



# **North East Land Links: Final Report for the Countryside Agency.**

## **Section 4: Community Food Access Programme**

### **4.0 Introduction**

The NELL project (and its predecessor the GNF LMI) pursued an interest in community food throughout the lifespan of the project. NELL initiated work is being continued via the FoodChain (northeast) Ltd, a social enterprise established by NELL staff in august 2004.

Work on this topic was prompted by an interest in the potential for linking up what is in our region largely urban based work on food access ( enhancing access to affordable fresh food to disadvantaged communities) and rural based work on developing local food economies.

Our attention was initially drawn to this area by the apparent success of a scheme in West Cumbria, which was establishing food co-ops in deprived communities where there was limited access to fresh food, and then arranging for these co-ops to be supplied by a local supplier.

### **4.1 Discussion**

We define community food initiatives (CFI's) as projects which pursue one or more of the following types of activity, growing schemes, community cafes, promotion of healthy eating ( cookery skills etc), food access projects. The range of organisations involved in the running of CFI's is extremely diverse, as are their origins and consequently their interests and priorities. During the duration of the NELL project we had contact with over one hundred and thirty CFI's across the north east region, additionally we were aware of a number of others and new projects are constantly emerging.

Funding for CFI projects comes from a variety of sources; traditionally the charitable sector has been active both in funding and delivery. Latterly the public sector in the form of regeneration agencies, and in particular the health sector has become the most significant source of funding.

CFI's are usually initiated as a response to the perceived needs of specific communities. These communities may be defined by geography or be a sub-set of the general population. Most CFI's, but not all, prioritise the healthy eating agenda and are informed by health policy and national strategies.

The diverse nature of CFI's means that there is in general a lack of co-ordinated activity and consequently an inefficient use of resources ( to many small projects all requiring their own staff, offices, vehicles, duplication of activity, failure to identify capture potential efficiencies through collaboration etc) .

Some areas (for example Newcastle) have an area network and co-ordinating officers but in practice their role is mainly limited to servicing the network rather than leading on the development of collaborative activity. There is limited evidence of practical co-ordination/collaboration between organisations and certainly less than we would consider desirable. Mainly this is due to the fact that many groups are either focused on their own priorities, and/or that they perceive other groups as potential competitors for scarce resources.

## **4.2 Food Access Projects**

Whilst we developed a general interest in the community food sector as a whole, our main practical area of interest was in food access. Food access projects are primarily run with a view to facilitating improved access to affordable food, food co-ops are perhaps the best known of this type of project.

Food co-ops can take several forms but in general they involve selling food at cost or at a subsidised rate to users of community facilities such as schools and village halls. Volunteers have a significant role to play in organising and managing such operations. The community sector has been running food co-ops for many years, they do not necessarily involve fresh produce and where they do the use of local food is rarely a priority.

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in food co-ops from the health sector with many organisations viewing them as a potentially useful health intervention mechanism. Evidence to support this view is however slight and there is a recognised need to evaluate both the effectiveness of food co-ops as a means of improving peoples health and their value for money as a health intervention mechanism.

Increasingly organisations from the rural sector have begun to take an interest in food co-ops, drawn in particular by the positive publicity surrounding work initiated in West Cumbria by the Countryside Alliance (now Rural Regeneration Unit). This work aims to improve access to affordable fresh produce, with this being where possible of local origin. The project has been hailed as example of how health and rural regeneration can be linked to the benefit of all.

We learnt a considerable amount from the project in question and do not wish to detract from the good work which they have undertaken. However we were concerned by the apparent lack of critical appraisal (by funders) of some of the claims which were made for this project, particularly in relation to the value of the project to the rural economy (in relation to the public money required to support the project) and its efficacy as a health intervention mechanism. In our view these matters should have been considered and an appropriate form of evaluation undertaken before this work was subsequently rolled out in other areas of the country.

Certainly in our opinion funders considering future activity of this type need to ensure that the projects they deal with can demonstrate not just that they are effective but also that they represent value for money. Critically they should also assure themselves that such activity can be sustained, during the lifetime of the NELL project we saw several well funded projects rise on the back of public money only to fall as quickly when funding ceased, there is little if any evidence to suggest that these projects achieved anything of lasting value.

### **4.3 The FoodChain (north east) Co. Ltd**

#### **Introduction**

The Food Chain (north east) Co. Ltd was established by NELL in August 2004 the company has outlived the North East Land Links project with ex NELL staff continuing to be involved both operationally and as directors. The Food Chain represents a practical expression of our desire to see a more strategic operational framework in the CFI sector. There is a strong 'action research' dimension to this work which is dealt with in more detail in the section on evaluation.

It has long been our view that the regions CFI's should operate collaboratively on the purchasing and supply of food. In February 2003, at the inaugural meeting of the North East Community Food Initiatives Network (called ny NELL), the NELL project manager proposed an integrated model for food buying and distribution building on existing infrastructure. Our argument was that this could result in greater efficiency in the sector by,

- reducing the overall amount of human resource currently expended on the buying and distribution of , what are often, small amounts of produce
- capturing the economies of scale which can flow from bulk buying and the use of wholesalers
- identifying realistic opportunities for engaging with local producers

Whilst there was significant interest in the idea it rapidly became apparent that the necessary commitment would not be forthcoming. Key organisations proved to have little interest in local food and to be unprepared or unable to operate outside of their current geographic remit.

With a view to testing the validity of the concept NELL initiated a pilot distribution project based initially in the borough of Gateshead. As word concerning the pilot spread it became apparent that a number of organisations had an interest in establishing food access projects but had been unable to do so owing to the absence of secure supply chain. Having identified a market for the companies services the decision was made to incorporate the company as a social enterprise, the FoodChain (northeast) Co Ltd, in August 2004. The principle aim of the company is to facilitate the distribution of affordable fresh produce ( local where feasible) to disadvantaged sectors of the population, primarily via existing community and health projects.

The FoodChain now operates in partnership with dozens of organisations and groups and supplies food to over thirty outlets including food co-ops and community cafes across the southern part of the north east region.

We do not perceive the FoodChain as representing a 'perfect' model and we are constantly looking to improve upon it. The company has always had a strong action research component and we have been and will remain keen to share information concerning our experiences with a wider audience. The staff and directors of the FoodChain regularly give presentations (UKPHA National Conference, Healthy Communities Collaborative) and the company features as a case study on websites run by Sustain, FoodLinks UK and the Plunkett Foundation.

#### **Sustainability**

There are four critical issues those planning/implementing community food programmes need to be aware of.

**Access** – is there reasonable physical access to the product, 'reasonable' will vary depending upon the perception and habits etc of the target group.

**Awareness**- are people aware of the opportunities available to them?

**Affordability**- is the product economically accessible. Analysis of this needs to consider both actual affordability and the value placed upon the product by the target consumer.

**Attractiveness**- is the product desirable, attractive to the consumer. In the case of fresh fruit and veg is eating more fruit and vegetables something which the target group(s) want to do.

The FoodChain company principal objective is to make fresh produce more affordable and accessible to dis-advantaged individuals and communities, with a view to helping to reduce health inequalities. We believe these to be important factors affecting peoples consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables though we suspect that this is primarily the case for people whose inclinations or habit disposes them to eat such foodstuffs. Where this is not the case simply making fresh produce more accessible and affordable seems to us unlikely to change an individuals eating behaviour.

In practical terms we have found that within the communities we are dealing with (mainly white low income) it has proven difficult to establish significant markets for our product. There is a lack of **demand pull**. We have sought to combat this through our marketing of our products (we do not mention health in our literature and have tried to 'pitch' our message as an aspirational one), and through partnering with organisations who run complementary programmes which focus on raising awareness of the benefits of eating more fruit and vegetables and the development of cooking skills etc.

Whilst we feel that we can improve our service and have the opportunity to deliver greater benefits there is a clear need for more effective mechanisms for effecting behavioural change amongst the groups we deal with. How this might be achieved remains one of the great unanswered questions, we believe that there is a role for community level initiatives but worry that unless their activity is complemented by effective, co-ordinated regional and national action (focused on effecting behaviour change) the influence of such projects will be slight.

It is in fact very difficult to determine exactly how effective community food programmes are or have been. The evidence base is very slight. In our region the majority of programmes have not been evaluated, whilst most of those that have, have tended to undertake retrospective evaluations. There are many reasons why projects are not evaluated, but lack of time and expertise are probably the major determinants though we have frequently come across the view that 'of course our projects work why should we have to prove it'.

The answer of course is that without evaluation those running and funding projects have no objective method for determining whether their project actually works, how it might work better and whether it represents a cost effective method of delivering the desired outcomes. With the assistance of Dr Martin Carraher we devised an evaluation methodology for the FoodChain with a view to providing information to assist us to answer what we considered to be key questions (see key documents section for further information);

- The effectiveness of food co-ops as a health intervention tool.
- Their cost effectiveness
- Who uses food co-ops and why? (Who doesn't and why?)
- What are the incidental benefits of participation in food co-ops
- The economic sustainability of an integrated purchasing and distributing organisation
- To what extent is it possible to factor in the use of local produce and of what value is this to the rural economy?

We would suggest that whatever the reservations those running projects might have concerning evaluation, funders should insist that the projects they finance are evaluated and that the evaluation methodology to be employed is independently validated. Perhaps the best approach would be for funders to collaborate to finance the development of a series of evaluation tools which all would agree to accept as valid. It would greatly aid funders to compare and contrast programmes they are or have been asked to fund if these were all being evaluated using the same method.

Such evaluations however need to be run over significant timescales, a minimum of two years is often quoted. Unfortunately many of the community food initiatives we have engaged with are unable to sustain themselves due to lack of funding. Even during the relatively short lifetime of NELL we saw a number of projects come and go often leaving no discernible evidence of lasting achievement. Where funding is of necessity of short duration we would argue that there is little merit in developing food access schemes. In the main these are not self sustaining in the absence of project staff and associated resources. Short term interventions should limit themselves to seeking to effect behavioural change (though their effectiveness will be limited if access and affordability are a problem).

Where it can be demonstrated that food access programmes deliver and a decision is made to initiate this type of work then consideration should be given to long term ongoing investment/support/service level agreements.

If it is deemed appropriate a food access programme funders should consider what represents the optimal delivery model. Small may be beautiful where intensive work with a small group of hard to reach, priority individuals are concerned however if the aim is to improve food access to the community of a deprived ward then a larger scale operation may represent a more cost effective method of achieving this aim. For example the FoodChain operates across most of the southern half of the north east region, on a purely per capita basis we would suggest that it offers an extremely cost effective method of improving access to affordable fresh produce. We would suggest that funders need to be more pro-active in identifying opportunities for and pursuing cross border (and cross sectoral) collaborative approaches to the delivery of services. In simple terms not every ward /district/local authority/PCT needs to have their own food access project, depending upon their objectives it may well be feasible to develop a delivery model which is able to deliver a service to several bodies at a fraction of the cost required to pay for multiple individual projects.

#### **4.4 Key Points**

- All of the community food programmes we are aware of are to some extent or other dependent upon public or third sector funding, this will continue to be the case because whatever the nature of the initiative they are dealing with a difficult 'market' which requires a considerable investment of time and effort in order to secure and maintain results. For example, there is limited evidence of

a demand pull for the FoodChain's products from our target market, we undertake considerable developmental work with our partners with a view to creating this pull.

That said there is a currently largely unmet need to ensure that value for money is being achieved i.e. that projects are and can demonstrate that they are delivering against agreed objectives, and that projects are operating in the most efficient fashion i.e. that they operate at an appropriate scale, operate efficient distribution systems etc. Funder's and those organisations with an interest in improving the performance of the voluntary/community and social enterprise sectors should invest in evaluation and business modelling and take a role in driving change.

- We would suggest that the direct value of community food projects to the rural economy (where they are linked) is relatively small and that this should not be accepted as a substantive argument for justifying public expenditure on such projects, particularly given the level of public expenditure required to support them. Local producers can only supply a proportion of the range of products which are commonly sold through food co-ops, this will vary according to the time of year. We have established contact with several of the most successful food access projects in England and Scotland and all of them are ultimately reliant on fruit and vegetable wholesalers for the majority of the produce they supply. The economic benefits to the rural economy, which accrue from linking producers to food access projects, appear to us to be frequently overstated.
- We would argue that the justification for public expenditure to support the establishment of food access projects should be based primarily on their ability to deliver against the health and well being agenda. The health benefits of fruit and vegetable consumption are well known. We have not however been able to access significant evidence demonstrating the efficacy of food access projects as a health intervention mechanism. This is not to say that they are not effective simply that the case has yet to be made.

It is evident that there is a demand for food co-ops but as yet we feel there has been insufficient effort made to understand who uses them, who does not and why. If it is simply a case of people who already consume fruit and vegetables switching to a cheaper source can the public expenditure required to establish food co-ops be justified?

A number of health professionals with whom we have discussed this issue have expressed scepticism about the value of food access work. There is concern that projects such as food co-ops are not well used by 'hard to reach' groups. A commonly held view, and one to which we subscribe, is that the access to and affordability of food are in many cases not as important as has been supposed and that a more fundamental question is, how might we effect change in peoples eating habits?

Recent work undertaken by Dr Martin White of the University of Newcastle in the west end of Newcastle indicates that even where access to affordable fresh produce is good, key target groups may continue to exhibit unhealthy consumption patterns. Work on access must therefore ensure it is targeted and be complemented by work which aims to change attitudes and behaviour.

- There is a recognised need to develop evaluation methodologies in order to ensure that projects such as community food initiatives are able to measure their achievements. A 'common' approach to evaluation and monitoring would allow funders to compare and contrast projects with a view to ensuring best value for money. Funding organisations should collaborate on this matter with a view to better informing their spending decisions.
- The number of organisations involved in community food initiatives, and the associated range of individual and organisational agendas, means that organisations are frequently operating in ignorance of one another and/or without due regard to the opportunities for collaboration. There is evidence that this situation is improving but currently activity in the community food sector lacks a strategic operational context. Cross-sectoral, inter and intra organisational, and cross boundary ( geographic) working needs to be improved.
- Funders should ensure that they do not compromise existing programmes when funding new projects. For example by funding a project in an area which is already serviced by others. Or by funding a project which effectively undercuts others, thereby restricting their ability to become more self sustaining, for example by supporting a project which gives food away or sells at cost price only when other projects charge at cost+ in order to become more self sufficient. Currently these sorts of mistakes do occur.
- In our view funder's need to drive a process of rationalisation in the community food sector. Small is not always beautiful. CFI activity has evolved in most locations in an 'ad-hoc' fashion. Efforts have been made to evolve area strategies to guide CFI activity (eg PCT Food and Nutrition Strategies, however these efforts are complicated by the number of organisations engaged in the sector and by conflicts of interest.

We would suggest that organisations involved in the funding of CFI's come together to consider the most efficient organisational structures (both intra and inter) for delivering their objectives. In some cases it will be appropriate to pursue projects at a 'local' scale, others though should be pursued on a more strategic basis, for example the Foodchain Co, with limited resources, has established and continues to support and supply a network of food co-ops across the whole of the southern half of the north east region. It is not suggested that this represents a perfect model, but it is a more cost effective approach to providing this type of service than others which we have seen come and go. We would suggest that if an appropriate analysis of the regions CFI sector was undertaken it would reveal clear opportunities to reduce overall expenditure on CFI projects without compromising on delivery.

In the main rationalisation of the sector is unlikely to be driven by delivery organisations, funders will need to make hard choices and funding bodies will need to free their funds to enable more efficient cross border operations to develop.

#### **4.5 Main Project Outcomes**

- Establishment of NECFIN
- Involvement with Regional Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food (lead Bill Kirkup)

The NELL project manager assisted in the drafting of several chapters of this strategy, including the chapter on Healthy Communities. The project manager is currently the regional task group lead for section 4.1, this relates to food health and nutrition.

- Funding for project officer

We have secured three years funding from the Northern Rock Foundation to appoint a Food Links officer. The key objectives of the post are,

- to support the development of the North East Community Food Initiatives network (NECFI)
- to promote collaboration between members of NECFI
- to establish opportunities for local producers to supply food access projects.

The Northern Rock Foundation contributes 50% of the funding for this post, matched funding is drawn from NELL's core budget. The project officer Simon McCabe was appointed in October 2003.

- Establishment of the FoodChain + associated work ie food co-ops etc, (see what have submitted to NRF) also note case studies, taking an action research approach to this work note evaluation

#### **4.6 Key Documents**

- NECFIN Terms of Reference
- Evaluation Framework and Questionnaire
- FoodChain marketing materials including website

**Prepared by Bill Kirkup  
NELL Project Manager  
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