

The Belfast Way

A Strategy and Roadmap
to a Thriving, Fair and
Resilient Food System



Belfast Food Partnership

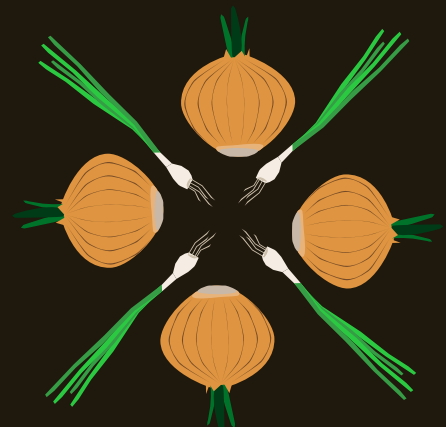
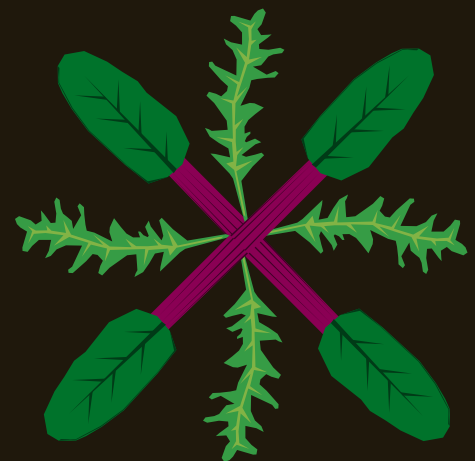
Introduction

Belfast's food system is made up of food produced for the city, supplied from global and local supply chains, and accessed and eaten by citizens across Belfast.

It also includes food waste and surplus food. When viewed as a whole system, it has significant potential to drive positive change for citizens, to include improved public health, environmental sustainability, and social justice and equity.

Currently, however, some citizens lack access to adequate nutritious, environmentally friendly and culturally appropriate food. People are struggling under mounting costs as a result of the cost of living crisis and are vulnerable to further shocks and stresses that threaten the city's food security over the coming years. Climate change is increasingly threatening the UK's food security, as extreme weather events like droughts and floods disrupt harvests, strain supply chains, and drive up food prices. Unsustainable farming practices—such as excessive use of chemical fertilizers, monocropping, and deforestation—intensify environmental degradation by depleting soil health, polluting water sources, and accelerating biodiversity loss, all while contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Food waste is a major global issue, with nearly one-third of all food produced being discarded—further wasting precious resources like water, land, and energy. There is an opportunity now to build a fairer and more resilient food system in Belfast, and a cross-sectoral partnership of organisations have come together in the city to work together to deliver a sustainable food system that works for everyone.

This strategy was developed by the Belfast Food Partnership in 2025 and sets out a vision and a 3 year roadmap for creating a resilient, equitable, and nature-friendly food system for residents and future generations to lead healthy and happy lives in our city, and be resilient



in the face of future challenges ahead.

Our priorities in delivering this strategy are to empower and support communities to access growing opportunities, funding, and training, as well as tackle household food insecurity in ways that preserve dignity, choice, and nutrition. We also recognise that sustainable procurement policies have the power to strengthen local and sustainable food production. This can foster trust, relationships and understanding with local agro-ecological food producers so that supply and demand of locally produced regenerative food can build greater food resilience for Belfast.

In achieving this vision, we want to play to our strengths, harnessing the power of our anchor institutions to help us understand where we are as a city and monitor our progress to where we want to be, cultivating collaboration among community organisations, public institutions, universities, and businesses.



Why we are creating this strategy

Belfast city needs a sustainable food strategy to address a range of challenges facing the city's food system, which is part of a wider and interconnected complex global supply chain. As the food system has globalised, we have moved further away from the source of our food, and people that produce it, and this resulted in vulnerabilities including price volatility, environmental strain on resources and pollution, reduced resilience, health inequality and growing food security risks. These are all issues that disproportionately affect the city's most vulnerable communities. The food system is estimated to account for up to 35% of greenhouse gas emissions, and the city has set an ambitious target to reach net zero by 2050 so we need a plan for the food system to play its role in helping to achieve this. We also know that more and more people are accessing food aid in Belfast – according to University of Sheffield data, 14.8% of adults in Belfast worry about not having enough food, with 5% struggling to access it and 2.5% experiencing hunger. In NI, £7.6bn is spent by society in fighting the effects of an unhealthy diet. The impacts of climate change are already being felt, and the rising costs of living in Belfast will continue to affect our city's food security into the future. These problems underscore the vulnerabilities of the current food system, which relies heavily on global, carbon-intensive and environmentally destructive supply chains that are vulnerable to global shocks and uncertainty.

A sustainable food strategy will help pave a pathway that strengthens local and regional food systems, reduces emissions, and improves public health outcomes, whilst supporting community resilience through urban growing, skills development, and circular economy initiatives. Crucially, taking a whole food systems approach—as outlined in Belfast's Resilience Strategy 2020, enables the city to address root causes rather than symptoms, aligning efforts across health, climate and environment, economy, and equity. In a context of increasing uncertainty, from climate extremes to geopolitical disruptions, embedding food sustainability is not just a policy ambition—it's a resilience imperative.

OUR FOOD SYSTEM

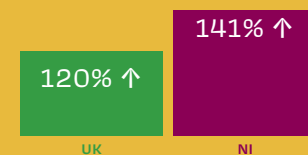
1 People in NI are favouring independent retailers where they can.

Between 2022 and 2023, NI supermarket usage fell from 88% to 80%, and independents like greengrocers, butchers and bakers saw an increase, rising from 32% to 41%. Use of farmers markets also increased but this food is not equally accessible/affordable to all.



2 Rising food insecurity

Over the five years to 2023 the number of parcels distributed by food banks increased by 141% in Northern Ireland, compared to a rise of 120% in the UK as a whole.



3 The need for a shift in food production.

NI produces enough animal protein for nearly 12 million people, but only has a population of only 1.9 million. There is not enough horticulture, which is less than 2% of agricultural land in NI.



Belfast as a city has achieved its Bronze Award from Sustainable Food Places UK, which recognises and celebrates the success of those places taking a joined-up, holistic approach to food. The Award has enabled a cross sectoral city food partnership to be established of over 23 organisations. Relationships, knowledge exchange and collaborative working have been formed since 2023. With this strategy, a vision and focus will help the Partnership to build on this for the next three years.

The Belfast community planning partnership, through the Belfast Agenda, has committed to embedding sustainable food practices and partnership working in Belfast over the next three years. Belfast City Council, through this commitment, is convening the food partnership in the city, supporting it with a dedicated food systems coordinator and delivering its own sustainable food policy that will address waste, sourcing, packaging, carbon emissions and events.



4 Making the most of our assets

St George's Market is home to over 250 local producers, with the potential for more local markets in Belfast neighbourhoods. We have over 100 community gardens, orchards, school gardens, allotments and 202km of alleyways in Belfast.

250

local
producers

100

community
gardens

202km

alleyways

5 The need to protect vulnerable Communities:

Climate change will impact those of lower economic status the most.

Disabled people, working aged adults and families with children are over represented in those accessing support from food banks.

6 Unhealthy food costs the UK over £250 billion every year

Analysis commissioned by FFCC finds the costs of Britain's unhealthy food system are almost equivalent to the total annual UK healthcare spend. NI's share of the cost of an unhealthy food system in the UK is £7.6bn.

The Belfast Food Partnership

The Partnership was initiated in 2023 by the city's Community Planning Partnership and has been building a shared vision for sustainable food in the city. The partnership is made up of over 23 organisations across sectors and is driven by the following values developed over the past 2 years.

Food Justice: Acknowledging that everyone has the right to affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food, grown in ways that respect those who produced it, animals, and the environment.

Systems Driven: Recognising food challenges (including climate change, biodiversity, health, poverty) are interconnected and the solutions to them must tackle the root causes.

Circular and Regenerative: Working for the environment and people in an integrated way that captures local value, restores ecosystems and minimises waste.

Resilient: Creating value for local food production, promoting sustainable land use, and preparedness so communities are able to cope with and adapt to food supply chain disruptions brought about by climate change and other global shocks.

Place-based and sustainable: Understanding that people's experience of the food system is different depending on where you live across Belfast. Prioritising equitable and fair supply chains that ensure decent pay and conditions for producers and workers.

Participatory and asset-based: Focusing on what's strong, not what's wrong. Building strategies with input from residents, workers, marginalised groups and their representatives, businesses, and public bodies (and academia where appropriate).

Community Wealth Building: Facilitating broader ownership of the economy; keep money circulating locally; develop progressive procurement policy and practices.



How the Strategy was developed

The process of developing the strategy has been led by a team commissioned by Belfast City Council that includes Community Garden Support, Brink! Stories CIC, Grow NI and Ulster University, supported by the Food Ethics Council. The Strategy document has been written by members and working groups of the Belfast Food Partnership, and practitioners themselves with deep and diverse expertise in the food system. Engagement with people involved in the food system in Belfast has taken place, as well as those with lived experience of accessing food in the city. The Strategy has been collaboratively developed with respect for a plurality of views, opinions and beliefs gathered via many workshops, conversations and events, underpinned by a considerable amount of research and references.



The engagement process involved over 40 meetings and events engaging over 200 people between January and April 2025, including two Belfast Sustainable Food Partnership meetings and three BSFP working group meetings, presentations to the 4 Belfast City Council Area Working Groups, a presentation to the Our Planet Board of the Community Planning Partnership, 3 bespoke workshops involving people with lived experience of food insecurity, focused meetings with DAERA, Climate Co+ Centre, CoCentre for Sustainable Food Systems, SECA, Unite, Nourish NI, Belfast City Council officers from Place and Economy, City and Neighbourhood Services, City and Organisational Strategy, 6 public facing events and well as many individual meetings and conversations with individual and organisational stakeholders.



OUR VISION

To ensure that every person in Belfast can access, enjoy, and help shape a sustainable, resilient, and equitable food system that promotes human and planetary health.

A food system that enables everyone in Belfast to have equitable access to nutrient rich, affordable food and one that creates conditions for a strong, circular and fair local economy for all.

OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Good Food Governance

**Community Growing
and the Right to Grow**

Food Access and Justice

Circular Food Economy

Transforming Procurement

Nature Friendly Farming



OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Good Food Governance

Outcome One:

Sustainable food practices and partnership working are embedded into broader urban strategies and local governance across Belfast.

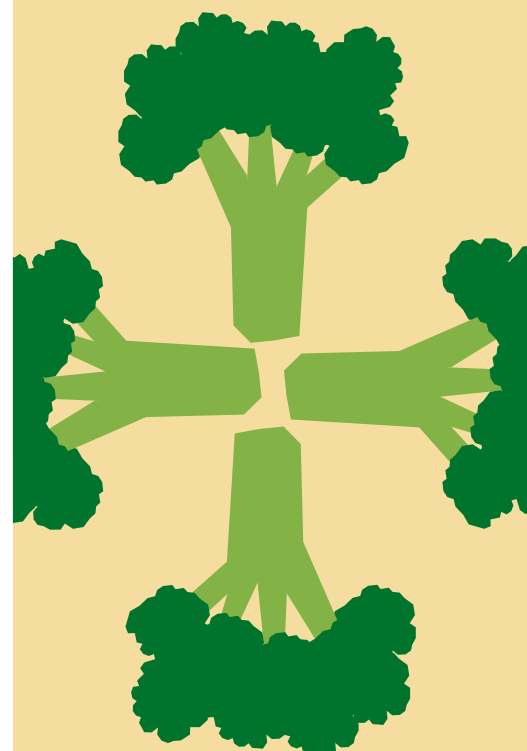
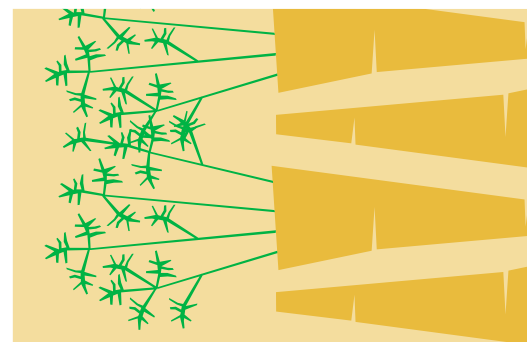
Outcome Two:

Inclusive and collaborative food decision-making is encouraged and facilitated across Belfast.



How will we achieve it?

- Strengthen inclusive governance frameworks and enabling local food partners to develop strategic, systemic solutions to Belfast's food challenges.
- Ensure joined-up working — encompassing growing, distribution, consumption, and waste.
- Protect and strengthen the right to food and the right to grow, for everyone.
- Promote cross sector collaboration to ensure the integration of health, environment, economy and social aspects in urban food policies.
- Connect urban, peri-urban and rural areas to foster co-governance, drive regenerative farming practices and socio-economic linkages and support sustainable regional food flows.



OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

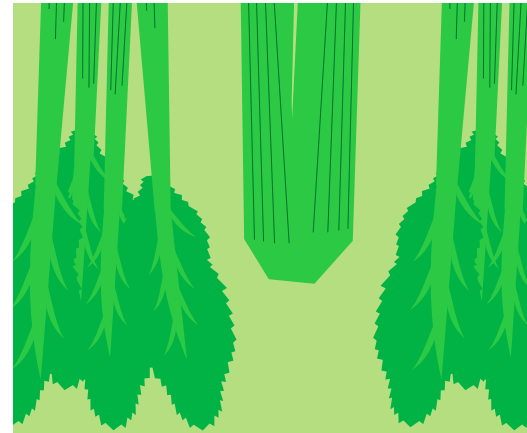
Community Growing and the Right to Grow

Outcome Three:

The Right to Grow is realised through fair distribution of space and opportunities to grow fresh food, favouring areas with less green space and minoritised communities.

Outcome Four:

A well networked and coordinated growing sector that celebrates local knowledge and social innovation, maintains fruitful networks and provides the best possible support for Belfast residents to eat well.



How we will achieve it?

- Empower communities by expanding and coordinating infrastructure, funding, and training for community gardens, allotments, and local growing initiatives.
- Work with landowners to facilitate easier access to unused or underutilised land for community food production.
- Leverage existing networks—like the Community Growing Forum—to share best practice and align resources
- Reviewing the existing Growing Communities Strategy and develop a resourced city-wide community growing plan, supporting a Right to Grow approach.

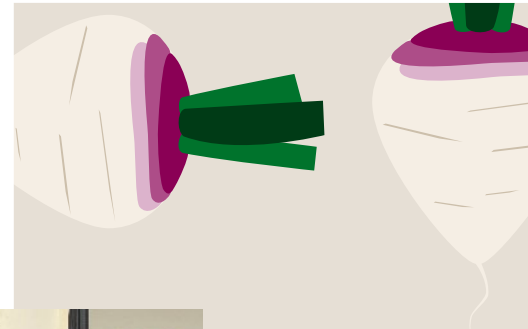


OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Food Access and Justice

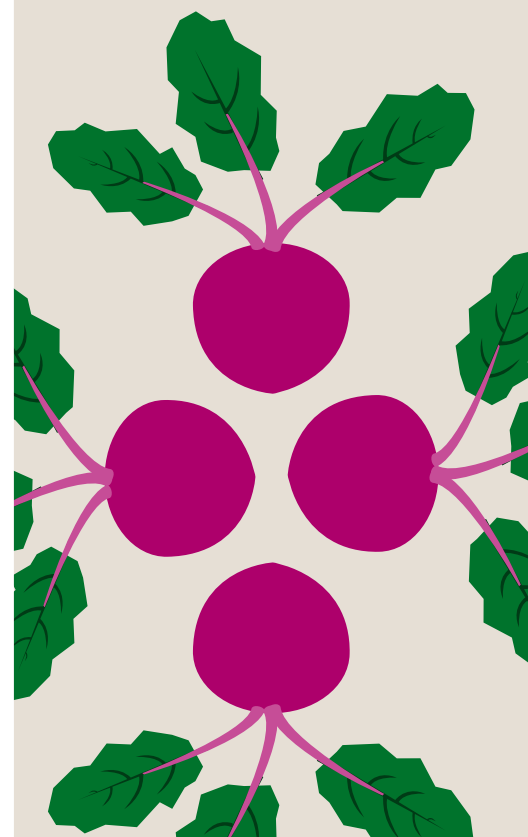
Outcome Five:

Collaborative and compassionate working to ensure that everyone can access nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food in a dignified and equitable way.



How we will achieve it

- Work to achieve a shift from short-term, emergency food provision toward systemic solutions ensuring dignified, culturally appropriate, and affordable food for all.
- Centre the Right to Food in policy: advocate for incorporating it into local and regional legislation, procurement, and anti-poverty programmes.
- Tackle diet-related health inequalities via comprehensive measures including advocating for universal free school meals.
- Involve diverse stakeholders in food system governance and decision making.
- Support food literacy to enhance democratisation of the food system



OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Circular Food Economy

Outcome Six:

Belfast is celebrated as a vibrant food city where our unique culinary heritage, rooted in local and sustainable produce, nourishes our communities, empowers our workers, and delights our visitors, fostering a thriving, just, and resilient food future for all.

Outcome Seven:

Belfast is recognised for its low emission, circular food system where food is sourced from local supply chains, food waste is reduced and resource efficiency and circularity are prioritised with opportunities to create value in the economy.

**How we will achieve it**

- Increase circularity and build community wealth by sourcing food locally, fostering food co-operatives, small-scale local businesses, and ethical hospitality practices.
- Reduce food waste by identifying the impact of our sources of our food and packaging waste in Belfast and identifying potential circular solutions to reduce it.
- Support fair wages, job security, and the role of unions in food retail, processing, and hospitality settings—particularly for young and part-time workers.
- Showcase local, sustainable produce and a vibrant, authentic culinary heritage.
- Measure the carbon emissions of the food system in Belfast and set a target to reach net zero.
- Explore community composting models and infrastructure.



OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Transforming Procurement

Outcome Eight:

Key institutions in Belfast use their purchasing power to demonstrate how the food system could become more sustainable, ethical, and provide better choices for people, and for the local and wider environment and society.

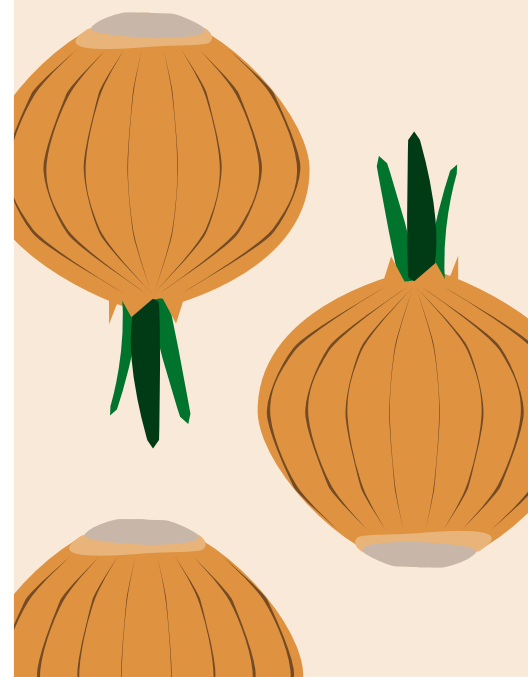
Outcome Nine:

Small regenerative producers are well networked and have a collective voice in promoting ‘smallness is resilience’ and are influencing – routes to market, shorter supply chains.



How we will achieve it

- Advocate the use of public purchasing power to promote healthy diets, support local producers and strengthen local supply chains that favour agroecological producers—particularly within key institutions.
- Investigate the feasibility of smaller procurement contracts so small local producers can participate in public procurement.
- Investigate the model of Regional Procurement Hubs to cooperatively market small local organic producers.
- Encourage anchor institutions in the city to adopt sustainable food policies.

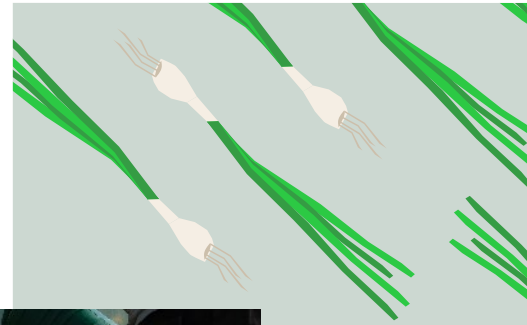


OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

Nature Friendly Farming

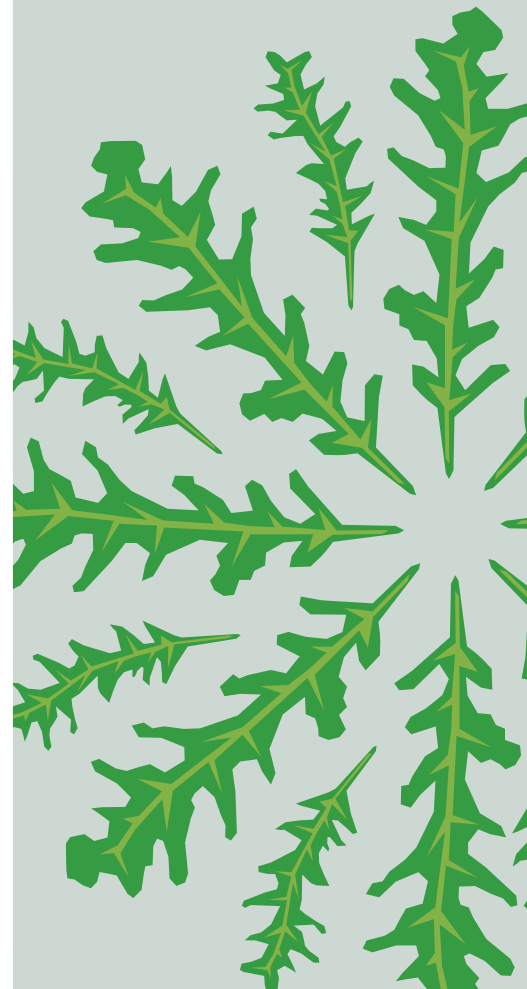
Outcome Ten:

A re-localised agri-food system supported by people and anchor institutions in Belfast based on short transparent food supply chains ensuring good quality, sustainable food and fair farmgate prices in exchange for accountability and good practice.



How we will achieve it

- Support the regional transition to nature-friendly farming (e.g., agroecology, regenerative agriculture) to mitigate biodiversity loss, climate change, and soil depletion.
- Promote the reduced use of synthetic inputs, increased crop diversity, healthy soils and improved water management to restore habitats, preserve biodiversity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- Build resilience to extreme weather events and supply chain disruptions by promoting integrated farming systems, crop rotations and other regenerative farming practices.
- Increase local horticulture (vegetables and fruit) produced using nature friendly farming to support healthier diets and a reduced reliance on imports, thereby lowering emissions and building resilience.
- Support sustainable land-use policies and leverage funding that prioritises diverse, nature friendly and climate resilient food production in the Belfast hinterland and beyond and create fair routes to market(s) for farmers and growers.
- Support sustainable nature friendly farming as a way of connecting people and nature, offering communities opportunities to gain new skills, strengthen social ties and environmental awareness.



Delivering on this strategy – how we will know we have achieved success

A three year action plan to deliver on the ten outcomes above is currently being developed. It will contain things we are already doing, things that could begin straight away, and follow up steps to create better understanding of and lasting change to the food system in Belfast. We will set suitable monitoring arrangements that align with the Belfast Agenda, and hope to demonstrate our success by achieving our Silver Award by the end of the three years. In achieving this we will reassess where the city is and embrace new opportunities, developing further steps that will continue to deliver a food system that ensures every person is able to access, enjoy and help shape a better and fairer food system.

By focusing on justice, local resilience, ecological regeneration, and collaboration across all sectors, Belfast can cultivate a thriving, future-proof food system. This Strategy provides a coordinated, strategic path—practical enough to implement now, while ambitious enough to tackle climate, social inequities, and health challenges as we move forward. Achieving these aims will require sustained commitment, strong partnerships, and dedicated resources.

We have been inspired by other place-based approaches across the Sustainable Food Places network, the UK and globally. We've taken note of the Preston Model, the Birmingham Food Revolution and the Wigan Deal.

But Belfast has its own character, its own strengths and its own opportunities so rather than trying to emulate other places, we are striving to create our own approach. One that is reflective of our particular needs, behaviours, aspirations and culture(s). We're interested in the Belfast model that tells our story of food, place and community, and how, together, we are building a sustainable food system in Belfast.

Drawing out Belfast's specific opportunities and challenges, this Strategy showcases 'The Belfast Way'. The City is ready for change. We have the energy, the belief, the people and the momentum.

Thank you to everyone across our city and our food system who has been part of these strategy discussions. Together, we can work together, plan together, celebrate together and grow together to make Belfast a resilient, thriving, sustainable city.



This report was produced in partnership with the Belfast Food Partnership, Belfast City Council, Brinkl!, Community Garden Support, Grow NI, Food Ethics Council and Ulster University.



We're grateful to Belfast City Council who provided support and funding for this strategy and associated research.