Enhancing Wellbeing in Place through Food and Community

Policy Brief Autumn 2026

SUMMARY

This participatory action research project centred on co-designing practical interventions through a social 'Innovation Lab'. The Lab involved three full-day (10 am-3.30 pm) workshops attended by 34 participants overall, each selected for their relevant knowledge and experience. The aim was to bring together a diverse group of people occupying different roles across the food and wellbeing system. Collectively, they explored challenges facing rural Wales, including food poverty and insecurity, social isolation, health and wellbeing inequalities, and limited access to affordable locally grown produce.

Through mapping the current system, participants identified a number of barriers: restrictive legislation affecting schools and communities; short-term and fragmented funding cycles; limited access to healthy, locally sourced food and the dominance of ultra-processed options; declining community spaces and social cohesion; reduced cooking skills and food literacy; and a lack of clear leadership across the system.

From this, the group developed a shared vision: "A Rural Wales where there are opportunities to grow, cook and eat together in comfortable and inclusive settings." Building on this vision, participants generated a set of proposals designed to strengthen wellbeing by bringing rural communities together and deepening their connection to local food and to one another. Based on the workshops and the proposals co-produced by participants, we offer the following recommendations:

BACKGROUND

Study Objectives

This study is part of wider work by Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales on Enhancing Wellbeing in Place. It explores the current status of food and wellbeing in Wales, to generate proposals for how to improve and develop this sector.

Policy Context

Food and wellbeing are increasingly recognised as interconnected priorities across Welsh policy. Access to healthy, nutritious food is understood as essential not only for physical health but also for mental wellbeing and social connection, with food-related community spaces playing a key role in reducing isolation. This policy emphasis is reflected in Wales Community Food Strategy, which highlights the importance of strengthening local food networks, improving access to sustainable and community-led food provision and supporting healthier food environments across Wales. The Strategy directly responds to challenges such as food poverty, growing health inequalities, and social fragmentation, aligning with the long-term goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

Policy developments include the Welsh Government's Plan for a National Food Strategy, which builds on the Future Generations Commissioner's focus on the food system as a national priority in, 'Take food insecurity seriously, says Future Generations Commissioner for Wales', emphasising the need for cohesive, resilient and fair food systems that contribute to social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing. The Welsh Government has

committed funding through to 2028 to support community-led food initiatives and expand Local Food Partnerships which now operate in every local authority in Wales. The final National Food Strategy is expected to be presented to ministers during 2027.

At regional and local levels, Public Services Boards (PSBs) and their Local Wellbeing Plans increasingly recognise the potential for food to act as a driver of improved public health, local prosperity and community cohesion. PSB's are working together to identify priorities and focus areas that will support improved resilience in the food system. Local Food Partnerships across Wales are strengthening place-based collaboration, coordinating local food systems, and addressing issues ranging from food poverty to supply chain resilience. These partnerships are identified by Welsh Government and Food Sense Wales as central to building a more sustainable, just and resilient Welsh food system, capable of supporting wellbeing and community resilience at scale.

Despite this progress, innovation and continued implementation are needed to address persistent barriers and fully support the potential of local food systems. Strengthening leadership, ensuring long-term and stable funding, and embedding inclusive, community-led approaches remain essential to enhancing wellbeing and building resilient food networks across Wales.

The Evidence Base

Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales delivered a series of Innovation Lab workshops on *Enhancing Wellbeing in Place through Food*, designed to co-produce innovative proposals that support the development of a wellbeing economy in Wales. The Labs convened 34 participants selected for their relevant knowledge and experience, representing local authorities, Welsh Government, the NHS, public health, education, growers, chefs, community organisations, Local Food Partnerships and a local farm. Three workshops held in May, June and July 2025 provided a structured process to examine the current status of food and wellbeing in Wales, envision desirable futures for the sector, and co-design potential interventions capable of enabling this transition.

Across the sessions, participants also contributed a wide range of additional ideas and insights on how best to drive improvements in the food and wellbeing system. These reflections provide an insight from key stakeholders, helping to shape both the analysis and the recommended interventions that follow.

KEY FINDINGS

Current legislation limits the capacity of public bodies and third-sector organisations to grow, cook and eat together

Current legislation and regulatory requirements in Wales, which strictly govern what food can be prepared and served on school premises, can unintentionally limit the ability of public bodies, schools and third-sector organisations to use shared spaces for community-led growing, cooking and eating activities. These rules, paired with the complex food safety and environmental health requirements highlighted in community kitchen guidance, create additional compliance burdens that make it harder for grassroots organisations to access facilities and run inclusive food-based initiatives, ultimately reducing opportunities to foster social connection and wellbeing through shared food activities.

The importance of accessible public spaces for reducing social isolation and strengthening community wellbeing

Reduced access to public spaces in rural areas is significantly limiting opportunities for social connection, informal learning and community activity. As community venues close or become harder to access, residents—particularly those experiencing isolation—have fewer opportunities to come together, share meals, or participate in collective food-related activities. This decline directly impacts community cohesion and reduces the capacity of rural places to support shared dining, intergenerational learning, and food education. Participants emphasised that enabling communities to experiment with alternative or underused spaces—such as schools, village halls, community hubs, farms or mobile facilities—can help rebuild social infrastructure.

Ultra-processed and fast food easily accessible whilst locally grown produce more expensive

Ultra-processed and high-fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) foods continue to be the most visible and affordable options, while access to fresh, local produce remains inconsistent. Communities across Wales report wanting more chances to come together around healthy, affordable, locally sourced meals rather than relying on fast food or ultra processed convenience items.

Recent policy shifts in Wales suggest growing support for this change. In 2025, Vale of Glamorgan Council became the first local authority in Wales to restrict unhealthy food advertising, banning HFSS product adverts from Council owned sites—including bus stops, roadside boards, and Council websites

Food banks and surplus food distribution

Food banks in Wales continue to see rising demand, with Trussel Trust food banks distributing nearly **2.9 million emergency food parcels in the last 12 months**, a **51% increase** over the last 5 years. At the same time Wales is experiencing a shift toward **community pantries, community fridges and other community-led food initiatives** that offer low-cost or free surplus food, with more choice than traditional emergency provision. Tools like the Community Food Map for Wales | FareShare Cymru show how rapidly this network is expanding by mapping pantries, fridges, lunch clubs and other community food support across Wales. These options often prioritise a food system dependent on cheap, nutritionally poor products although supporting locally grown and sustainably produced foods could be considered on the rise, by mapping community growing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings summarized above, we propose a number of recommendations for the Welsh Government / local authorities, developed as suitable interventions to implement:

Support and encourage the proliferation of community-led dining to strengthen local food culture and social wellbeing.	**Develop a national network of community-led kitchens and dining spaces that create opportunities for social eating, food education, and the celebration of local food culture.** These community hubs would act as welcoming spaces that: Foster connections to local producers and seasonal food; Enable redistribution of surplus food; Build cooking confidence and skills; Encourage intergenerational interaction and social connection; Support a sense of joy, community pride, and resilience through shared meals. **Ensure easy access to public buildings and create simple, supportive pathways for communities to register and run their own food initiatives.** Reducing administrative barriers and providing clear guidance would empower communities to bring excellent ideas to life, strengthening local food ecosystems and improving wellbeing.
Roll out a Whole-School Approach to Grow, Cook and Eat – improving food literacy and building lifelong positive relationships with food	**Embed a Grow–Cook–Eat approach across all Welsh schools,** ensuring that every child develops practical food skills and a strong understanding of where food comes from. This whole-school model would cultivate curiosity, confidence, and competence around food from an early age. **Mandate food literacy within the Curriculum for Wales,** enabling it to inspire the next generation of farmers, chefs, growers, and food sector innovators. Embedding food education across key learning areas would elevate its status and ensure consistent, high-quality delivery across all schools. **Ensure that legislation for nutrition, health, and safety enables rather than** restricts participation. Clear, supportive guidance—paired with procurement systems that prioritise fresh, locally grown produce—would create the conditions for meaningful hands-on learning. This approach would promote healthier diets, strengthen local supply chains, and expand opportunities for children to grow, cook, and share food within their school communities.
Enable the development of Community Farms to increase local food resilience, education, and wellbeing	**Ensure community-owned farms can secure planning permission,** and encourage councils and public bodies to utilise publicly owned land for community farming initiatives. Creating supportive planning pathways would empower communities to develop resilient local food systems rooted in shared ownership and long-term stewardship. **Increase local food production and strengthen community connections to growing and land-based learning,** supporting improved food literacy and delivering wellbeing outcomes. Community farms can offer practical education,

	volunteering opportunities, and inclusive spaces for people to engage with nature and local food systems. **Improve access to fresh, local produce for schools, NHS services, and communities,** helping to enhance health and wellbeing while advancing sustainability and lowering the environmental impact of food supply chains. **Leverage Welsh farming subsidies and planning powers to accelerate agroecological, community-led models,** reducing reliance on ultra-processed foods and supporting a healthier, more sustainable and locally rooted food economy. Prioritising regenerative, community farming approaches would align with national goals for environmental resilience, rural development, and community prosperity.
Tackle the root causes of poverty by working with food banks to ensure the most vulnerable receive the support they need	**Create a trained network of "food systems mentors"** to work alongside food banks, warm welcome spaces, and other community support hubs. These mentors would help address the underlying causes of food poverty while offering practical guidance on nutrition, cooking skills, budgeting, and navigating local food sources. Their role would bridge emergency food support with long-term empowerment and resilience. **Fund these roles through Public Health Wales and local councils,** positioning them as part of a preventative health approach. This investment would strengthen community wellbeing, reduce pressure on crisis services, and support resilience by helping individuals and families build the knowledge, confidence, and resources needed to move out of food insecurity, connecting with local growing, cooking and eating opportunities.

PROJECT INFORMATION

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In collaboration with Local Food Partnerships and County Councils (Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire & Pembrokeshire), Holden Farm Dairy, Rural Health and Care Wales, Future Generations Commissioners Office, Cegin Hedyn, Ein Cegin, Flying Start, NHS, WCVA, Hywel Dda Health Board – Whole Systems Approach, Clyfyw Care Farm, Porthi Aber, Cegin-Y-Bobl, Fathom Trust, Ageing Well Project, Free lance chef's, Nutrition experts, Mentera, Cyfan Cymru, Headteacher, Student Voice, Connecting Communities Project and Methodist Church.

Further reading Further information on LIP's Innovation Labs can be accessed at www.lpip.cymru

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