, supporting jobs, supply chains, and community wealth in ways that advance wider government missions on health, economic growth, and opportunity.

National government should back the community-led infrastructure that is already working in Liverpool and Merseyside, level the playing field in relation to the dominant large food companies, and reform procurement so that local and regional suppliers can participate in the markets that both help them to thrive and grow real public value in communities.



1 Squash Liverpool's Anita Welsh with CAC members Martin and Cathie

Key elements necessary for a healthy Liverpool and Merseyside food system

“From a food strategy point of view, I think it’s very important that the strategy focuses much more on local, regional approaches, driving community initiatives, encouraging self sufficiency, helping people understand more about food, where it comes from,

Regional experts Keenan Humble and Michael Fitzsimmons from Feeding Liverpool helped organise the inquiry and set the scene for the Citizen Advisory Council.

Over two days, the citizens met with a wide range of people and organisations with a stake in Liverpool’s food system and spent time visiting projects to see what was working well and what national government and the food strategy could learn from. Working together, they identified the conditions necessary for Liverpool and Merseyside’s food system to thrive:

- **A food system that works for people and places:** businesses prioritising profit and volume

what actually healthy food is.”

Matthew, CAC Member

over health use their scale to make cheap, heavily processed food ubiquitous, making it harder for businesses with health and sustainability at their core to compete and for people to get good food. Good food should be good business, and those businesses should be rewarded

- **Local food partnerships with the authority and stability to lead:** where coordination exists – as with Feeding Liverpool – the system functions more coherently; but partnerships currently rely on goodwill and short-term support rather than the secure footing needed to drive change
- **Procurement systems that open doors to local and regional suppliers:** public procurement is typically designed for national and global scale, locking out those best placed to supply their own communities – but places such as Bath and Somerset, Preston and Birmingham show that public procurement can be reformed to support local suppliers
- **Planning that shapes the food environment:** high streets are filling with fast food and vape shops while good food businesses struggle to establish; planning has a role in creating the conditions for a healthier food environment
- **Infrastructure that connects food production to the people who need it:** food deserts persist because the physical links – transport, markets, distribution – between where food is grown and where people live are missing or underfunded

Building on what works

The CAC saw numerous examples of how people in Liverpool and Merseyside are making the food system better every day. And they picked out a number of ways to build on work that is already happening:

<p>Communities building their own solutions to get food to people</p>	<p>The Queen of Greens van shows what's possible when communities create infrastructure themselves. This mobile greengrocer brings fresh, locally sourced produce to seven children's centres, areas where asylum seekers and refugees live, and hospitals. People can buy the amounts they need at prices they can afford, rather than pre-packaged supermarket quantities. The van has become part of community life – people know their time slots and what they can get with Alexandra Rose vouchers. Citizens think this model could work in other urban places.</p> <p>Squash Cafe and the Grapes Community Food Garden show the same spirit. Food is grown in the community garden and turned into meals eaten and bought in the cafe. Citizens were struck by Anita's message of 'nourish and grow': the food nourishes people, and the model grows community connection.</p>
<p>Council leadership investing in community food infrastructure</p>	<p>Liverpool's markets show what council investment in food infrastructure can achieve. Markets supply wholesale, retail and community members, and the market at Stanley Park in Anfield has won awards as a place where residents do their weekly shop. Citizens see potential for markets to connect local farms such as Kindling with community vendors like Queen of Greens and with schools – if procurement were simpler.</p>
<p>Community ownership changes what's possible</p>	<p>Citizens found the community ownership model at Kindling Farm heartening. This 78-acre organic farm near Liverpool was bought for £1.8 million through 800 member contributions plus loans. They currently have 200–300 vegetable box subscriptions, are aiming for 1,000, and supply the University of Manchester – demonstrating how community-owned farms can achieve real scale.</p>
<p>School food that works for students and schools</p>	<p>Food for Thought works with 84 schools with a team of just four people. Schools are key shareholders and the board is made up of headteachers and teachers, accountable to students. All income is reinvested into the food and schools. School Programme Manager Angela Phillips explained that for many children, school meals are the most reliable meal of the day and should be good quality.</p>
<p>Nutrition treated as healthcare</p>	<p>At Alder Hey Hospital, ward-based chefs work on each ward making more than 600 meals daily, ranked number one by young patients for food. Dr Ian Sinha, Consultant Paediatrician, explained that poverty affects children's health at a biological level and advocates for building the right to food into law. Citizens hadn't encountered ward chefs in their own communities and left convinced that treating nutrition as healthcare is a model that can travel.</p>



2 Citizen Advisory Council member Keira and others on day 2 of the What Works Here Inquiry

Barriers to change

“The public sector is a huge market - schools, universities, colleges - and it could support other initiatives through its procurement strategies.”

Matthew, CAC Member

“In Liverpool, it’s easier to buy vapes than it is to buy apples. That was a striking lesson for me - and I suspect it holds true across much of the UK.”

Martin, CAC Member

Citizens saw barriers that stop what works from reaching more people across Liverpool.

Citizens think that large food companies and manufacturers can keep prices low through scale and global supply chains. From their own experience, they know there are a lot of unhealthy and processed food products in the shops they use, and they want something different. They heard that this scale makes it hard for local food to compete even when people want to buy it. Citizens think the system is not working properly.

Citizens think planning decisions matter. They saw empty shops and wondered why planning can't shape what fills high streets, why businesses that don't serve communities are given space while good food struggles to establish. Vapes landed as a vivid example of this pattern, with tobacco companies pivoting to products framed as healthier, maintaining their presence in communities while the harms shift in form. They heard that for Liverpool's markets to grow they need support, and felt that if planning could help slow the spread of fast food outlets and vape shops in areas that already have too many, local food businesses would have more chance to thrive.

Grant funding dependency came up repeatedly. When grants end, citizens heard how things collapse. They don't think this makes sense, particularly for the projects that have proven their worth and built trust. If something works, citizens think funding should support it to continue and grow. They would like to see more private investment into what works in regions across the country. Citizens heard that the price of good food is not the only issue. Expert witnesses explained that housing, fuel, electricity, and gas costs squeeze lower-income communities in Liverpool and Merseyside, and across the country. Citizens found a disconnect: regions have detailed knowledge of their communities' needs but lack the funding and authority to respond.



3 CAC members at Kindling Farm with farmer Chris Walsh and Feeding Liverpool's Keenan Humble & Michael Fitzsimmons

Summary

"Every single thing goes back to food, our health and wellbeing, our education, our health care systems, food is behind all of it. So people, if you're not a well nation, you're not a progressive nation."

Cathie, CAC Member

The CAC members who spent time in Liverpool and Merseyside came away with a clear sense of a deeply resilient community, full of creativity and purpose. There are many fantastic initiatives which successfully help build community, expand access to healthy food, and support local and regional food producers. Local government is being pro-active - investing in markets, working through the Marmot framework, and supporting

food partnerships like Feeding Liverpool that connect work across the system.

However, people in Liverpool and Merseyside cannot transform their food system without a clear and consistent policy environment and targeted investment from national government. At present, food systems are designed predominantly to benefit large food companies to the detriment of community-led projects, grant dependency leaves proven programmes vulnerable, and deprivation limits many people's ability to eat healthily. People are doing a huge amount to help themselves, but they want national government to help level the playing field and create the conditions to enable communities to thrive.

Thank you to the people in Liverpool and Merseyside who made this work possible

Feeding Liverpool helped organise the inquiry and introduced citizens to:

- Cllr Jane Corbett
- Keenan Humble and Michael Fitzsimmons, Feeding Liverpool
- Liz Fisher, Public Health
- Chris Walsh, Kindling Farm
- Dr Ian Sinha, Alder Hey Hospital
- Daniel Heffy, GSG Hospitality
- Michael Bracken, Liverpool City Council Markets
- Angela Phillips, Food for Thought
- Keenan Humble, on behalf of Lucy Antal - Director of Alchemic Kitchen CIC who operate Queen of Greens

Citizens also visited Chris Walsh at Kindling Farm, Lucy Antal at Queen of Greens, and Anita Welsh and Jackie Swanson at Squash Cafe and Grapes Community Garden.

Who we are

The Citizen Advisory Council is made up of 30 citizens from across the UK, representing a diverse cross-section of

British society. The Council was formed in May 2025 and has been working with Defra to ensure the new Food Strategy reflects people's everyday experience of food. *The following Citizen Advisory Council members led the What Works Here Inquiry in Liverpool and Merseyside:*

- Catherine McMinn, County Londonderry
- Keira
- Martin McCloy, County Antrim
- Matthew Bixby, Gwynedd
- Wena Isename, Edinburgh

The Inquiry Process

The What Works Here Inquiries used a participatory research approach, positioning citizens as researchers. Over two days in Liverpool and Merseyside, Citizen Advisory Council members conducted field research through site visits and dialogue with local stakeholders. Citizens took detailed field notes and then participated in structured reflection sessions. Through this collaborative analysis, citizens synthesised their individual findings into collective insights, distinguishing between what was working well, what barriers prevented progress, and what would support regional food systems.

The Food Conversation

Since 2023, the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission has run the UK's largest-ever public dialogue about food. Through deliberations in 12 parts of the country and over 75 community conversations, citizens explored policy interventions and produced the [Citizen Manifesto to Fix Food](#) in March 2025, a call for joined-up thinking to address food inequalities, poverty and waste.

Food Foundation Food Ambassadors

The [Food Foundation Food Ambassadors](#) are people aged 14 and up with lived experience of food insecurity who contribute to campaigns, research, and events as experts by experience. They've worked on campaigns from school meals to tackling food poverty, including with Marcus Rashford on the #EndChildFoodPoverty campaign.