

# **Advice Report Food Council Groningen**

“Just say you’re a Food Council!”

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## Summary

From the Speak Up project and the Groningen municipal food policy, this research focuses on setting up a Food Council in the province of Groningen, with the central question: How can Groningen take the first steps in establishing a Food Council? The impetus for this research lies in the growing need for a more sustainable and equitable food system, in which residents and stakeholders play an active role. The aim of this research is to formulate a recommendation for starting a Food Council that fits the context of the Groningen region and knows how to create support among a broad group of stakeholders. The research was conducted using qualitative methods, including interviews with representatives of Food Councils from the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. In addition, literature research was conducted on existing food councils and initiatives that contribute to sustainable food transitions.

The main findings point to three essential key points for a successful start: building a strong network and community, creating effective cooperation with the municipality, and paying consistent attention to visibility and communication once the Food Council is in place. These points were highlighted by almost all interviewees as crucial in the early stages of a Food Council. In addition, the analysis shows that Groningen has a rich ecosystem of existing food, health and sustainability initiatives, which can provide a solid basis for collaboration.

The conclusion of this study is that a Food Council in Groningen can be set up effectively by utilising and building networks, increasing the visibility of the Food Council as much as possible to reach different (new) target groups, and focusing on a good relationship with the municipality. Key recommendations include developing an inspiring vision that aligns with local values, organising low-threshold activities to strengthen involvement and investing in structural support. Follow-up research should focus on how exactly strong social networks and communities are created and effectively maintained, in order to make the Food Council as supported as possible.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context and reason

Global pressures on health, sustainability and social well-being are steadily increasing (Leusink et al., 2015, p. 2). Food plays a central role in addressing these complex and interconnected issues, being both a cause and a potential solution (Lang & Barling, 2009, pp. 1-2; IPCC, 2019, p. 89). Food systems contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss and social inequality. At the same time, they face the challenge of ensuring global access to healthy and sustainable food (FAO, 2021). It is becoming increasingly clear that structural changes in food systems, a food transition, are necessary to ensure a healthy, sustainable and inclusive future.

In Groningen, this issue is also urgent. The region faces challenges such as the accessibility of healthy food, an inclusive food supply and the sustainability of food production and consumption (Gemeente Groningen, 2024). At the same time, Groningen offers a unique breeding ground for change because of its strong sense of community, innovative agricultural sector and growing focus on sustainability within policy and social initiatives (e.g. Fascinating, 2024). One promising approach to address these challenges is the creation of a Food Council. In a number of cities and regions, both in the Netherlands and abroad, Food Councils already function as independent platforms where diverse stakeholders come together to improve food systems. They promote inclusive decision-making, support policymaking and act as a link between government and society (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015, p. 1560). As a result, food councils can contribute to accelerating the food transition and strengthening local food systems.

This idea took shape during conversations with Renske Stumpel, lead partner of the Speak Up project, and Ivet Panjer, policy advisor on food transition at the Quality-of-Life programme of the municipality of Groningen. Speak Up focuses on improving collaboration between citizens and governments to tackle key societal challenges, including food. Groningen municipality's food policy focuses on making the food system more sustainable, encouraging local food production and promoting healthy and active lifestyles (Gemeente Groningen, 2024). In this context, the question was raised whether setting up a Food Council could be a logical and effective next step to further support the food transition.

This report therefore explores the opportunities, challenges and possibilities surrounding the establishment of a Food Council in Groningen. The research is based on literature review and interviews with experts in the field of local (food) politics and food councils at home and abroad. The central research question is: 'How can Groningen take the first steps in establishing a Food Council?' In doing so, this report provides a handle for the Groningen municipality to take this advice one step closer to a more sustainable and inclusive food system.

## 1.2 Purpose of the research

The aim of this research is to explore how a Food Council in Groningen could be most effectively established to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable and equitable food system. Food Councils are increasingly recognised as valuable platforms that foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders to address complex food-related issues (e.g. Stahlbrand and Roberts, 2019). Through advice, policy proposals and supporting local initiatives, Food Councils can play a key role in the transition towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems.

This research places the potential for a Food Council in Groningen within the broader context of existing food councils, both nationally and internationally. By identifying best practices and challenges of other food councils, it provides a framework for establishing an effective and context-specific platform in Groningen. At the same time, it explores how Groningen's unique characteristics can be leveraged to successfully implement a Food Council.

The results of this study not only serve as advice for the establishment of a Food Council in Groningen for the municipality of Groningen but also contribute to the broader discussion on the role of local food initiatives in addressing global challenges. In doing so, this report aims to be both a practical guide and a source of inspiration for other cities and regions.

## 1.3 Research approach and method

This study uses qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the possibilities, challenges and opportunities for establishing a Food Council in Groningen. The chosen approach focuses on combining practical experiences and theoretical insights. Data collection for this study consisted of two main components: interviews and literature review. Interviews formed the core of the study. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with stakeholders from food councils in the Netherlands, such as those in Utrecht and Ede, and with international experts from cities such as Birmingham (UK), Stuttgart (DE) and Malmö (SE). In addition, a thorough analysis of relevant literature was carried out to strengthen the theoretical basis of the study. Together, these methods provide a solid basis for answering the research question and formulating a recommendation for the municipality of Groningen.

The data from the interviews and literature were analysed to identify key insights relevant to the study. This involved looking at similarities, differences and applicable strategies that could contribute to the establishment of a Food Council in Groningen. The aim was not only to gather existing knowledge, but also to tailor that knowledge specifically to Groningen's unique context and needs. This approach provides a thorough and context-specific answer to the research question central to this report: how can Groningen take the first steps in establishing a Food Council?

## 2. Food Councils: an overview

### 2.1 What is a Food Council?

A Food Council is an independent platform in which citizens, civil society organisations, businesses and policymakers work together towards a healthy, fair and sustainable food system. They play a crucial role in the food transition by promoting food democracy: a process that involves different actors in shaping and improving food systems (Hassanein, 2003, p. 79). This makes food councils key actors in the pursuit of inclusive, sustainable and equitable food systems.

Food councils bring together representatives from various segments of the food system community, such as civil society organisations, community initiatives, the retail sector and educational institutions. Together, they discuss, coordinate and influence local food policy (Stierand, 2014, p. 169). These platforms create a space where professionals, businesses, governments and community members learn together and encourage collective action. Thus, they contribute to policy strategies and addressing complex issues in food systems (Bassarab et al., 2019, p. 32).

At the local and urban level, food councils play a multifaceted role. They bring issues such as nutrition and agriculture back on the political agenda by developing policy recommendations and taking joint actions. In addition, food councils support local initiatives such as urban agriculture, short food chains and programmes targeting vulnerable groups, including small farmers and newcomers. Through this approach, food councils contribute to bridging divisions, local solutions, social justice, and innovation and policy: by developing successful interventions that policymakers can adopt.

Although food councils are relatively new in the Netherlands, they already have a longer history in countries such as England, Germany and Canada (Voedselraden.nl, 2024). In the Netherlands, this concept is rapidly expanding to cities such as The Hague, Amsterdam and Dordrecht. Their local focus enables food councils to effectively address the specific needs of communities and support a more robust food transition. As a follow-up to the growing number of food councils in the Netherlands, a Community of Practice was launched in 2023, organised by food councils from The Hague, Amsterdam and Ede. After several meetings, it was determined that there is added value in working together in the CoP Food Councils NL (Stadslandbouw Nederland, 2024).

For a Food Council to function effectively, the size of the group is important. Movisie's Monitor Municipal (Wmo) Advisory Councils Social Domain (2017) shows that 45% of advisory councils consist of nine to 12 members, including a chairperson or coordinator. This is supported by research on governance structures, which shows that too large councils can hinder effectiveness and decision-making (Guberna, 2023). In practice, smaller and medium-sized organisations tend to have

five to seven board members, while larger organisations can grow to nine to 10 members. These insights suggest that a Food Council with at least five to seven members provides a good balance between enough diversity and fine workability.

## 2.2 The role and functioning of Food Councils

Carlson and Chapell (2015) stress that food councils can be a crucial bridge between the process of decision-making ('How?') and the substantive issues around food access and equity ('What?'). In other words, they not only help organise consultation and participation, but also ensure that these processes lead to concrete improvements in food policy and access. In addition, Carlson and Chapell point to the great potential of food councils as 'inclusive, transparent and purposeful spaces for dialogue' (p. 15). As Sieveking (2019) highlights, food councils aim to bring together stakeholders from different food-related sectors, including public institutions and businesses (p. 49). By bringing these parties to the table and developing joint strategies, food councils can influence local food policy, for example by advising policymakers, initiating regulations or supporting pilot projects for sustainable food production.

Such food councils also promote democratic engagement, by bringing different perspectives and interests together in a common platform. By providing space for dialogue and co-creation, food councils contribute to inclusive decision-making beyond traditional policy instruments. Improving policy coherence across sectors such as agriculture, health and the economy can thus contribute to better social outcomes (Dubé et al., 2014, pp. 204-205). In addition, bringing together diverse local and regional actors such as farmers, consumers, civil society organisations and entrepreneurs promotes cooperation, knowledge sharing and synergy between existing initiatives. Food councils act as a platform where ideas are exchanged and joint solutions are developed for challenges such as food waste, food security and circular agriculture (Prové & Crivits, 2020).

In addition to their linking function, food councils play an important role as advisory and consultative bodies. They place food issues on the political and social agenda by advising policymakers, developing strategies and making concrete recommendations. In some cases, food councils also participate in the implementation of policy measures, for example by setting up educational programmes, food markets or campaigns against food waste (Hawkes & Parsons, 2019; EU Farm to Fork Strategy, 2020).

The democratic nature of food councils is particularly suited to addressing inequalities and power dynamics within food systems. Involving a diverse range of stakeholders creates a space in which groups such as farmers and newcomers also have a voice. This strengthens social justice and creates more inclusive policies that meet the needs of diverse communities (Prové & Crivits, 2020). This democratic nature is linked to the idea that food is more than a commodity and that people are



more than just consumers (Sieveking, 2019). Such food democracy revolves around citizens having the power to determine food policies and practices locally, regionally and nationally: The concept seeks active citizen participation in shaping the food system (Hassanein, 2003).

Food councils often work thematically, focusing on topics such as short food chains, circular economy, urban agriculture and food education. This focus makes food councils relevant not only for policy discussions, but also for setting up concrete initiatives that have local impact. Food councils can usually be structured around core aspects such as structure, organisation and composition, policy, purpose and mission, and communication and awareness. These aspects form the basis of their effectiveness.

### 2.3 Chances for a Food Council

Wageningen Economic Research's Achterbosch and Bogaardt (2022) report emphasises that the transition to a sustainable food system requires a systematic approach, addressing not only production and consumption, but also the broader social and economic context. To enable this, they say, it is important to approach the entire food system as an integrated whole: 'Food systems are the composite and interconnected activities of primary agriculture and fisheries, including the associated use of inputs, the processing, transformation, distribution and consumption of food, and the impact of these activities on the environment, social conditions and public health' (p.12). This means that a transition is not only with farmers or consumers, but in the whole chain that needs to be addressed.

The report mentions that EU policy focuses on promoting sustainable food systems through regulation and financial instruments. Thus, governments can contribute to the transition through, for example, subsidies and tax measures, legislation and enforcement and innovation programmes (p. 13). This applies to both the Dutch government and the EU. Achterbosch and Bogaardt (2022) highlight how one can generally state that 'the EU often sets frameworks; national governments colour them with the diversity of food systems in the countries and local governments mainly enforce and implement them in local policies.' In this way, European policy frameworks can be a powerful driver for the transition to a sustainable food system. However, as the report shows, effective implementation requires local actors translating these policies into practice. This provides a starting point for Food Councils, which as local cooperation platforms can help drive these sustainability goals. A Food Council can thus play a strategic role by stimulating and challenging both policy development and community initiatives.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between European and Dutch policy frameworks for the transition to sustainable food systems (Achterbosch and Bogaardt, 2022). EU policy frameworks form the basis for national policy measures. Knowledge and innovation play a central role, both at EU level and in the Netherlands. In addition,



Dutch policy focuses on societal innovation tasks, such as sustainable agriculture and food policy. Within the Dutch food systems, initiatives such as the Commodities Act, City Deals, and the regional approach are included. A Food Council would fit within this as part of the regional approach or integrated food policy, as it contributes to local cooperation and policy development.

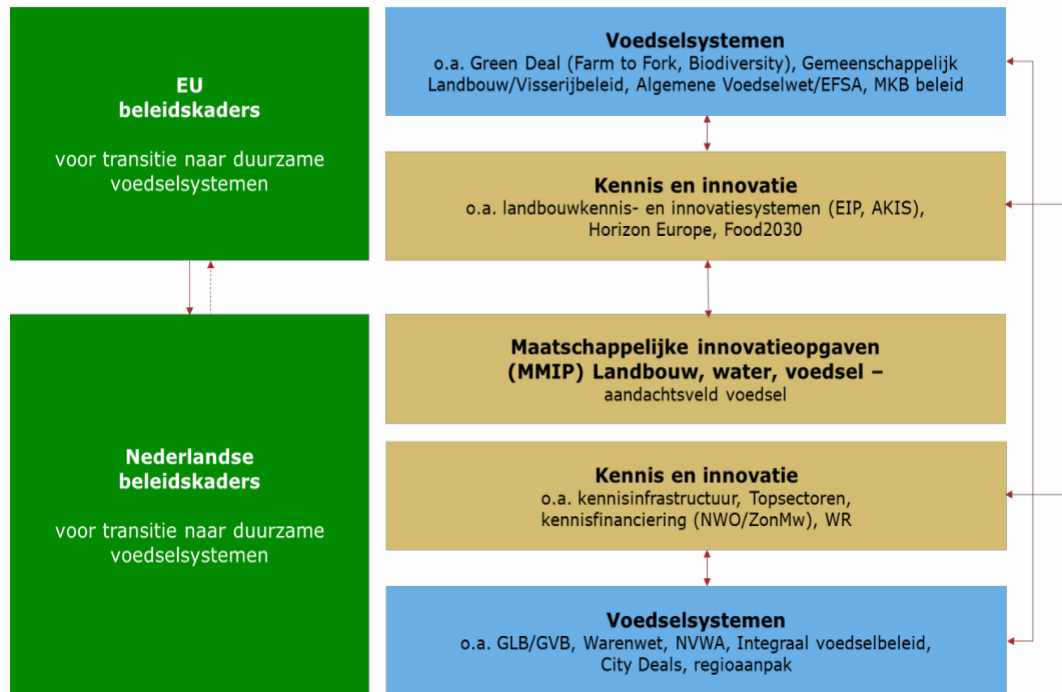


Figure 1: The context of EU and Dutch policy frameworks for transition to sustainable food systems (Achterbosch and Bogaardt, 2022).

In addition, the role a Food Council assumes within this regional approach or integrated food policy is an important issue. Research by Alanya den Boer of the Athena Institute of the VU Amsterdam (2022) shows that food councils that want to stimulate a transition, such as a food transition, can function as systemic transition intermediaries. This implies that food councils can operate at different levels depending on their role and influence. One effective level is the systemic level, where the food council facilitates so-called ‘vertical interactions’. This means that the council provides both solicited and unsolicited advice, based on insights from various stakeholders, and offers action perspectives for institutional change.

### 3. Local and global: insights of experts

#### 3.1 Experiences from the Netherlands

Food councils are relatively new in the Netherlands, with the first council being established in Ede in 2019. Since then, initiatives have emerged in cities such as The Hague, Amsterdam, Haarlem and Dordrecht. The growing focus on food transition offers opportunities to combine insights and experiences from other countries with the unique Dutch context. Food councils in the Netherlands can become an important link in the transition to a sustainable and equitable food system, by involving both local communities and policymakers (Voedselraden.nl, 2024).

During this research, I spoke with several experts in the field of food and communication, and representatives of food councils in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that the establishment of food councils in the Netherlands is relatively new, their experiences show that there is already much to learn from existing initiatives. The knowledge shared from these discussions provides important guidance for setting up a Food Council.

#### **Representative Food Council Ede**

- Established in: 2019
- Number of members: 8
- Funding: municipal subsidy (€15.000 a year)

Although cooperation with the municipality is good, the importance of independence was stressed during our conversation. A regular contact person within the municipality helps to get the Food Council on the policy agenda, but the Food Council guards its own course. This allows it to remain critical while playing a connecting role between different stakeholders.

Another challenge is measuring impact, as the results of food initiatives are often only visible in the long term. This makes it difficult to demonstrate immediate success and sustain support. Therefore, there is a strong focus on communication and visibility, for instance by organising events and public-facing activities. 'Investing in visibility is very important,' is stressed, as this not only engages citizens but also inspires policymakers and potential partners.

Finally, the importance of community-building and clear priorities is mentioned. In the early stages, it is essential to let local initiatives know that the Food Council is there and involve key people from the beginning. 'Setting clear spearheads is also important' is stressed, "this helps not only to give direction but also to foster cooperation". In addition, the conversation revealed that organising structural funding is also a crucial factor for success. For example, a paid coordinator from the community can ensure continuity, and prevent the Food Council from remaining

dependent on volunteer efforts. And the most important tip for starting the Food Council? 'Just say you are a Food Council!'

### **Representative Food Council Utrecht**

- Established in: 2023
- Number of members: 8
- Funding: none

The Food Council Utrecht is in its start-up phase and focuses on strengthening the connection between citizens and the municipality. The Food Council has an agenda-setting role, gathering insights from the community and translating them to policymakers, while making municipal policy more accessible to residents. The Food Council in Utrecht consists of members who all have an affinity with food, through studies, work or personal affinity with food and sustainability, for example. They began with two enthusiasts, who started by calling themselves the Food Council of Utrecht and joining the national Community of Practice VoedselradenNL. One of them talks about what they have experienced so far as a Food Council.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of attention to food in municipal policy, it is mentioned. The Food Council wants to work to change this in the coming years and advocates better support for civic initiatives, such as neighbourhood kitchen gardens and communal cooking places. It also stressed the importance of community-building. 'In every neighbourhood, there are people who know what is going on and where the needs are,' was indicated during the interview. Engaging these key people and using low-threshold networks, such as WhatsApp groups and city maker initiatives, helps build a solid foundation.

To make a real impact, involvement of policymakers is crucial. The Food Council must operate independently, but at the same time develop a strong relationship with the municipality to achieve shared goals. Furthermore, visibility is mentioned as an essential factor for success. Small, tangible actions and events help to engage citizens and put the Food Council on the map. Finally, financing proves to be a major challenge in Utrecht. A structural budget is necessary to guarantee continuity and further develop the Food Council. 'We want to do a lot, but without money it is just very difficult.'

### **Representative Food Youth Council Groningen**

- Established in: 2019
- Number of members: 4 (students)
- Funding: none

In 2020, a Food Youth Council was established in Groningen as part of the Food, Life & Innovation course. This Food Council included four students from the course. This initiative aimed to specifically raise awareness of food issues among young

people and give them a voice in local food policy. The choice of a Youth Council was also driven by the desire to actively involve young generations in sustainable food transitions, as they are the future consumers, policymakers and entrepreneurs within the food system. I speak with one of the teachers who was involved in setting up the Food Youth Council.

The conversation highlights how young people bring innovative ideas and a fresh perspective to food issues. In addition, they can really enthuse other young people. Although the Food Council was eventually discontinued in 2021 due to the impact of COVID-19, this experience provides valuable insights for setting up a Food Council in Groningen.

One of the key lessons is the importance of a strong network. The establishment of the Food Youth Council involved several partners, including municipalities and educational institutions. This not only ensured wider support but also access to expertise and resources. 'Creating a good network is very important especially in the beginning,' it emphasises. In addition, visibility plays a crucial role in the success of a Food Council. One of the Food Youth Council's ideas was to open a pop-up store at the Sugar Field, where farmers and citizens could meet and share 'the story behind the food'. 'The story around a product is as important as the product itself,' it pointed out. This underlines the importance of communication and public engagement.

A major challenge for the Food Youth Council was the lack of structural funding. Without grants or sponsorship, the council depended on the motivation of the students involved. Although motivation was ample at the time, the conversation highlights that a small financial payment could have made the involvement more sustainable. 'Young people are not as precious as full-time professionals, but a small fee can make a big difference.'

Finally, the focus on youth participation offers valuable insights for a future Food Council. "Young people look at the world in a fresh way and speak each other's language. It is important that they feel heard and not ignored." This highlights that a mix of generations within a Food Council could provide a broader and dynamic approach, bringing together the strength of young people and the experience of older generations.

A key question for a new Food Council is therefore: should young people be involved? 'Young people just understand each other well, and that helps enormously if you want to reach that large group,' is stressed in the conversation. A young person on the Food Council can thus form a bridge between policymakers and the younger generation and thus involve even more residents in Groningen.

### 3.2 Experiences from abroad

In the search for the most effective ways to set up a Food Council in Groningen, international examples also offer valuable inspiration. In several places, food councils and food initiatives have already proven to play a crucial role in the transition towards sustainable, inclusive and resilient food systems. These examples show how food councils can operate effectively within different political, cultural and social contexts. This section zooms in on interviews with food council representatives and strategies abroad. These exchanges not only gave me a better understanding of organisational structures and methods of cooperation, but also of the specific success factors and pitfalls that can occur. These insights formed an important basis for further developing advice and recommendations for the Food Council Groningen

#### **Representative Food Council Stuttgart, Germany**

- Established in: 2021
- Number of members: 13
- Funding: municipal grant (for staff and project costs €100,000 in 2024 and 2025) and European project grants

The Stuttgart Food Council plays an important role in making the food system more sustainable. The Food Council acts as a platform for policy development and cooperation between various stakeholders, with the aim of achieving structural change. During a conversation with a representative of the Stuttgart Food Council, I learn how things are going in Stuttgart. ‘We don't just want to organise separate activities, but really realise a more sustainable food system, from production to consumption,’ is emphasised. The Food Council consists of members from different sectors including agriculture, canteens, science, urban planning and food processing.

The Food Council operates independently but is funded through city resources and European project grants. A key success factor was the early involvement of a municipal liaison who supported the Food Council's mission and helped to achieve policy anchoring and structural funding. ‘Having someone within the municipality who understood our vision and was committed to this was crucial,’ is indicated.

The internal organisation consists of different circles: a project office with paid staff, a volunteer board and a wider group of members from sectors such as agriculture, logistics and civil society organisations. While this mix of professionals and volunteers is effective, it also brings challenges. ‘The balance between paid and unpaid workers remains an area of concern,’ he says.

In addition, engaging the community is a key challenge. ‘It is essential to understand what the needs of the community are.’ To strengthen the network and increase

visibility, the Food Council organises regular events and seeks to connect with existing initiatives.

The experience from Stuttgart highlights some crucial lessons for setting up a Food Council in Groningen. Stuttgart shows that investing in visibility, policy support and community participation is essential. 'A Food Council can only be successful if it has support in society as well as the right political backing,' it concludes.

### **Councillor Stuttgart, Germany**

Since the establishment of the Food Council in Stuttgart, independence, cooperation and awareness thus proved an important basis for its success. The Food Council has the freedom to take its own actions. 'Although they receive funding, they have the freedom to set their own course,' is stressed during a conversation with a city councillor who works closely with the Food Council. At the same time, the Food Council maintains a strong relationship with municipal bodies, allowing cooperation and policy development to align. 'It is indeed important for the council to remain independent, but still cooperate with us where necessary,' he says.

The Food Council works interdisciplinary, involving various city departments and external parties in its initiatives. "Their work goes beyond food. They also involve social, economic and environmental perspectives, so they can approach the food system from all angles." This broad approach helps achieve sustainable change but also brings challenges.

One of the biggest challenges is measuring the impact of the Food Council. 'Success is often only visible in the long term, and that can make it difficult to build support.' That is why it is important to clearly communicate the benefits of a sustainable food system. 'By showing how a better food system contributes to health, employment and the climate, you can convince people of the importance of change.'

In addition, awareness plays a crucial role in the Food Council's work. "Many people do not immediately see the connection between food, agriculture and climate. It is their job to tell that story." Stuttgart focuses heavily on explaining why change is needed, ecologically, socially and economically. 'People get more involved when they understand how these changes benefit them and their communities,' he says.

### **Head Food team Municipality of Birmingham, United Kingdom**

- Established in: 2021
- Number of members: 5
- Funding: municipal grant (for the staff budget £323,719 per year and for the non-staff budget from 2024-2025 £196,924), research and innovation funds and partners

In Birmingham, food policy plays a central role in the wider city strategy. The city is working to transform the food system through the Birmingham Food Revolution, a community, environmental and economic initiative. A key driver of this change is the development of an integrated food strategy, bringing together various initiatives under a shared vision. Although Birmingham does not have a Food Council but a Food Team, this group has similar objectives to a Food Council. I speak to the head of the food team. The team consists of researchers, public health officials and food experts.

One of the biggest challenges in Birmingham was connecting the many different stakeholders, such as local authorities, food producers and communities. 'It is essential to see them not just as stakeholders, but as active partners in change,' it stressed. This highlights the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility within a food team and council.

Strong networks between food initiatives proved a key to success. By working together, goals could be better aligned and impact increased. 'Networking not only provides connection, but also strengthens the effectiveness of your efforts,' he says. In addition, citizen involvement plays a crucial role. Allowing residents to actively think and work together creates greater support and access to valuable knowledge within the community.

Another essential aspect of Birmingham's approach is the translation of policy into concrete action. 'Developing policy is one thing, but implementing it requires resources and collaboration,' it emphasises. This means that a food team should not only have an advisory role but also work closely with the municipality to actually implement policies.

Birmingham's experience shows that a food team and council can flourish through a strong shared vision, close collaboration between stakeholders and a focus on impactful policy implementation. As summarised, 'It all starts with connection - connection between people, projects and a shared vision.'

### **Representative Environmental Department Municipality of Malmö, Sweden**

- Established in: 2020
- Number of members: 6
- Funding: municipal grant (SEK 250,000 in 2024) and European funds

Malmö's food policy plays a central role in the city's sustainability strategy. Talking to a representative of Malmö municipality's environment department, I learn how it has actively contributed to the creation of a food system that is both ecologically and socially equitable. One of the key steps was the establishment of a Food Council, which was initially supported by the municipality but now operates independently. 'We as a municipality built the boat and then sent it out on the water,' is highlighted,



illustrating how the Food Council has gained independence without losing ties to the municipality. The Food Council consists of members from different backgrounds within food production, education, sustainability, gastronomy and food markets.

A crucial success factor in Malmö was the involvement of influential and well-connected key figures within the food community. The Food Council grew into a platform where farmers, policymakers and local entrepreneurs came together and strengthened initiatives. 'It helps enormously when you have people who are well known in the sector and have the right connections,' he says. This network not only increased the council's effectiveness but also ensured wider support and cooperation.

It also stressed the importance of structural funding. While project grants helped in the start-up phase, in the long term it proved essential to have a stable financial base. 'Without a basic budget, it is difficult to create long-term impact,' said the report. This highlights the need for financial continuity to maintain and further develop initiatives.

Finally, careful formulation of a shared vision is cited as a key prerequisite for success. Because different stakeholders have different goals and interests, it takes time and effort to arrive at a widely supported strategy. Malmö's approach shows that connecting the right people, creating a recognisable identity and enough visibility and ensuring financial stability are essential ingredients for an effective Food Council.

## 4. Setting up a new Food Council

### 4.1 The key points for a successful start

When setting up a new Food Council, it is essential to focus in the initial phase on the aspects that lay the foundation for success. From the interviews with experts and representatives of food councils in the Netherlands and abroad, three key points most often emerged as crucial: building a strong network and community, good cooperation with the municipality, and increasing visibility and communication (see Figure 2). These three points were highlighted by all interviewees (seven in total) as the most important factors in the start-up phase of a Food Council. They are not only the basis for creating support and commitment but also ensure that the council can take a clear position in the local food system from the start.

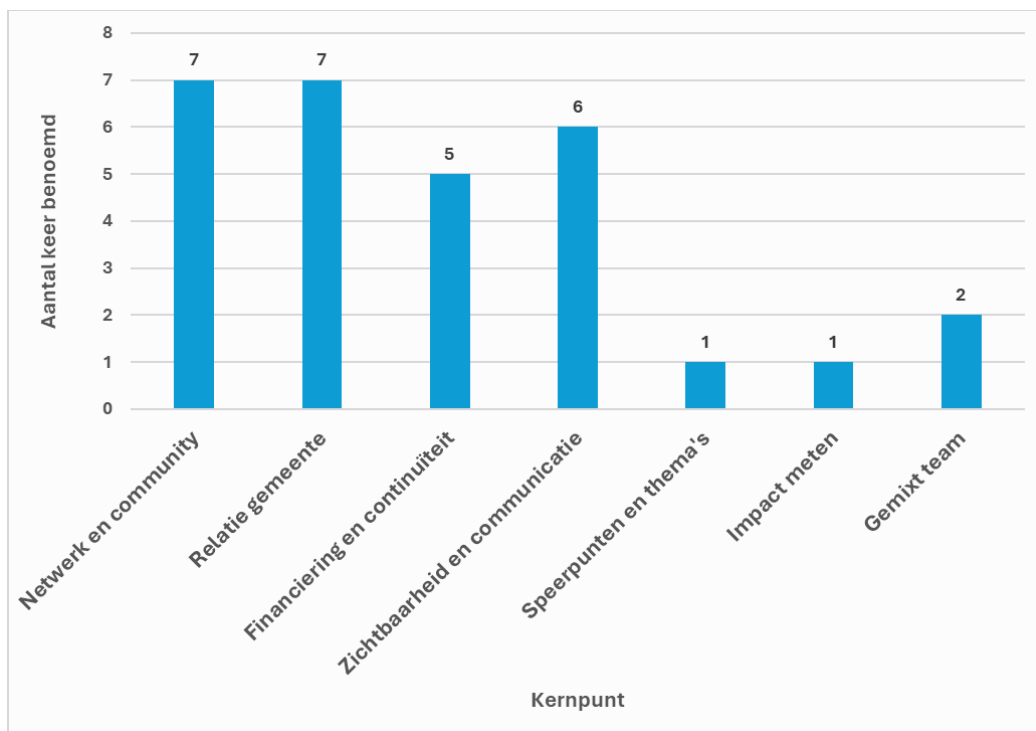


Figure 2: Number of named key points for starting a Food Council. From left to right: building a network and community, relation with the municipality, financing and continuity, visibility and communication, key points and themes, measuring impact, and having a diverse team.

This chapter elaborates on these key issues and how a strong focus on them can support the start-up phase of a Food Council. Focusing on network building, collaboration with the municipality and visibility not only lays a solid foundation but also paves the way for effective decision-making and long-term impact. These elements are essential to position a Food Council as a connecting link between citizens, local initiatives and policymakers.

## **Building a network and community**

A strong network is the backbone of a successful Food Council. Involving the right people and organisations from the start lays a solid foundation for collaboration and impact. Food councils in other cities emphasise the importance of connecting different stakeholders, such as farmers, entrepreneurs, civil society organisations and citizens. This network ensures broad knowledge sharing and increases the council's clout. Based on the knowledge obtained through the interviews, it appears that a strong network can be built using different approaches:

1. Bring together key people and existing initiatives: the Food Council identifies and approaches individuals and organisations already active in food transition and sustainability, such as farmers, urban gardens, food cooperatives or, for example, universities. Actively involving these parties in the Food Council creates a solid basis for cooperation. For example, the Food Council Ede has brought together local organic farmers and the Food Bank, which has led to better knowledge sharing and mutual support.
2. Create a platform for collaboration: the Food Council organises meetings where stakeholders can share ideas and needs. This helps to identify common goals and discover synergies. In Birmingham, the food team has set up regular “Food Forums”, where citizens, entrepreneurs and policymakers come together to discuss urban food issues.
3. Make the Food Council accessible: by having a low-threshold approach and a diverse composition, the Food Council ensures that people from different neighbourhoods and backgrounds are involved. Online groups, such as WhatsApp or Facebook, can contribute to an active community. On the Stuttgart Food Council website, anyone can sign up for one of their six working groups to help think about food issues. In this way, they make it easy for residents to think along.

## **Relation with the municipality**

A Food Council benefits from good cooperation with the municipality without losing its independence. Several Food Councils have shown that involvement of policymakers effectively helps to structurally embed the Food Council in local policy and access resources and support. The importance of constructive cooperation between advisory councils, such as a Food Council, and municipal bodies is crucial for effective local governance. Movisie's Handreiking (Guide) Partners in Participation (2019), which was produced on the basis of input from advisory councils on new roles and developments during inspiration sessions organised by the Koepel van Adviesraden Sociaal Domein and Movisie, shows that a number of general points are essential and need to be ensured by both the municipal council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (B&W) to optimise cooperation:

- Clear communication channels: it is essential to ensure regular and transparent communication between the advisory council and municipal bodies. This promotes mutual understanding and cooperation.
- Take advice seriously and follow it up: the input of the advisory council should be valued. Wherever possible, this input should be taken into account in policymaking, thus strengthening the confidence and motivation of the advisory council.
- Provide support without limiting autonomy: facilitating the advisory council with resources and facilities is desirable, provided the independent position and vision of the advisory council are respected.
- Not using the advisory council for political purposes: using the advisory council to promote specific political agendas undermines its credibility and independence.
- No excessive bureaucratic pressure: it is important to keep administrative processes simple so that the advisory council can concentrate on its core tasks without undue burden.

Based on the interviews, it appears that the Food Council itself can build a good relationship with the municipality and maintain its dependence through the following actions:

1. Establish early contact with policymakers: the Food Council actively seeks cooperation with municipal departments dealing with sustainability, health and food. This helps to connect with existing policy goals and increases the likelihood of support. From the beginning, the Food Council Malmö has focused on participating in urban sustainability programmes in order to connect well with policymakers.
2. Work on mutual understanding: the Food Council makes clear how it contributes to the municipality's ambitions, such as food security or healthy eating. This ensures that the municipality sees the Food Council as a valuable partner. The food team in Birmingham has organised joint sessions with municipal policymakers to understand each other's goals and challenges. This has led to a shared vision and greater understanding.
3. Provide a permanent contact person within the municipality: the Food Council should insist on a municipal point of contact so that communication runs smoothly and the Food Council can provide structural input on policies and projects. In Stuttgart, the Food Council has one permanent person within the municipality with whom they are in constant contact.
4. Guarantee independence: the Food Council can guarantee its independence by adopting a diverse funding strategy, leveraging external grants, funds or sponsorships in addition to municipal support. In addition, a clear mission and its own decision-making structure helps to avoid political influence. The Food Council Ede does this by setting its own agenda and issuing independent advice, among other things.

## **Visibility and communication**

A Food Council can only be effective if people know it exists and why it is relevant. Through strategic communication, the Food Council can broadly communicate its mission and appeal to different audiences, such as citizens, policymakers and local business owners. This not only helps increase engagement but also increases the likelihood of structural cooperation and financial support. It also ensures that the Food Council is recognized as a reliable and influential player within the food system, making it better able to achieve its goals. The interviews suggest that this can be done through the following approaches:

1. Develop a recognizable identity: the Food Council creates a clear mission and message that fits the local context. For example, a catchy name, logo and visual style can help build a strong brand. For example, the food team in Birmingham designed a powerful logo and named their mission the "Birmingham Food Revolution.
2. Use different communication channels: the Food Council actively uses social media, newsletters and local media to disseminate information and engage people. The Stuttgart Food Council regularly sends newsletters to keep people informed and works with local media to highlight their initiatives.
3. Organize events: the Food Council organizes public activities that help raise awareness and reach new audiences. The Food Youth Council Groningen's goal was to create a "pop-up store" where, for example, weekly markets could take place.
4. Highlight concrete successes: the Food Council demonstrates its achievements with tangible results. These may include successful collaborations, policy changes or new food initiatives in the city. The Malmö Food Council website provides a clear overview of all the Food Council's successes, such as completed projects and achievements.

Making these three core aspects central to the start-up phase of a Food Council lays a solid foundation for growth and long-term impact. They provide commitment, policy anchorage and a strong position within the community and broader food system.

## 4.2 The context: what makes Groningen unique?

Understanding the unique characteristics of Groningen is essential to the successful establishment of a Food Council. These characteristics not only influence the structure and operation of the council, but also determine the opportunities and challenges that may arise.

### Demographic and geographic characteristics

Located strategically in the northern Netherlands, Groningen is surrounded by fertile farmland that contributes to a strong agricultural sector, particularly in arable and dairy farming. In 2022, the province had 2,460 farms, most of which are arable and dairy farmers. In addition, there is growing interest in organic farming; the number of organic farms increased from 80 in 2015 to 105 in 2022 (The State of Groningen, 2022). The city of Groningen combines historic charm with innovation and is the economic and cultural heart of the Northern Netherlands. Thanks to the University of Groningen and the Hanseatic League, the city has a young, diverse and highly educated population, contributing to its dynamic and progressive character. As of January 1, 2024, Groningen has approximately 243,800 residents, a quarter of whom are students. Groningen is known for its focus on sustainability, with initiatives in green energy, circular economy and urban development. The largely car-free downtown promotes livability and accessibility. In addition, the city offers a vibrant cultural life with theatres, museums and music venues that attract local and international artists.

Research by Research Information and Statistics Groningen shows that residents value health, sustainability and affordability of food (see Figure 3). From left to right the figure shows 'not important at all', 'not important', 'neutral', 'important' and 'very important'. The blue lines address 'how healthy products are', green lines address 'the sustainability of products', orange lines address 'the ease of use', and yellow lines address 'the price of products'. This growing food awareness aligns with the city's sustainability aspirations and provides opportunities for innovation in the food system, such as through a Food Council.

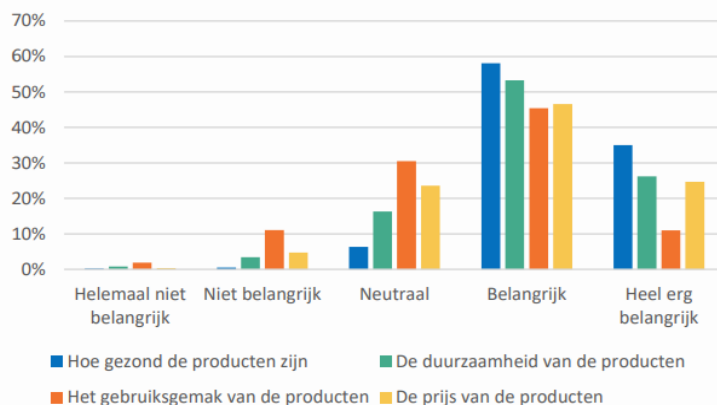


Figure 3: How important do you consider these aspects of your diet? (Source: OIS Groningen, 2022).

## **Livability and social environment**

The 2022 Neighborhood Survey shows that Groningen has large differences in livability and social cohesion. The centre of the city is dynamic, but scores low on social connectedness (see Figure 4), while southern and newer neighborhoods score better on this. Vulnerable neighborhoods such as Selwerd, Vinkhuizen, De Hoogte (see Figure 5), Oosterparkwijk, Beijum and Lewenborg struggle with both socioeconomic and physical challenges, such as limited access to healthy food and a lower quality of life. Neighborhoods such as De Wijert-Zuid and the Schildersbuurt have stable but less pronounced social cohesion, while Meerstad and Nieuw-Oost score high on quality of life and living comfort.

A Food Council can play a connecting role here by actively engaging residents in sustainable and healthy food initiatives. By encouraging collaborations between residents, supermarkets, community centers and welfare organizations, the Food Council can contribute to a more inclusive and accessible food environment. In vulnerable neighborhoods, this can help improve access to affordable, healthy food, such as through the establishment of social kitchen gardens. In addition to healthier lifestyles, a Food Council also promotes a sense of community and social engagement. Working together on food initiatives can encourage meetings between residents and create a sense of ownership and cooperation. This can have a positive impact, especially in neighborhoods with low social cohesion, by providing residents with a common goal and a structural way to work together. Furthermore, a Food Council can help raise awareness around food, giving residents more influence over their own environment and well-being. This aligns with the broader sustainability and inclusiveness goals of the Municipality of Groningen.

### **Centrum / Binnenstad / Stand**

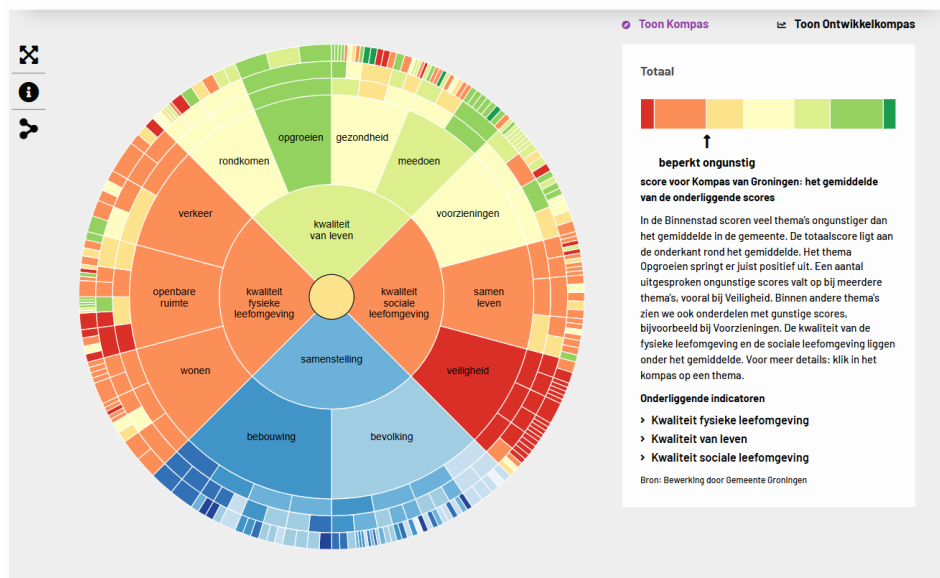


Figure 4: Neighborhood Compass Downtown, 2022 (Source: Basic Monitor Groningen). The greener, the higher the score, the redder, the lower the score. In total, the score for the city centre is limited negative.



## Oude Wijken / De Hoogte / Stand

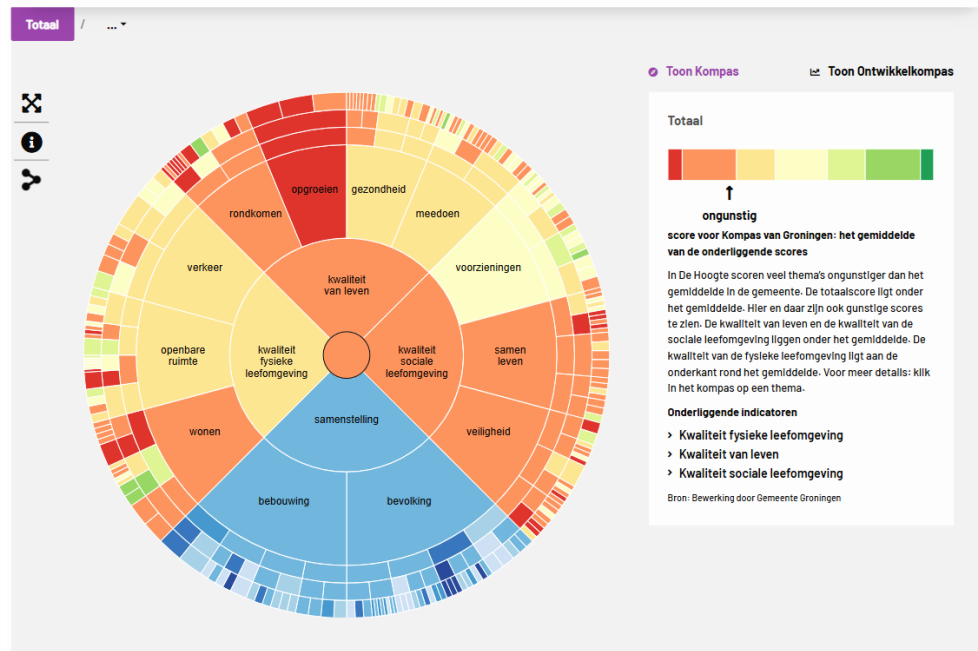


Figure 5: De Hoogte neighborhood compass, 2022 (Source: Groningen Basic Monitor). The greener, the higher the score, the redder, the lower the score. In total, the score for De Hoogte is negative.

### **Local food initiatives and networks**

Groningen has a broad agricultural sector, with both farming and organic initiatives. At the same time, there is a growing need for a better connection between producers and consumers. A Food Council can play a key role here by encouraging collaboration between farmers, market gardeners and city residents, contributing to food security and a circular food system.

The city has a wide variety of initiatives dedicated to sustainable food production and distribution. Stichting Groninger Voedseltuinen, for example, helps gardeners, municipalities and residents create a food garden in their neighborhood, village or city, with the goal of having one hundred food gardens in the province by 2040 (Stichting Groninger Voedseltuinen, n.d.). Nursery De Stadsakker grows about forty varieties of vegetables on the outskirts of the city and delivers them directly to consumers through vegetable packages and a store in the Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat (De Stadsakker, 2025). The public food forest PlukN in Groningen's Westpark helps farmers incorporate a nature-inclusive form of agriculture into their operations by providing support in design, construction, maintenance and management of the food forest. In addition, PlukN focuses on stimulating the realization of short local chains by strengthening the demand side from consumers and local businesses (Regeling Regionale Projecten, 2025). Such initiatives demonstrate the growing commitment and motivation among organizations and residents to organize the food supply more sustainably and locally.

In addition, a networking effort to connect food initiatives, producers and food hubs already exists in Groningen called Our Food. This initiative, set up in collaboration with Garden in the City and Blije Bodem, aims to strengthen existing initiatives through collaboration and joint positioning. Their research has been positively received by food initiatives and producers, indicating a broad need for better collaboration and a stronger local food system. In addition, Our Food strives to provide an accessible and reliable alternative to mainstream supermarkets, focusing on both physical availability and affordability. In doing so, the initiative contributes to an inclusive and sustainable food supply for all residents of Groningen. A Food Council can build on this by joining and encouraging new collaborations.

### **Current policy and social frameworks**

Groningen is actively working at both the municipal and provincial levels to make the food system more sustainable. For example, the municipality has created the Food and Protein Transition Roadmap (2024), with the goal of achieving a healthy and sustainable food system by 2050. This plan emphasizes the need for more plant-based and locally produced food, and aims to provide an accessible supply for all residents (Gemeente Groningen, 2025). In addition, Groningen participated in the European Food Trails project, which supported healthy and sustainable food initiatives. Within this project, living labs are being set up to make the journey “from farm to fork” more sustainable, strengthen communities and encourage sustainable behaviours. At the provincial level, the Province of Groningen supports projects that contribute to short food chains and sustainable agriculture. One example is the “Local Food at School” project, which explores how regional products can contribute to a short food chain while raising children's awareness of sustainable eating (Groeningen, 2024). There is also a food agenda consultation within the municipality, in which various municipal departments work together to address food issues.

These initiatives and collaborations demonstrate community spirit and commitment to social issues in Groningen. Support for sustainability and local projects is strong, providing opportunities for a Food Council that can function as a connecting link between farmers, city residents, policymakers and entrepreneurs. Through this broad collaboration, Groningen can further develop as a leader in sustainable and fair food supply.

In addition, the municipality of Groningen values participation and control by its residents. This means that residents can actively participate in the municipality's plans, as well as take initiatives for their own neighborhoods. This approach leads to better quality plans and greater involvement in decision-making (Gemeente Groningen, 2025). To structure this participation, the municipality has developed the Handreiking Participatie (Guide Participation) (2024). This serves as a tool for anyone with an idea or plan in the physical environment. The guide offers a step-by-step plan to shape participation effectively so that plans are realized in consultation with the community. The emphasis on participation aligns seamlessly with the goals

of a Food Council. By involving residents, producers and other stakeholders in the food system, the Food Council can contribute to a more sustainable and equitable food system in Groningen.

### **Existing advisory councils in Groningen**

The municipality of Groningen has several advisory councils that advise the local government on a variety of social issues. These councils, such as the Advisory Group Social Domain Groningen (ASDG) and the Advisory Committee on Traffic and Transportation (AVV), operate from an independent position and provide both solicited and unsolicited advice to the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (B&W). The participants are residents who feel involved in the relevant policy area and do not hold political or official positions within the municipality. The ASDG consists of a steering committee of six members and 30 to 50 general members, and is divided into three clusters: Wmo, Social Area Development and Youth and Health (ASDG, s.d.). The ASDG has 10 members and meets about eight times a year (Gemeente Groningen, 2025).

The relationship between these advisory councils and the political administration is characterized by constructive dialogue. The advisory councils generally have regular consultation moments with aldermen and policy staff, during which they explain and discuss their opinions. This interaction ensures that the input of the advisory councils is included in policymaking, while their independent position remains guaranteed. This model of cooperation can serve as an example for the Food Council, balancing independence with constructive cooperation with the political administration.

Some of these advisory councils receive funding; for example, the ASDG typically receives an annual operating budget from the municipality to carry out their duties (Gemeente Groningen, 2021), including funds for expertise promotion. This funding allows them to operate independently and formulate opinions without direct influence from the municipality. Participants usually receive no financial compensation for their efforts. Their motivation and participation are based on social commitment and their personal desire to contribute to municipal policy. The Monitor Municipal (Wmo) Advisory Councils Social Domain (2017) reveals that several advisory councils in the Netherlands receive a budget from their municipality for the facilitation of their council. Seventy-two of the requested advisory councils receive a budget of up to €15,000 per year. Nine of these advisory councils receive between 15,000 and 50,000 euros per year. The remaining nine receive between 50,000 euros and more per year.

## 5. The advice for the Groningen Food Council

### 5.1 The beginning for Groningen

This chapter presents the advice to the municipality of Groningen for the establishment and development of a Food Council in Groningen. This advice is based on insights from interviews with experts, existing Food Councils, and the Groningen context. The advice for the establishment of the Food Council in Groningen is divided into four phases: structure and organisation, purpose and mission, awareness and communication, and relationship with the municipality. This phasing ensures a step-by-step development of the Food Council, first laying a foundation before working towards independence and broad community involvement. This advice has been formulated with an eye on the key points raised by the interviewees as essential for a successful start. The chapter thus provides a roadmap for the establishment and growth of a Food Council that is anchored in the community and can make a real impact.

For the initial phase of the Food Council, it is important that the municipality of Groningen takes on a facilitating role. This assumes a municipal initiative to lay a foundation for the Food Council. The municipality can step back when phases 1, 2 and 3 have been completed. In this way, the initiative can gradually shift to the members themselves, so that the Food Council can eventually operate independently.

#### 1. **Structure and organisation: how will the Food Council be set up?**

An effective Food Council in Groningen must be broad-based and represent diverse interests. To achieve this, it is important for the council to lay a strong foundation with a clear structure and collaborations with relevant local parties.

**Form the Food Council:** rather than setting up an entirely new consultation platform, it makes sense to join existing structures and initiatives in the initial phase. As a municipality, therefore, join and develop existing networks such as Our Food, an initiative that aims to connect food initiatives. In addition, seek connections with the growing network of community centres and neighbourhood organisations in Groningen that are already active in the field of food and sustainability. Leverage their expertise and network to create connections. This can provide a valuable grassroots network for the Food Council. In addition, the council can make optimal use of the internal Food Consultation that already exists within the municipality and include external parties who are already active within existing food initiatives. This ensures that the Food Council draws on existing structures and networks, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, and potentially recruiting members to the Food Council. In the beginning, it can be challenging to have a full membership and position the Food Council immediately. As the Food Council develops, it is important to grow to a

permanent group of members, of ideally five to seven members, so that there is support and diversity.

**Composition of the Food Council:** an effective Food Council benefits from a diverse composition so that different perspectives from the food field are represented. This ensures broad support and enough substantive expertise. Based on experiences from other Food Councils, the advice in the start-up phase is to aim for at least one representative from the following sectors: agriculture and food production, civil society organisations, education, entrepreneurs and retail, citizens and consumer representation and students and young people. Depending on the context, needs and range of people wishing to participate, this composition can be adjusted, but it is important to include as many links in the food chain as possible.

**Clear consultation structure:** to ensure the effectiveness of the Food Council, structural consultation moments need to be scheduled and clearly recorded. The internal Food Consultation within the municipality is a good starting point for this. Utilise this group and, from the regular meetings, schedule additional consultations where external representatives of food networks and initiatives in Groningen are invited to discuss ideas, plans, and problems. These structural consultation moments with external parties ensure that relevant developments can be addressed directly.

**Establish Food Council responsibilities:** the aim is for the Food Council to play an active and advisory role in Groningen's food policy. The survey of existing food councils shows that the main responsibilities of the Food Council should include at least:

- Providing solicited and unsolicited advice to the municipality on food policy and sustainable food initiatives. This advice is given when explicitly requested by the municipality, but also when the Food Council itself identifies bottlenecks or points for improvement that require action. To make advice as feasible as possible, it is important that the Food Council, like other advisory councils, ensures (1) thorough preparation and information gathering, (2) cooperation with policy staff and relevant network partners, and (3) prior coordination with the municipality for unsolicited advice.
- Monitoring cohesion between different food initiatives and promoting cooperation between parties.
- Identifying bottlenecks and opportunities within the local food system and initiating improvements.
- Promoting awareness and engagement on food issues among residents and entrepreneurs.

**Funding plan:** for the successful and long-term operation of the Food Council, it is necessary to develop a funding plan over time. In the initial period, the municipality can play a supporting role, but long-term structural funding needs to be considered more broadly. In the start-up phase, the municipality can commit to providing funds,

but it is important to remember that structural funding from the municipality cannot be guaranteed (immediately). As the Food Council gains a foothold, it should actively seek additional sources of funding, such as grants from the province of Groningen, European project grants and social funds. In addition, collaborations with local entrepreneurs, agricultural collectives and other civil society organisations can also provide financial opportunities and support. See also chapter 5.3 on options for financing the set-up of the Food Council.

## **2. Purpose and mission: a shared vision for Groningen**

Once a base group with members has been established, it is essential that the Food Council has a clear and supported goal in line with Groningen's sustainable ambitions: a healthy, fair and sustainable food system for all. To work effectively, the advice is to formulate a shared vision in the initial phase, when the council actively joins existing initiatives and networks. This helps maintain focus and give direction to the further development of the Food Council. This involves two phases.

**Step 1:** in the first period, the focus for the municipality is on exploring the existing food network, getting to know different parties and initiatives and identifying common interests. This is an important step in understanding the needs and opportunities within Groningen.

**Step 2:** once a base group has been formed to carry the Food Council, it is important to define a clear mission and long-term goals. In doing so, it is important to discuss shared interests, challenges and opportunities within the Groningen food system. For the Food Council to become a valuable addition to the already ongoing food movements in the region, it is important to connect with existing initiatives and insights. In addition, set spearheads and formulate a clear mission statement that forms the foundation of the Food Council. By setting priorities, the council can effectively work towards achievable and impactful goals. The recommendation is to make this mission brief, powerful and recognisable to residents, policymakers and entrepreneurs.

## **3. Communication and awareness: how is the Food Council supported?**

To create broad support in the long term and ensure the involvement of residents and organisations, it is important for the Food Council to be visible and accessible from the start. Other food councils show that a strategic and active communication approach is crucial to make the council known and involve residents. In the initial period, the municipality can play an important role in this by using existing networks and resources to put the Food Council on the map.

**Setting up communication channels:** in the initial period, the advice is to use existing municipal communication channels, such as the Sustainable Groningen website, to publicise the establishment of the Food Council. This will help reach a

wide audience. At the same time, once there is an established group, the Food Council should build up its own channels, including a website and social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. To ensure continuity in communication, it is important to have someone within the Food Council responsible for managing these channels. Newsletters, collaborations with local media, and regional radio and television stations can also help raise awareness.

**Cooperation with other councils:** it is also advisable to join national networks such as the Community of Practice VoedselradenNL from the outset. These networks can provide valuable knowledge exchange and cooperation opportunities, which helps in the further development and professionalisation of the Food Council.

**Involve the community:** once the Food Council has a clear structure, it is important to organise low-threshold and accessible meetings at existing meeting places such as community centres, social eateries and use welfare organisations as venues for meetings. This ensures that the Food Council connects with residents and entrepreneurs from different neighbourhoods.

#### **4. Relation with the municipality: a good cooperation for Groningen**

Experience from other Food Councils shows that good cooperation with the municipality is crucial to make an impact and contribute structurally to the transition to a sustainable food system. In the beginning, it can be difficult to determine from which angle the council should be set up. Therefore, the advice is to start this process from within the municipality, with the initial aim of connecting to existing food initiatives and networks. This lays a foundation for a Food Council in which all relevant sectors are represented and in which clear consultation times are agreed upon. Once this basis is in place, the municipality can step back and retain a role as a key point of contact and cooperation partner.

**Active consultation and policy connection:** As the Food Council develops and operates increasingly independently, it is important to organise regular consultations with municipal departments dealing with sustainability, health and social cohesion. This helps align with the wider sustainability policies of the Groningen municipality. As part of this, it is recommended that the Food Council eventually participates structurally in municipal advisory processes and participation moments to influence food-related policy. This will allow the Food Council to make concrete proposals and contribute to relevant policy decisions.

**Obtain official advisory role:** in time, it is important that the Food Council obtains a recognised advisory position within the municipality and province in the field of food policy. This can be done by actively contributing to urban and regional food agendas, submitting policy proposals and inviting officials to meetings. The advice here is request a permanent point of contact within the municipality after the start-up phase, when the municipality has withdrawn from the Food Council. This way, the Food



Council remains structurally involved in policy decisions and is not dependent on changing contacts. This contributes to the council's continuity and clout as a serious interlocutor on food policy.

## 5.2 How can residents and stakeholders be effectively involved?

As indicated by almost all interviewees, the success of a Food Council hinges on the extent to which residents and stakeholders feel heard and involved in the council and its activities. The municipality of Groningen's new participation policy (2025), which is expected to be adopted by the council in May 2025, provides an important basis for the Food Council's working method. This policy emphasises that participation is not only about participation, but also about equal cooperation between the municipality and residents on social issues. In line with this, it is important that the Food Council develops into an independently functioning platform in which residents, entrepreneurs and civil society organisations actively contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive food system. The participation framework provides tools to shape this cooperation, with the municipality playing a facilitating role in the start-up phase. Over time, however, the Food Council must operate independently, with strong community involvement. This means that the Food Council is not just an advisory body, but a platform where strategies are developed and implemented together. Through this approach, the Food Council can not only strengthen the relationship between citizens and government but also have a lasting impact on the food system in Groningen.

This section presents strategies and concrete recommendations to effectively engage residents and stakeholders in the Groningen Food Council. A conversation with a Transformational Media expert on the power of media and content to reach and engage people highlighted that a strong and inspiring story is essential to engage people. The message should connect with different interests, such as health, sustainability or local economy. In addition, low-threshold participation opportunities, such as voting rounds and workshops, increase engagement. Finally, continuity is crucial; a clear structure and sufficient resources ensure continued success.

Based on the insights, the advice for more effective involvement of citizens and stakeholders in the Food Council in Groningen is as follows:

### 1. Build a strong narrative that fits the Groningen context:

- Formulate a mission that is **recognisable** to Groningers. Emphasise themes such as the urban-rural connection, students and international residents, and a focus on sustainability and local production. Make clear why a Food Council is relevant to all residents.
- Work together with **communication specialists**. Involve experts from the Hanze or the University of Groningen, for example, to develop a strong and convincing story and disseminate it widely through various media.

2. Segment the message for different audiences:

- Target communication to **different groups** within Groningen. Address young people and environmentally aware residents with a focus on sustainability and climate, families with healthy and affordable food, and entrepreneurs and farmers with local economy and short chains.
- Use **storytelling** to make impact visible. Tell stories about a Groningen farmer who supplies urban agriculture projects, a neighbourhood vegetable garden that strengthens social connection, or a neighbourhood initiative that combats food waste.
- Organise social **media campaigns** and **physical events**. Use platforms such as Instagram and Facebook and organise neighbourhood days, tastings or themed markets to reach different audiences.

3. Create participation opportunities and actively involve stakeholders:

- Organise **low-threshold activities** such as neighbourhood talks, workshops and city walks where residents can participate in thinking about the Food Council's plans.
- Set up (possibly) a **citizens' panel** in which representatives from different neighbourhoods, such as neighbourhood initiatives and local entrepreneurs, can participate. In this way, a citizen panel can function as a sounding board for the Food Council and actively contribute ideas on food policy and local initiatives.
- Encourage **collaboration** between farmers, community initiatives and educational institutions to set up concrete projects, such as neighbourhood kitchen gardens and urban agriculture.

4. Invest in professionalism and continuity:

- Facilitate **knowledge sharing** within the Food Council so that members stay well informed about current developments in food policy, sustainability and participation. This could be through training courses provided by the University of Groningen or external experts.
- Set **clear goals** and **monitor impact**. Develop a measurement plan in which the Food Council tracks how initiatives and residents contribute to food security, sustainability and community building. For example, collaborate with researchers to scientifically substantiate and increase this impact and participation.

Groningen already has a strong ecosystem of food, health and sustainability initiatives in place. This provides a solid foundation on which the Food Council can build, making it not only relevant but also broad-based. At the same time, the strength of the Food Council does not lie solely in collaborating with these existing initiatives. It is essential to reach new target groups, such as residents who are not

yet naturally concerned with sustainable and healthy food, but who can make valuable contributions. By combining targeted communication and low-threshold participation opportunities with leveraging existing networks, the Food Council can not only become more inclusive but also contribute more effectively to the transition to a fair and sustainable food system in Groningen.

### 5.3 How can a Food Council be funded in Groningen?

Setting up a Food Council requires funding for several essential costs. These include costs such as coordination, meetings and communication. An indicative starting budget for the Food Council in Groningen would be 30,000 euros per year. This estimate is based on the funding of similar food councils such as Ede, the budgets received by other advisory councils in the Netherlands, and the needs of a starting organisation with no existing capital. This grant is used for coordination and organisation (project leader, administration, etc.), meetings and activities (rental of locations, organisation of networking and public meetings, etc.) and communication and visibility (website, promotional materials, members' expenses, etc.), among other things.

Various grant opportunities are available for this funding of the Food Council in Groningen. For example, the municipality of Groningen makes subsidies and funds available for projects that tie in with policy goals in the areas of sustainability, health and social cohesion. One example is the Sustainability Fund Groningen, for initiatives that focus on circular food chains and climate goals. In addition, through the Social Agenda, Nij Begun Groningen offers support to initiatives that contribute to a healthier and more sustainable living environment. The Food Council can also leverage provincial and national resources, such as subsidies for sustainable agriculture and short food chains through the province of Groningen or, for example, the national Food and Green Scheme. For broader rural development, joining LEADER grants may be interesting. At the European level, funds such as Interreg, Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) offer opportunities for innovative and sustainable food initiatives.

To secure long-term structural funding, the Food Council can also seek cooperation with social and private funds, such as the Groningen Entrepreneurs Fund or the Triodos Foundation, provided there is a clear link to sustainable and social impact. By submitting a well-founded application, with a clear vision and demonstrable social added value, the Food Council can not only obtain a start-up grant but also work towards long-term financial support.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary

This report explored how Groningen can take the first steps in establishing a Food Council. The report highlights how a Food Council can play a key role in making a local food system more sustainable and stronger, in line with residents' needs, and allowing them to play an active role. The result shows that an effective Food Council in Groningen requires a strong foundation, consisting of actively connecting existing initiatives, stakeholders and local organisations, positioning the Food Council as an independent advisory body that collaborates effectively with the municipality, and creating and increasing awareness and accessibility of the Food Council through clear communication and low-threshold participation. In addition, structural funding is an important prerequisite for long-term impact.

With the advice formulated for the Groningen municipality, this report provides a practical guide for setting up a Food Council in Groningen. In addition, this report can serve as a source of inspiration for other cities and regions wishing to set up a Food Council.

### 6.2 The future of the Food Council of Groningen

This advisory report provides a solid basis for the establishment of the Food Council Groningen. When the municipality puts the advice in this report into practice, it can provide a starting point to effectively set up the council. At the same time, this report is only the beginning. The actual establishment and successful operation of the Food Council will require further steps and research.

In particular, research on creating and strengthening (food) communities can be a valuable next step to increase support for the Food Council. Therefore, this report does not directly guarantee the establishment of a Food Council but provides a foundation on which to build. Through further elaboration and targeted action, Groningen can work towards a structural and effective Food Council that contributes to a sustainable and fair food system in the region. And the very first step? 'Just say you are a Food Council!

## 7. Appendices

### 7.1 Interview representative Food Council Utrecht

Emina Zorlak is an enthusiastic initiator playing a key role in the establishment of the Food Council in Utrecht, which is still in its early stages. Her involvement in the food system began during her participation in DuurzaamDoor, a four-year project aimed at cooperation between different sectors to promote food transition. This project gave her insight into the shortcomings of the current food system and motivated her to engage more actively in change. Although still in its infancy, the Food Council in Utrecht now consists of eight members who are all enthusiastic about improving food policy in Utrecht. Each member has a strong connection to food and the city of Utrecht.

During the conversation, Emina explains that the Food Council Utrecht carries an agenda-setting role, striving to build a bridge between citizens and the municipality. They focus on gathering insights from residents about what is going on around food and communicate this to policy makers. In addition, Emina explains, they also try to make municipal policies accessible to citizens. Emina emphasizes that the municipality currently pays little attention to food in its policies. In the coming years, the Food Council therefore wants to work to change this and advocate for better support for civic initiatives, such as kitchen gardens, community cooking spots and other food-related projects. Emina's vision, and that of her Food Council in Utrecht, is to create a stronger connection between citizens and policy makers in Utrecht to develop a sustainable and inclusive food system that benefits everyone. According to Emina, this vision is an important part of making change happen.

During our conversation, Emina points out that creating community is essential to the success of a Food Council. "In every neighborhood there are people who know what's going on and where the needs are," she explains. She stresses the importance of finding these key people and involving them in the process. She also mentions that low-threshold ways, such as using WhatsApp groups or joining existing networks such as city maker groups, can help lay a solid foundation for a good network.

In addition, Emina emphasizes that the involvement of policymakers and municipal support is crucial to making an impact. "You need people within the municipality who understand what you are doing and can help you influence policy," she explains. She says building a relationship with the municipality is essential, with the Food Council remaining independent yet working together to achieve common goals.

Another important point Emina mentions is increasing the visibility of the Food Council. For example, she recommends starting with small, visible actions that appeal to people and invite them to get involved. This can be done, for example, by organizing events or joining existing initiatives in the city. "It is important to show what you are doing so that people get to know you and understand why it is important," Emina said. Emina also emphasizes in our conversation that obtaining funding is one of the biggest challenges in setting up a Food Council. She indicates that a structural budget is an essential factor for continuity.

Emina's experiences in Utrecht provide inspiration for Groningen and underscore that setting up a new Food Council requires a sound and strategic approach.

## 7.2 Interview representative Food Council Ede

Martine Groenewegen has been an active member of Ede's Food Council since 2022. With her background as a circular entrepreneur, she has developed particular expertise in the area of food waste and sustainable food chains. Martine is passionate about keeping the issue of food waste on the agenda, both within the Food Council and in her own entrepreneurship. Within the Food Council, Martine is committed to making connections between citizens, small initiatives and the municipality. She emphasizes the power of collaboration and the impact of local initiatives. With her wealth of experience and innovative perspective on sustainability, Martine provides valuable insights for both the Food Council and broader initiatives striving for a fairer and more sustainable food system.

During our conversation, Martine talks at length about the role of the Food Council in Ede and the challenges and opportunities she sees in promoting a more sustainable food system. "The Food Council is a link between citizens and the municipality," she explains. "We signal what is going on in society and give that back to the municipality. In doing so, we make sure that citizens and small initiatives are not forgotten." Martine emphasizes that the strength of the Food Council lies in connecting different parties. The council consists of people from diverse backgrounds, from farmers and entrepreneurs to education and research professionals. She explains that having different perspectives adds a lot of value, and that this diversity really makes a Food Council stronger.

One of the major themes the Food Council is focusing on is the protein transition. Martine explains that this theme is central to the council's updated 10-point plan. She also sees opportunities to encourage more sustainable horticulture in the region. "I would like to see not only a focus on small vegetable gardens, but that we also promote sustainable agriculture on a larger scale," she says.

Although cooperation with the municipality is good, Martine stresses the importance of independence. "We have a permanent contact at the municipality, which helps to get our ideas on the agenda. But it's important that the Food Council can take its own course. We have to remain independent, but at the same time play a connecting role that the municipality itself finds difficult to take up. This is how we support the quality of municipal policy."

Another challenge is measuring impact. Martine points out that the results of food initiatives are often only visible in the long term, which makes it difficult to quantify success directly. At the same time, she sees opportunities to raise awareness and garner support through good communication and visible events. "Investing in visibility is very important," she says. "Good communication and engaging activities ensure that you not only reach citizens but can also inspire policymakers and other partners."

Finally, Martine offers valuable advice for new food councils, such as the one in Groningen. She stresses the importance of building a community and setting clear priorities. "Especially in the beginning," Martine adds, "it is good to announce to local



initiatives that you are there.” She also mentions how important it is to provide focus through spearheads and to connect your ideals to current municipal policy themes. “And if you can, make sure you have a catalyst - a paid coordinator from the community is really essential for continuity.”

Martine's insights and lessons from Ede emphasize that a successful Food Council is all about collaboration, visibility and a balance between independence and involvement. This approach provides valuable inspiration for setting up a Food Council in other regions, including Groningen.

### 7.3 Interview representative Food Youth Council Groningen

A Food Youth Council was set up in Groningen in 2020, an initiative as part of the Food, Life & Innovation course. This dedicated itself to informing and enthusing young people in Groningen, and making their voices heard in the field of food. The fact that it was precisely students who sat on the council meant a fresh perspective on food issues and easier to reach younger generations. Marjan Nijenbanning-Pot was one of the facilitators of the Food Youth Council. Her role consisted of supporting the young people in setting up the council and making connections with relevant parties such as local farmers and other stakeholders. The Food Youth Council was also in contact with municipal representatives who helped obtain issues and make connections. These contacts were very valuable, Marjan says. Although the project was eventually halted due to the impact of COVID-19, her experience provides useful insights for setting up a Food Council in Groningen.

In our conversation, Marjan stresses the importance of a strong network as a foundation for a successful Food Council. Creating a good network is especially important in the beginning, she explains. During the establishment of the Food Youth Council, several partners were involved, including municipalities, provincial representatives and educational institutions. This not only ensured support but also access to valuable resources and expertise.

Marjan emphasizes that making such a council known plays a big role in its success. One of the ideas within the Food Youth Council was to open a pop-up store at the Sugar Field. Here farmers and citizens could meet, and attention was paid to telling “the story behind the food. “The story around a product is just as important as the product itself,” she explains.

The Food Youth Council in Groningen had to operate without grants or sponsorships, which led to a strong dependence on the motivation of the students involved. Although this motivation was ample at the time, Marjan indicates that offering a small financial compensation would have been a valuable support, especially if the council had existed longer. “Young people are not as valuable as full-time professionals, but a small stipend can make a big difference,” she stresses. This would have allowed them to better combine their involvement with other responsibilities.

A unique aspect of the Food Youth Council was its focus on young participants. Marjan stresses the importance of their contribution: “Young people look at the world in a fresh way and speak each other's language. It is important that they feel heard



and not ignored.” This perspective can also be of great value in a regular Food Council.

During our conversation, Marjan offers some tips for setting up a Food Council in Groningen: Ensure a mix of participants; combine youth and adults to integrate diverse perspectives. Create a stable base; establish a core team that provides continuity and oversight. Build a strong network; use participants' connections to create broad support. Invest in visibility; organize activities that connect the community and put the Food Council on the map.

#### 7.4 Interview representative Councillor of Stuttgart

Sabine Weick is an important source of insights on the workings of the Stuttgart Food Council, whose development she has actively witnessed. The Food Council in Stuttgart was founded about two years ago and has since been aiming to create a more sustainable food system. Sabine's experiences show how independence, cooperation and awareness are crucial pillars for the success of a Food Council.

During our conversation, Sabine mentions some key strategies that proved effective in Stuttgart. For example, she emphasizes that the Food Council in Stuttgart operates independently, despite the financial support they receive from the municipality. “Although we receive funding, we have the freedom to set our own course,” Sabine says. At the same time, the council maintains a good relationship with the municipal authorities, which ensures fruitful cooperation. “It is important to remain independent yet cooperate where necessary. This provides space to develop policies that meet the needs of the community, while at the same time we can support the council in achieving their goals.” Connecting to community needs goes hand in hand with building a good network in the municipality. Sabine emphasizes that knowing what is going on among citizens is an important part of a Food Council.

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The Food Council in Stuttgart works interdisciplinary, involving various city departments and external parties. Sabine explains: “Our work goes beyond food. We also involve social, economic and ecological perspectives, so we can approach the food system from all angles.” One of the challenges Sabine mentions during the conversation is measuring the impact of the Food Council. “Success is often only visible in the long term, and that can make it difficult to build support,” she told us. Sabine stressed the importance of communicating the benefits of a more sustainable

food system. “By showing how a better food system contributes to health, jobs and the climate, you can convince people of the importance of change.”

Sabine says that awareness is an essential part of the Food Council's work. “Many people don't immediately see the connection between food, agriculture and climate. It's our job to tell that story.” In Stuttgart, the focus is on explaining why change is necessary from an ecological, social and economic perspective. She adds, “People get more involved when they understand how these changes affect them and their community in a positive way.”

## 7.5 Interview representative Food Council Stuttgart

In addition to Sabine Weick, I also spoke with Jana Gutzat. Jana has been the coordinator of the Stuttgart Food Council since November 2022. With a background in energy and environmental management, she focuses on making the food system more sustainable, with the Food Council acting as a platform for policy development and cooperation between various stakeholders. “We don't just want to organize individual activities, but really bring about structural change,” Jana emphasizes. “Our goal is to achieve a more sustainable food system, from production to consumption.”

The Stuttgart Food Council works closely with the municipality but operates independently. They are funded by the city, supplemented by European project grants. A key success factor was the early involvement of someone in the municipality who supported the Food Council's vision and helped anchor their plans policy-wise. “Having a political contact who understood our mission and was committed to it was crucial to getting structural funding,” Jana says.

The internal organization of the Food Council is made up of different circles: a project office with four paid staff (including two students), a volunteer board and a broader group of members who come from different sectors, such as agriculture, logistics and civil society organizations. While this mix of professionals and volunteers is very effective, it sometimes brings challenges. “We would like to involve more volunteers, but the division between paid and unpaid workers is sometimes difficult,” Jana acknowledges.

Another challenge is involving the community in the Food Council. “It is important to understand what the needs of the community are,” says Jana. “We are building a network of interested citizens and experts, but this takes time.” To increase engagement, the Food Council organizes regular events and tries to expand its network through existing organizations and initiatives.

Jana's experience highlights some crucial lessons for setting up a Food Council in Groningen. In addition, Stuttgart shows that it is essential to invest in visibility and community participation from the beginning. “A Food Council can only be successful if it has support in the community as well as the right policy support,” Jana concludes.

## 7.6 Interview representative Head Food Team Municipality of Birmingham

Sarah Newton leads Birmingham City Council's Food System Team. This team is responsible for coordinating and improving food projects and strategies within the city. Her mission is to unite the many diverse food projects in Birmingham under one unified vision, the “Birmingham Food Revolution.” Sarah works to develop and implement the Birmingham Food System Strategy, a plan aimed at transforming the city in three core areas: communities, environment and economy. Her role combines strategic leadership, policy development and practical innovation, with a strong focus on collaboration and behaviour change. This makes her an ideal source of insights for your research on a Food Council in Groningen.

During our conversation, Sarah shares valuable insights about the strategies and approaches that have been used in Birmingham on food policy and initiatives. She emphasizes the importance of creating a shared vision that integrates different food projects and enables visibility. “The Birmingham Food Revolution is not just about food supply, but about completely transforming the way food is produced, consumed and organized locally,” Sarah explains.

One of the biggest challenges Sarah identifies is bringing together diverse stakeholders, such as local governments, food producers and communities. She emphasizes that it is not enough to see these parties as “stakeholders.” “It is essential to engage them as active partners in the change you want to achieve,” she says. This requires clear communication and a shared goal.

Building strong networks among diverse food initiatives is a key to success in Birmingham. Joining the forces of different parties made it easier to formulate common goals. “Networking not only provides connection, but also strengthens the impact of your efforts,” Sarah emphasizes. In addition, involving the local community is essential, according to Sarah. “When you include citizens in the process, you not only create support, but you also gain access to valuable knowledge and experience from the community itself,” she explained. Sarah emphasized that sustainability is a central theme in Birmingham's food strategy. Another key point Sarah mentioned is the importance of effective policy implementation. “Developing policy is one thing, but actually implementing it requires resources and collaboration,” she indicated.

This means there must be warm ties between the Food Council and the municipality. Sarah's emphasis on developing a shared vision and effectively implementing policy provides valuable guidance for Groningen. As Sarah points out, “It all starts with connection - connection between people, projects and a shared vision.”

## **7.7 Interview representative Environmental Department Municipality of Malmö**

Gunilla Andersson works at Malmö's Environment Department and has extensive experience in urban food strategies and sustainable policy development. In recent years, Malmö has invested heavily in making its food system more sustainable, with the municipality playing a facilitating role in establishing a Food Council. During our conversation, Gunilla explains how Malmö has approached this transition and what they have benefited from.

The Food Council in Malmö arose from the ambition to structurally embed food within urban policies. The municipality initially played an active role in the start-up

phase, but deliberately chose to have the Food Council eventually operate independently. “The municipality initiated the process, but it was important that the Food Council could decide for itself how they wanted to work,” Gunilla explains. This independent position allowed the council to remain critical and connect both citizens and policy makers. At the same time, the connection with the municipality was maintained, which Gunilla says is an important aspect of a successful Food Council.

As in many other cities, building a strong network was a crucial first step. The Food Council in Malmö managed to involve a wide range of stakeholders, from local farmers and entrepreneurs to civil society organizations and researchers. Gunilla emphasizes that collaborating with existing initiatives is a smart strategy: “You don't have to set up everything yourself. By joining ongoing projects and leveraging existing structures, you can make an impact faster.” This helped the Food Council to be visible from the beginning and lay a solid foundation.

Another important aspect is funding. In Malmö, the Food Council was initially supported by municipal grants, but Gunilla warns that dependence on temporary funding is a risk. “It is essential to work on financial stability from the beginning, for example through structural collaborations with the municipality or funds.” This provides continuity and prevents projects from grinding to a halt once grants expire.

In addition, Gunilla stresses the importance of a shared vision. Because different stakeholders often have different priorities, she says it is essential to invest in dialogue and shared goals. “When everyone recognizes themselves in the mission of the Food Council, there is more commitment and cooperation,” she says. In Malmö, therefore, a lot of time was spent on consultation and co-creation, which is why the Food Council is now widely supported.

Finally, Gunilla mentions that a Food Council should not only be an advisory body but also be visible and practical. Events, campaigns and collaborations with schools and businesses helped in Malmö to make the importance of sustainable food choices tangible. “Show what you are doing, then it becomes easier to get people on board,” she advises.

## 7.8 Interview expert in Transformational Media

Bianca Harms is an expert on Transformational Media. In our conversation, she talks about the power of media and content to reach and move people. According to her, targeted communication and a thoughtful participation strategy is essential to create broad support and encourage active involvement.

“The first step is always a powerful and inspiring story,” says Bianca. People commit more easily to an initiative when they understand what it stands for and how it aligns with their own values. For the Food Council in Groningen, this means that the mission and vision must be clear, with a clear focus on the local context. Why is sustainable and healthy food important to Groningen? And how does the Food Council contribute to larger themes such as climate, health and social cohesion? Answering these questions creates a sense of urgency and commitment among residents and stakeholders.

In addition, Bianca stresses the importance of target group-oriented communication. “Not everyone is addressed by the same message,” she explains. “Some people are primarily interested in health, others in sustainability or the local economy. If you really want to make an impact, you have to tailor your message to these different motivations.” For the Food Council, this means not having one overall message, but multiple stories that cater to residents' diverse interests and backgrounds.

Another key issue is creating opportunities for participation. “People feel more connected to an initiative if they feel their voice matters,” Bianca says. This principle can be applied in Groningen by actively involving residents, for example, by letting them think about priorities or inviting local initiatives to create projects together.

Finally, Bianca emphasizes the importance of continuity. Many initiatives start with great enthusiasm but fail due to a lack of structure or resources. Her advice: invest in a professional approach from the beginning. Consider appointing a communications specialist who focuses on visibility and maintaining relationships with the community. That way, the energy is maintained, and the initiative grows in the long run.

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