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# Municipal Foodscapes: Urban food policy and the new municipalism

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of food policy at the municipal level because municipalities are assuming a growing role in food policy reform. Adopting a framework of municipal foodscapes, we set out an embedded case study of the Oldham Educational Catering service, located within the Metropolitan Borough of Oldham in Greater Manchester, England. Through this prism we consider the potential of a foundational economy approach to embed food more firmly in the civic remit and highlight the role of new municipalism in enacting this approach in the public domain.

To illustrate these arguments, we argue that the public plate, particularly the provision of school meals, offers an important way to stimulate transformative food agendas at the municipal level. To progress this political agenda, however, multilevel action is needed at national and regional levels as well as within municipalities themselves to stimulate sustainable foodscapes. Recognising the foundational status of food, as illustrated by its criticality during the Covid-19 pandemic, can lead to more progressive and consequential food policy reform.

## Keywords

Foodscapes; Urban Food; Public Procurement; Regional Food Policy

## 1 Introduction

The main aim of this article is to explore the role of food policy at the municipal level. Municipal governments across the world are playing an ever more important role in the 'good food for all' movement (Morgan and Santo, 2018). We draw on the concept of the 'foodscape' because, in contrast to the narrowly defined and productivist notion of the 'food chain', the foodscape

embraces both production and consumption as components of a broader food system in which the social, ecological and political dimensions are rendered explicit (Morgan, 2012). Although the term varies in its application, foodscapes are inherently relational conceptualisations that seek to acknowledge the interplay between social and material dimensions, particularly with respect to geographies of place. As summarised by Vonthron et al. (2020), a foodscape is not considered as “an environment external to individuals, but a landscape including, perceived, and socially shaped by individuals and policies”. As an extension of this approach, a municipal foodscape can therefore be considered as the part of a food system that is shaped, both materially and socially, by the agency of municipal government.

The main research question that we try to address in this article can be defined as follows: to what extent can municipal government hope to play a consequential role in fashioning a more sustainable food system in its local jurisdiction? In addressing this question, the article hopes to contribute to the food studies literature by situating a key component of the municipal foodscape - namely school food provisioning – in the context of two burgeoning conceptual debates about the *foundational economy* on the one hand and the *new municipalism* on the other.

We argue that the municipal foodscape can contribute to, and benefit from being studied in the context of these two conceptual debates (a) because the concept of foundational economy elevates the status of mundane goods and services that loom large in meeting human needs and (b) because the concept of new municipalism highlights the manifold ways in which local government is seeking to reclaim its agency after being marginalised by years of neoliberal austerity.

This conceptual approach is illustrated through an empirical case study of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, a municipality within the city-region of Greater Manchester, England. Focusing on the case of the school meals service, we also explore municipal policy-led action to stimulate and embed sustainable foodscapes locally in Oldham itself and regionally in Greater Manchester. In the conclusion we seek to draw out the theoretical and political implications of this analysis.

## 2 Municipal Foodscapes

Although municipal government structures vary across the globe, in terms of both scope and scale, they tend to share common responsibilities that encompass the interrelated domains of human and economic wellbeing of their citizens. The level of power at municipal level, compared with regional and national government, and non-governmental provision, also varies considerably from country to country. Framed in institutional terms, remits at municipal level typically include education, public health, physical planning, economic development and environmental protection among others (Dollery and Wallis, 2001).

Recent years have witnessed a considerable growth in initiatives at the municipal level to promote more sustainable food systems, particularly in urban parts of North America and Europe (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999; Sonnino et al., 2019; Morgan, 2016; Cohen and Ilieva, 2020). Many of these initiatives are driven by networks of actors across stakeholder types, often with a discernible collective ethos that challenges mainstream food industry interests and consumer habits. Municipal officials are often either part of these networks or actively encourage their development (Moragues-Faus, 2020). Other areas have adopted a more technocratic route, relying on municipal powers and other state resources to engender change (Morgan and Santo, 2018). In practice, municipal level food policy initiatives often include increasing physical access to healthy food, reducing food waste,

supporting urban growing schemes, new business support and public food provision, particularly for school meals (Fillipini et al., 2019).

Overcoming the complexity and operational inefficiencies of the public sector, even at the municipal level, is essential because these problems can stymie the best designed food policy initiatives (Narbón-Perpiñá and De Witte, 2018). In the context of food, there can be distinct and sometimes conflicting remits in the areas of finance, public health, economic development and sustainability (Parsons, 2019). A key factor in the local decision-making process in local government is, of course, the elected political class, a much neglected topic in food policy studies. However, the case of school food reform in Rome highlighted the fact that many years of progressive food policy can be undone by changes in political representation at the local level (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). In public catering, for example, local political priorities can either foster or frustrate municipal school food provisioning (Morgan and Morley, 2013).

Systems for municipal food provision are diverse and context dependent. In the case of the UK school meals system, for example, there are broadly 3 models of school food providers: *Local Authority Caterers* (either internal or through 'arms-length' organisations) who typically provide food to a majority of schools in the municipality; *Contract Caterers*, often large food service providers part of multinational conglomerates; and *Independent School Caterers*, schools who produce meals 'in house' for pupils. Public food provision, therefore, ranges from multinational businesses such as Sodexo, who have the sourcing capacity of supermarkets, to individual cooks and kitchen managers who source direct from local shops and wholesalers. Similarly, suppliers to these food service entities include nationally dominant corporate wholesalers alongside an array of regional food wholesalers (usually specialists in areas such as meat or fresh produce) as well as small independent businesses (Morley, 2021). UK school meal provision is relatively dynamic in form, due to the ability of schools to decide their own catering provision arrangements. The net impact of this has been a consistent trend towards private catering providers at the expense of local authority caterers because the former promise a lower cost service (FFL, 2019).

### 3 Potential of School Meals

School meal provision is an attractive arena for advocates of progressive municipal foodscapes for a number of reasons. Chief among them is the growing realisation of the impact of poor diets on the development of children and the importance of the school meal in the overall diet for many children from low income households. The existence of poor quality meals in schools – not just nutritionally but organoleptically and in broader sustainability terms – has provided the main stimulus for reform, albeit with varying degrees of success. The second, related, factor is the size and ubiquity of school meal provision, particularly in industrialised nations. In the USA, for example, the federal government spent over \$18bn on school food in 2018 (USDA, 2019a), serving nearly 30 million student lunches per day (USDA, 2019b). Not only is this a significant economic activity in absolute terms, it is unique as a part of a food system under direct control by government and therefore within the remit of civic duties. Moreover, much of the operational control, such as budgeting and form of provision, is retained at subnational, often municipal, government levels. Despite this, the role and potential of school meal provision has often been overlooked by food policymakers and service providers (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010; Poppendieck, 2010).

Manchester was the first city in the world to provide free school meals when in 1879 authorities introduced a scheme to feed 'destitute and poorly nourished' pupils at school (McMahon and Marsh, 1999). British school food policy has its roots the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act of Parliament which first introduced free school meal entitlement. Nutritional standards were introduced in 1941 and by 1944 school meal provision was mandatory in state-run schools. The nadir for school food provision arose from the development of a low cost ethos through the compulsory competitive tendering framework introduced in the 1980s, alongside broader public service reforms which aimed to reduce the cost burden of food provision in line with the prevailing neoliberal model adopted by successive Conservative governments. Key elements of this approach included the removal of both nutritional standards and the requirement to provide meals at all except for the most socio-economically deprived children (Gustafsson, 2002; Passmore and Harris, 2004; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010).

Since the turn of the century, however, a series of government reforms, stimulated and supported by health and food sustainability advocates has led to healthier school food provision across the country, though this remains highly uneven (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010). For example, critics argue that not enough has been done, particularly with respect to wider sustainability qualities of the service and the harnessing of school food provision as a tool to promote healthier consumption habits amongst pupils. At the same time, the service remains under pressure to provide more for less in the face of stringent and persistent cuts to local government spending and the encroachment of commercial food service operators able to promise ever lower costs to schools (Morgan and Morley, 2014).

A key driver of this reform has been pressure exerted by populist advocates such as the chef Jamie Oliver and footballer Marcus Rashford, along with prominent NGO initiatives such as Food For Life (FFL), which works with over 10,000 schools in the UK. The higher political profile of school meals has been supported by a growing research basis outlining the benefits of quality school food provision. This includes positive relationships between educational attainment and both universal school meals (Schwartz and Rothbart, 2020) and healthy food provision (Anderson *et al.*, 2017). With respect to Food for Life participation in the UK, Jones *et al.* (2015) report a doubling in consumption of five portions of fruit and vegetables a day among participating children whilst satisfaction rates among pupils were around 40% higher than schools outside of the scheme. Researchers have also established the potential socioeconomic benefits of sourcing healthy and sustainable food from local suppliers. In the case of Food For Life, social return on investment analysis found that returns to the local economy via local food businesses were 3 times greater than the initial spend, money that would be lost if all the food was purchased outside the region (Kersley *et al.*, 2011).

Despite this heightened attention from policymakers, researchers and advocates, the school meals service remains burdened with a low status within municipalities. Municipal leaders in the UK usually have little engagement with school caterers (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010) and municipal food provision as a service remains under pressure from neoliberal pressures for choice and economic rationality (FFL, 2019).

The key point that has been established by recent research is that food policy at the municipal level is multi-dimensional in scope, with implications for health, social justice and ecological integrity. Moreover, it competes for political attention with many other strands of local government policy responsibilities, leading to potential conflicts in both prioritisation and implementation (Lang *et al.* 1999). Within the municipal sphere, public food provision, chiefly in the form of school meals, is a vital tool through which policy can influence the local foodscape (Morgan, 2008).

## 4 Situating Foodscapes

In this section we explore how foodscapes are situated within municipal economies, broadly defined for the purpose of this study as the distribution of resources to promote human, societal and planetary wellbeing at the municipal level. The aim is to explore how food policy can be deployed to foster economic and social wellbeing at the municipal level and here we draw on the twin concepts of foundational economy and new municipalism, both of which are informed by moral economy sensibilities.

### 4.1 The Moral Economy of Food

The notion of the moral economy gained traction from E.P. Thompson's essay '*The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*' (1971), which argued that food riots among the poor were manifestations of a shared set of social norms and obligations. These were considered to override emerging market relations of early capitalism. In this case, collective notions of a community's right to food were seen to be threatened by the *amoral* economy of capitalist food supply in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain.

In the modern context, Sayer provides a compelling call for the moral economy to be seen as a critical lens to study collective action: "all economic institutions are founded on norms defining rights and responsibilities that have legitimations (whether reasonable or unreasonable), require some moral behaviour of actors, and generate effects that have ethical implications. Moral norms are not merely conventions, but embody assumptions about what well-being consists in, and these can be evaluated" (Sayer, 2007: 261).

The moral economy perspective is potentially instructive where there is tension between collective social goals and pervading market forces. The value-laden nature of food, particularly in intensive consumption arenas such as towns and cities, is a prime example of such a site of contention, as illustrated by Thompson's original thesis. This tension is reflected in the burgeoning food related social movements across the globe which are focused on access and inequalities caused by the perceived failings of market mechanisms (Wekerle, 2004). In more substantive terms, this lens suggests that modern consumers should be empowered through the provision of progressive foodscapes and the ability to make informed consumption choices for the benefit of personal, societal and planetary wellbeing which are derived through social norms and collective obligations (Morgan, 2015).

The notion that societal progress should be articulated in terms of a set of shared moral norms, rather than the amoral accumulation of capitalist wealth, leads to the quest for wellbeing frameworks for economies that incorporate these concerns as a counter to prevailing neoliberal arguments. One such approach that is particularly appropriate for re-centring food in policy discourse at the municipal level is the foundational economy perspective.

### 4.2 Foundational Economy and New Municipalism

The foundational economy offers a new perspective on the role of municipalities as important agents in the creation of sustainable foodscapes (Morgan, 2020). The foundational economy model seeks to elevate the status of so-called 'mundane' sectors of the economy in two ways: firstly, by establishing the critically important role that foundational sectors such as care, health, education, food, transport play in meeting human needs; and, secondly, by highlighting the significance of these sectors as sources of employment in all regions of the country (Bentham et al., 2013; Froud et al., 2018). Foundational sectors in the UK, for example, are estimated to employ over 43% of the total workforce (Froud et al., 2018). In terms of human need, the foundational status of food provisioning was dramatically underlined by the Covid-19 pandemic, when food workers were officially classified as 'key workers' in many countries (FEC, 2020).

The foundational economy approach also aims to rebalance the political gaze away from fashionable 'high tech' sectors and mobile international capital – for which regions and nation states are in increasing competition – towards more place-based and essential economic activities that focus on human needs and social cohesion (Bentham et al., 2013). As such, the approach offers a way to translate the ethical critique of the moral economy lens into a political response that can enhance the role of food through policy and practice (Morgan, 2020). Through a foundational economy lens, food and other foundational activities are conceived as 'stabilizers' which enable internal and external 'accelerators' (such as land value and capital respectively) to unevenly accrue economic prosperity (Engelen et al., 2017). Viewed through such a lens, food demands greater attention from urban planners because it underpins the socio-economic health of all localities, furnishing the basis for economic growth in conventional technology-driven sectors.

By acknowledging the foundational status of food, municipal policymakers are challenged to strengthen the resilience and reach of the sector in order to maximise its benefit to residents and the wider economy. Crucially, the foundational approach to foodscapes requires municipal actors to account for place-specific constraints and opportunities. A chief constraint in the UK context, in common with many other countries, is limited resources at local government levels due to centrally-imposed austerity measures, forcing municipalities to 'do more with less' in terms of public service provisioning (Morgan, 2020).

A foundational foodscape approach, therefore, suggests a rethinking of traditional policy reach at municipal level, both in form and function, and it has much in common with the 'new municipalism'. The 'new municipalism' has emerged from the struggles against neoliberal austerity and it aims to elevate the status of municipalities as more autonomous political and economic agents with respect to the central state (Thompson, 2020). In order to tackle the multifaceted challenges for food policy, more holistic approaches are required that harness civic potential, that integrate hitherto separate policy areas (particularly public health and economic development) and that aim to be locally embedded but globally engaged in food policy debates. In this political perspective, municipalities are cast as key agents in the regulation and delivery of foundational foodscapes (Morgan and Santo, 2018).

More and more local authorities are pursuing policies associated with the new municipalism, a movement that aims to build progressive alternatives to neoliberalism (Russell, 2019). To avoid the celebrated 'local trap' – which fetishizes the local scale and treats localisation as an end in itself – the new municipalism espouses a multiscale politics by refusing to treat any scale as inherently more progressive than another (Purcell, 2006). In practice this involves setting a high premium on policy experimentation through municipal entrepreneurship (Cumbers, 2012; Thompson, 2020). New municipalisation aims to deliver a new species of citizen-centred public services, or the restoration of privatised services to the public sphere in the case of re-municipalisation, particularly with a view to secure universal access to services and promote social justice and environmental sustainability. In

recent years, municipalities across the world have developed, or revived, public services, often in response to the detrimental effects of neoliberalism on their communities. In a recent survey of municipalisation initiatives, food and catering was the second largest category of local government-led initiatives, behind only housing. In France, for example, the provision of organic and local food to schools and nurseries has been the focus of a number of re-municipalisation efforts over recent years, including the creation of municipal farms and procurement initiatives to support local farmers (Kishimoto et. al., 2020).

It is proposed, therefore, that municipal foodscapes can embody the ethical principles of the moral economy approach translated into policy action through foundational economy thinking. By encompassing multiple socio-economic, health and ecological goals, these approaches ground municipalities in the moral economy of their residents. This approach includes harnessing the potential of municipalisation, most notably in the form of public sector catering.

As a movement with global potential, municipal foodscapes offer a potential vehicle for delivering the Sustainable Development Goals that fall within the food system domain. Moreover, municipal level action promises to overcome two of the major weaknesses that have been identified in the critical food studies literature: the need for a more granular spatial sensibility, in other words subnational delivery capacity, and more clearly defined implementation mechanisms to guide place-specific actions that address the goals (Morgan and Santo, 2018).

## 5 Methodological Approach

The case study presented below aims to shed light on the processes that inform the evolution of novel public services to promote progressive municipal foodscapes. It does this by accounting for multi-levelled place-based specificities that feed or frustrate holistic approaches to food policy. The case study was developed through engagement with public sector representatives and wider stakeholders in the region between 2015 and 2020 primarily through an action research partnership between Oldham Council (acting on behalf of Greater Manchester) and Manchester Metropolitan University as part of a EU-funded Interreg Project ‘Strengthening regional innovation policies to build sustainable food chains’<sup>i</sup>. Also known as Food Chains 4EU, this partnership aimed to improve the implementation of regional policies that stimulate the delivery of innovation to create sustainable food chains. The primary role of participating universities was to facilitate the sharing of experience between regional stakeholders and encourage interregional learning. Participant observation was employed during a prolonged period of engagement through these activities, during which fieldnotes were recorded. In addition, both authors acted in advisory capacities in the region and nationally with regard to regional policy development and school meals policy. The case study account draws directly on informal interviews with 12 municipal and regional government employees and five expert stakeholders actively involved in Greater Manchester municipal food policy. In addition, secondary data analysis was conducted on both published and unpublished policy related documentation, including minutes from municipal and policy network meetings. Comparative national data were drawn upon where appropriate, particularly in relation to school meal provision.

An embedded case study approach has been followed in order to provide a situated account of the actions of a progressive municipality within a regional context. Embedded case studies focus on multiple interrelated units of analysis within the system under investigation (Scholz and Tietje,



2002). In order to understand and convey an instructive example of municipal foodscape development, the case study delineates regional, municipal and service level accounts focused on the metropolitan borough of Oldham within the Greater Manchester region of England. This approach aims to provide analytical framework for the incorporation of a range of empirical data whilst facilitating multi-scalar and multi-contextual analysis. Broader analytical themes were then sought with reference to the underlying conceptual grounding of the paper, as set out in Sections 1 to 4, with the aim of distilling policy relevant findings.

## 6 Oldham: Good Food in a Poor Municipality

### 6.1 The Regional Food Policy Context

The Greater Manchester region consists of 10 local municipalities which work together on areas of mutual interest where public service delivery can be enhanced by combining resources and powers. The region is geographically centred on the city of Manchester with 7 neighbouring authorities, including Oldham, plus the adjacent councils of Wigan and Bolton. It is a predominantly urban region of metropolitan nature, comprising a series of post-industrial towns with around 2.8 million inhabitants. Greater Manchester is a region of high socio-economic inequalities. Child poverty rates are higher than the UK average, whilst 8 of the 10 boroughs have lower than average life expectancy for residents (IHE, 2020). The region is also home to pockets of high prosperity centred around construction-led urban renaissance projects in the city of Manchester and a small number of suburban and rural areas, particularly in the south of the region (GMIPR, 2019).

**Figure 1: The Greater Manchester region**



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The governing body for the region level is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) which consists of the 10 constituent local authorities plus the office of the Mayor for Greater Manchester. GMCA's policy power is a combination of the combined powers of individual member authorities in areas of mutual interest plus a set of devolved powers transferred from UK central government through a series of 6 devolution deals agreed between 2014 and 2017<sup>ii</sup>. As a result, the region has powers in areas such as Health and Social Care (in partnership with National Health Service agencies in the region), Policing, Planning and Transport but lacks the more comprehensive devolved powers of other parts of the UK such as Greater London and, in particular, Wales and Scotland (Hodson et al., 2020).

Greater Manchester has little direct or explicit policy power in the food system. The constituent Local Authorities have responsibility for the enforcement of food safety standards along with associated measures related to environmental health and trading standards. Local authorities also largely retain responsibility for school meal provision as well as aspects of public health. Responsibility for food-related issues is woven into a range of policy domains at the regional level covering public health, planning, economic development, and waste management (Parsons, 2020).

In recent years there have been concerted attempts to bring together and strengthen food-related policy in Greater Manchester. The roots of this development lie in two broad-based partnerships driven by individuals and organisations largely at the periphery of policy making power: Feeding Greater Manchester and Good Food Greater Manchester (Good Food GM).

Feeding Greater Manchester is a grassroots network of sustainable food advocates. Formed in 2009 as Feeding Manchester, the network connects likeminded activists, particularly from the community enterprises, urban growing and alternative food sector. In 2014 Feeding Greater Manchester produced a Sustainable Food Strategy for Greater Manchester. This was followed in 2017 by a Sustainable Food Vision for Greater Manchester produced in collaboration with a multitude of community and environmental organisations in the region. Good Food Greater Manchester was established in 2015 as a policy-oriented food board for the region. Membership includes individuals from the third sector and activists as well as representatives from public sector organisations in the region with the aim of influencing and coordinating strategic action across the region. In 2017, Good Food GM was endorsed by the Mayor as a strategic food policy network in the region at a Greater Manchester Green Summit which was convened to support the development and implementation of a new environmental strategic plan for the region

Both networks work towards, and are supported by, the Sustainable Food Places (SFP) framework. SFP is a national network that supports local level collaboration between government and civic society across a range of 6 interrelated sustainable food issues. The programme has a similar Bronze, Silver and Gold accreditation for member localities. There are around 60 member cities, towns and other geographical areas across the UK<sup>iii</sup>, 24 of which have gained award accreditation<sup>iv</sup>. Manchester and Oldham both have SFP accreditation, whilst two other municipalities, plus the region as a whole are members of the movement without accreditation.

In 2018, a collaborative partnership was initiated with Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership (GMHSCP) with the aim of enhancing food system leadership and strategic capacity in the region. GMHSCP and Good Food GM jointly commissioned an independent Greater Manchester Strategic Food Review of the policy landscape which was published in May 2019 (Davies and Williams, 2019). Since this time, the organisations have been working together to implement the recommendations of this review, particularly the development of a formal food strategy and action plan for the region. Alongside this, the Mayor of Greater Manchester signed up to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact<sup>v</sup> in October 2019, a global network of over 200 cities, with the aim of supporting the evolution of strategic food policy in the region and its constituent municipalities.

Despite this apparent vibrance, however, food issues have been largely absent from the growing corpus of strategic policy documents that have developed alongside the devolution process (see Davies and Williams, 2019). The overarching strategy for the region 'Our People Our Place' (GMCA, 2017, for example, only explicitly acknowledges food as a niche manufacturing strength for the region. Instead, the region has adopted a networked approach to food policy, steered by a broad base of governmental and non-governmental actors. In this way, Greater Manchester is joining many other -predominantly urban – localities in attempting to overcome policy dispersion and lack of coherence between the wide range of civic activities that relate to a more sustainable food system.

As a relatively loose agglomeration of municipalities, Greater Manchester is a particularly complex policymaking arena. All 10 municipalities retain many of the powers and responsibilities incumbent on municipal government. As such, a key dimension of policy coordination at the regional level is the facilitation of learning and opportunities for joint working between the local authorities. Moreover, each municipality has its own priorities and levels of interest related to food, both politically and among civic organisations.

The region has a number of core strategies which attempt to cut through the complex array of powers and priorities by providing strategic direction and an impetus to both political and monetary investment. The Greater Manchester Local Industrial Strategy (HM Government 2019) acknowledges

the importance of the foundational economy to overall prosperity in the region. Although food is not singled out as a foundational sector, hospitality and healthcare are identified as core elements of the foundational economy that should be supported in order to underpin economic progress and the livelihoods of Greater Manchester residents.

## 6.2 Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

Oldham is a metropolitan borough, approximately 144 sq. km in size, with a population of approximately 240,000 people (Oldham Council, 2019). The municipality is based around the post industrial town of Oldham which is around 10km North East of the city of Manchester. Oldham stands out among GM municipalities by the fact that it has a relatively large rural component. Around a quarter of the borough is part of the Peak District national park. The borough therefore contains a mixture of urban, suburban and rural locales. Residential areas are concentrated in the Centre and West of the borough. The municipality as a whole is highly multicultural, with ethnic minority groups accounting for 22.5% of the population (Oldham Council, 2019).

Oldham has a rich industrial past. In the decades around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it was a global centre for cotton-spinning, with over 350 mills in operation (McNeil and Nevell, 2000). The economic decline has been marked. The town of Oldham was recently ranked by the UK national statistics authority as the most deprived town or city in the country, according to an Index of Multiple Deprivation. Over 65% of neighbourhoods are in the lowest deprivation classification, the highest proportion in the UK (ONS, 2016). At the municipal level, 30% of neighbourhoods are in this classification, the joint second highest in Greater Manchester, behind the City of Manchester which has 43% (the 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the UK) (MHCLG, 2019).

In 2015, Oldham Council estimated that there were around 24,000 residents in food poverty in the borough, approximately 10% of the total population. An estimated 4,600 individuals received assistance from a local food bank, around a third of which were children (Oldham Council, 2015). It can be assumed that this figure grew significantly in subsequent years due largely to the impacts of UK government welfare reform. The Trussell Trust, the leading UK supporter of Food Banks, estimates that demand for Food Bank services nationally rose by 73% between 2014 and 2019 (Trussell Trust, 2020).

A more positive part of Oldham's industrial legacy is a cooperative ethos which stems from the cooperative movement which has its origins in the neighbouring municipality of Rochdale. England's first cooperative retailer, the 'Oldham Co-operative Supply Company' was established in the town in 1795 (Patmore and Balnave, 2018). In modern times, Oldham Council was a founder member of the UK's Co-operative Council network and continues to follow an operating model based on a co-operative framework for whole system change (Shafique et al., 2012). The current overarching municipal strategy 'Oldham Plan 2017-22' (Oldham Partnership, 2017) articulates this approach as the 'Oldham Model' and identifies two key enablers: public service reform and empowering people and communities. The stated aim of the Oldham Model is to deliver 'fundamental shifts' within the borough in the three broad categories of economic inclusivity, co-operative based public services and thriving communities.

Municipal food policy is driven by Growing Oldham Feeding Ambition (GOFA) partnership which was established in 2016. GOFA is a strategic network, predominately made up of public sector representatives from the borough and is chaired by an elected official. The aim of the partnership is to support food related priorities and drive a sustainable and cooperative approach to food in

Oldham. Delivering the Oldham Plan is a key mandate for GOFA particularly the document's commitment that Oldham institutions support 'fair access to healthy food' (Oldham Partnership, 2017, p18).

A key aspect of GOFA and the broader municipality's approach to promoting 'fair access to healthy food' is through support for community enterprise in the food sector. This includes the provision of a Food Enterprise fund specifically aimed at 'not for profit' food initiatives in the municipality. One of the desired outcomes of this programme is the support for existing community groups to scale-up food production for the benefit of municipal residents. Oldham is an active member of the SFP framework, achieving Bronze status in 2018. The municipality has the stated aim to achieve Silver accreditation by 2022, an award which is only held by one other town in the UK.

A major expression of the value put on food in the municipality is the development of a flagship food growing initiative called Northern Roots. This ambitious project will be the largest urban farm and eco-park in the UK. Spread over 160 acres, as well as growing fresh produce, the site demonstrates Oldham's commitment to a municipal foodscape approach by including incubation units for community-led food businesses<sup>vi</sup>. Supported through the Food Enterprise Fund, entrepreneurs will be supported to develop added value food products and services that are in line with the Oldham Model. In addition, there will be animal husbandry provision and an onsite food service venture and shop. The aim is to create a positive vehicle for change in the municipality based on valuing green space and food that benefits the whole community.

Although Oldham is only one of 10 constituent municipalities, council representatives have been particularly active at the GM food policy level through proactive membership of Good Food GM and the council's participation in the Food Chains 4EU project, which aims to strengthen food policy leadership in GM to support sustainable food innovation, on behalf of GMCA. In addition, the Chief Executive of Oldham Council is the Chair of the GM Population Board which oversees the GM Health and Social Care Partnership work on food. The most impactful and renowned municipal food initiative in Oldham, however, is the school meals service, which we examine next.

### 6.3 Education Catering Oldham

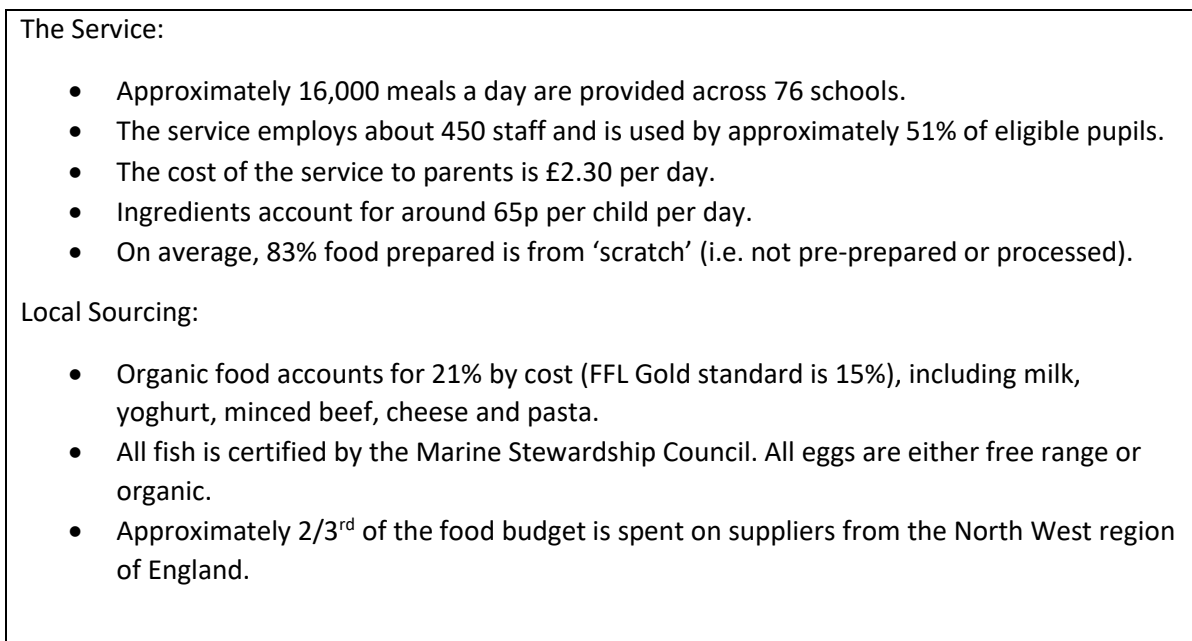
Education Catering Oldham (ECO) is an operational arm of Oldham Council. The service provides around 16,000 meals a day to 76 schools spread across the municipality. ECO is led by a highly dynamic municipal manager who has worked for the service since 1978 when she started as a trainee cook. She is widely considered as the architect of the award-winning catering service in Oldham, although she fully acknowledges the vital support and commitment from both her catering team and the senior civil servants and politicians in the municipality. When she became catering manager in 2000, she inherited a system that, in common with the majority of school meals services in the UK, relied on low cost and low quality ingredients.

In 2009, the school meal service joined the *Food for Life* programme. Founded by the UK charity Soil Association, *Food for Life* is a national initiative that sets out to promote whole school approaches to food. The aim is to support schools to promote healthy and sustainable eating throughout the school experience. Member schools incorporate good food into their curriculum, including cooking and growing skills. The provision of healthy and sustainable school meals is at the core of the *Food for Life* ethos. As a certified provider of *Food for Life* meals, ECO have had to meet a series of tiered standards which are inspected annually. Entry level to the scheme is the Bronze award, which is followed by Silver and Gold. ECO achieved Gold status in 2014, just 6 years after joining, and have

successfully retained the status every year since. Oldham is one of only five local authority caterers in England to hold this status. All holders of this standard must ensure that the food provided by the school meal service in Oldham is at least 15% organically certified and 5% free range. In addition, at least 75% of meals must be freshly prepared using unprocessed ingredients. Other aspects of sustainability such as local sourcing and climate friendly meals are incentivised through the awarding of points that must total more than a minimum threshold at Silver and Gold levels.

The fact that the gold standard has been maintained is an achievement that should not be underestimated because Local Government funding has been cut significantly during this period whilst the number of pupils qualifying for free school meals has increased (in part due to social welfare reform). In 2019-2020, Oldham received the second lowest central government grant for free school meals in Greater Manchester, a figure which is well below the national average (£172,000 versus £238,000) (ESFA, 2019).

**Figure 2: Oldham Education Catering in Figures:**



Data from 2019.

The ability to meet food cost pressures associated with school food provision in an area of deprivation is attributed to the development of long-term trustful relationships with regional suppliers. In 2017/18, the average UK ingredient cost for primary and special school meals was 80p, compared with 65p in Oldham. Moreover, the cost to parents of the service (£2.30) is only marginally higher than the UK average of £2.25 (APSE, 2019).

Over recent years, a national Universal Free School Meals policy for primary school children has boosted uptake rates for many school caterers, providing relief against economic pressures by lowering fixed costs per meal (APSE, 2019). This has also had the effect, however, of reinforcing the attractiveness of the service to predatory commercial providers (O'Brien, 2016). In Oldham, as elsewhere, labour is the main cost for the school meals service. Moreover, staff costs are relatively higher as the quality of food provided by ECO depends on dishes being made from scratch where

possible, which requires both more staff and greater kitchen skills (Kimberlee et al., 2013). The resource implications of this are compounded by the fact that Oldham MBC pay staff at least the Foundation Living Wage (£9.30 per hour in 2020 compared with the national living wage of £8.72 for over 25s).

The sustainability gains made by the municipal school meals service are not down to a difference in supply contracts or the underlying sustainable procurement framework. ECO use contracts negotiated at the GM level by a procurement consortium and used by five other municipalities. All municipal authorities in GM operate according to a GMCA Social Value Policy (AGMA, 2014) and associated Framework which sets out to ensure that the assessment of a range of socioeconomic impacts are considered in procurement processes. Instead, sustainability gains have been achieved by working with existing contract holders to source from regional and organic producers whilst ensuring that costs are manageable.

Despite the success of OSM, a small number of schools have switched to private catering providers in recent years. Regulatory changes that give schools greater budgetary autonomy have accompanied greater financial pressures on the sector, enabling lower cost commercial providers to poach schools from municipal catering. Critics argue that this shift is counterproductive as meal quality is lower, particularly over the longer term once contracts are secured, and exclude the 'true costs' of the service in terms of adverse health and socioeconomic impacts (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010).

Despite being a pioneer of award-winning municipal school food in Oldham, the wider region is struggling to provide a consistent quality for school meals. Only three out of 229 FFL certified caterers are based in GM, despite the region having over 4% of the UK population and the City of Manchester is the only other municipality to gain FFL status in GM<sup>vii</sup>. The success of ECO has also stimulated regular advocacy at the regional level for the reproduction of the Oldham school meal model in other GM municipalities. Both Feeding Greater Manchester and Good Food GM have formally called for action to scale out the Oldham approach across the region. This was also a recommendation of the independent Greater Manchester Strategic Food Review and the Food Chains 4EU project.

## 7 Discussion and Policy Implications

The embedded case study above explores the multilevel influence of municipal food policy and practice within a nested territorial governance structure. Four themes emerge from this analysis that are instructive for understanding the dynamics of food policy action at the municipal level. The lessons from Oldham suggest that pursuing action in these areas can facilitate the development of more sustainable foodscapes.

### 7.1 Progressive Municipalism

The concerted attempts by the local authority in Oldham to facilitate the development of municipal foodscapes through conspicuous initiatives such as ECO and the Northern Roots project can be considered as expressions of new municipalism. In the case of ECO, rather than introducing new services or bringing private services into the public sphere, the ECO approach extended the reach of

an existing service by integrating sustainability and socioeconomic goals into what would conventionally be considered as a prosaic feeding service. Similarly, Northern Roots extends the reach of the municipality by creating a physical manifestation of a foodscape in the landscape of the borough. By bringing food growing and entrepreneurship into the municipal sphere, the local authority is employing the ethos of new municipalism to elevate food as part of its foundational economy. The adoption of the SFP framework and coordination with agencies at the GM level are also examples of this approach as they endeavour to harness and combine remits at the municipal level that were previously deemed independent in both operational and strategic terms.

## 7.2 Harnessing Entrepreneurial Municipalism

The emergence and sustained success of the ECO model can be attributed to an effective public sector entrepreneur supported by a progressive municipal environment alongside a strong trans-local implementation framework. The innovative role played by the catering manager and her team at Oldham, and her willingness to veer from the institutional norm of the typical municipal caterer, can be viewed as an example of *entrepreneurial municipalism*. The notion of entrepreneurial municipalism, which has its roots in co-operativism, contrasts with the 'heroic entrepreneur' ideal as it involves collective endeavour and aims at social transformation rather than economic opportunism (Thompson et al., 2020).

A key challenge for ECO, and similar entrepreneurial success stories in the public sector, is how to embed the dynamism embodied in municipal entrepreneurs in the organisational routines of the institution? Cases of entrepreneurial municipalism that are predicated on particular individuals run the risk of being undone when that person moves on. This is a circumstance that plagues school food reform. Evidence for this goes back to the 1980s, as described by Barlett (2010) in the case of Hendrix College, Arkansas, which integrated up to 30% of sourcing from local farmers as part of a catering reform initiative only for this to unravel once the champion of the scheme left. Effective and durable change within the public sector is often transitory in the absence of the political will to embed new practices in old organisations (Morgan and Morley, 2014).

## 7.3 Harnessing Trans-local Learning

Oldham's trajectory towards SFP Silver status could be regarded as the development of a foodscape in Oldham that recognises and embeds food as part of the foundational economy of the municipality. The relative popularity on a national scale of FFL and SFP confirms a value of trans-local initiatives as drivers for sustainable foodscapes (Pitt and Jones, 2016; Santo and Moragues-Faus, 2019). Both are holistic food sustainability frameworks led by NGOs but within a philosophy of networking and shared learning. As such, they seek to highlight the intrinsically significant place of foodscapes in human, societal and planetary wellbeing and facilitate locally embedded organisations to set their own priorities based on prevailing norms and obligations.

The emphasis on trans-local learning rather than scaling out best practice into neighbouring municipalities, however, presents challenges to foundational economy thinking as regional economies are particularly intertwined. In the case of GM, for example, many people live and work in different municipalities, whilst food system infrastructure is largely built around supply and demand rather than political boundaries.



## 7.4 Municipal-Regional Dynamics

The struggles over school food highlight the structural limits of progressive localism, as illustrated through the example of Oldham and ECO. A combination of national, regional and local action is needed in order to scale out or adapt successful examples of municipal entrepreneurship and experimentation to other local contexts. In the case of school food provision, national action such as the Universal Free School Meals initiative can put catering services on a more secure financial and regulatory footing. At the regional level, municipalities have the potential to work together to reproduce areas of success and seek critical mass to bring economies of scale and more effective shared services. At the local level, within municipalities, there is potential to broaden areas of best practice into allied policy remits, as illustrated by the subsequent adoption of SFP in Oldham.

At the regional level, the main food policy impetus from Oldham has been the success of the ECO model. Calls from stakeholders and good food advocates to scale up or reproduce the Oldham school meal approach in other municipalities have so far gone unheeded. One of the main barriers to this is the degree of municipal autonomy within Greater Manchester which stymies the power of the regional mayor. Although municipalities collaborate through purchasing consortia and work within a common Social Value Policy, the form and function of school catering services varies and are largely independent in an operational sense. This represents a core dilemma for progressive food policy reformers: how can 'little victories' at the local level be scaled and embedded in regional and national structures that might afford them more longevity?

The role the municipality takes at the regional level, however, acknowledges the embedded nature of the Oldham municipality within the Greater Manchester region. This includes recognising the value of influencing both the levers of regional policy and the nature of the regional food system itself in order to deliver its own goals for 'fundamental shifts' at the municipal level.

## 8 Conclusions

The case of Oldham outlined above provides an instructive example of how municipalised approaches to progressive foodscapes can emerge through complex multi-scalar policy influences. In particular, the municipalisation of the school food service can be considered an expression of a foundational approach to food which is itself a function, in part, of the moral impetus of the council's co-operative ethos and the entrepreneurial municipalism of the service manager.

Public food provisioning is an important part of the municipal foodscape and provides reach into communities, homes and the quality of life for individuals. This foundational approach is also being expressed through a flagship initiative that enrolls communities and businesses in a municipal foodscape centred on physical space.

This paper suggests that municipalities such as Oldham are potentially important agents in implementing food-focused foundational economy initiatives. This involves the elevation of food as a generator of multiple dividends by providing economic livelihoods, healthier citizens and greener local environments. New municipalism, particularly in forms that harness local entrepreneurial potential and are morally grounded in the needs of residents and stakeholders, constitutes a key tool for municipalities pursuing this agenda. Moreover, municipalities and their supporting agents must forge links between urban food policy, school food and procurement.

Finally, the interplay of municipal and regional governance in food policymaking presents a challenge to the growth of new municipalism, at least in the Greater Manchester case. This paper exposes the tension between successful municipal policy initiatives and the wider governance structure of the city-region, where borough autonomy prevents the regional mayor from deploying his power to disseminate local innovations (like Oldham's school food service) beyond a single locality. If the ambitious goals of new municipalism and foundational economy approaches are to be met in the area of food, multi-scalar food policy mandates must be harnessed, not least in order to avoid the draw of the 'local trap'. Future research should devote more attention to the scalar interplay between local and regional policy making power structures to ensure that the potential of municipal foodscapes can be harnessed to better effect.

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