

Executive Summary

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Duncan's overall assessment of Lincoln was that it presents an excellent opportunity for establishing a Local Food Ecosystem.

The reasons for this assessment are good engagement from existing local food enterprises, good engagement from local authorities, and an excellent geographic situation with access to an abundance of locally produced food.

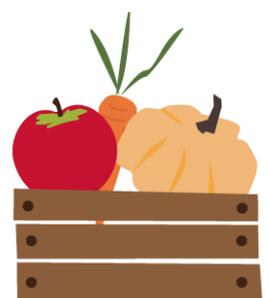
The lack of an obvious 'anchor organisation' means that a new enterprise would need to be started from scratch. This can be a challenge. However, it is also a rare and exciting opportunity to start with a blank canvas and design an ideal local food system without compromise.

Duncan's recommended next steps are...

To capture the enthusiasm demonstrated by local food practitioners during the workshop in some form of 'expression of interest' document

To follow up on the Council's invitation to submit a bid for Shared Prosperity funding, with a view to establishing a pilot project

To make known to the developers undertaking the development to the west of the city that there is a desire for a Food Hub to be built there



Introduction

About the 'Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem' programme and this report

Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem is a programme that is delivered by Duncan Catchpole of Harmony Food Hubs with the dual objectives of conveying the Local Food Ecosystem concept to local food practitioners and stakeholders, and assessing an area in terms of the prospect of creating a Local Food Ecosystem in that area.

The focus of the programme is the innovative concept in local food supply-chain coordination, designed according to circular economy principles, that is described in the book 'Local Food Ecosystems: How Food Hubs Can Help Create a More Sustainable Food System'. A Local Food Ecosystem can be established in an area by the creation of a 'Food Hub', which facilitates direct trade between local food enterprises and improves trading conditions so that it becomes more viable to run local/sustainable food enterprises. This creates a vibrant local food economy, and also delivers many social and environmental benefits.

The Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem programme consists of an in-person visit by Duncan, during which he delivers a workshop, and conducts research through meeting local food practitioners and stakeholders. The findings of that research are presented in this report, which includes Duncan's assessment of the area, and recommendations for next steps.

Duncan's visit to Lincoln

This report is based on research carried out during my two-day visit to Lincoln on the 14th and 15th of July 2022. This included the 'Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem' workshop, which was attended by 18 stakeholders in the local food system (including food producers and other independent food enterprises), a meeting that took place in City Hall which was attended by 20 representatives from local council and other local institutions, and also visits to Stokes Coffee Roasters' 120 year anniversary event, Doddington Hall sculpture exhibition and an informal meeting with 8 other stakeholders in the local food system at the Horse & Groom pub. It should be noted that, even though this was a terrific number of stakeholders to meet with, it still is only a portion of the wider local food system of north Lincolnshire.



Introduction

Continued... The visit was followed up with a conference call with members of the Donington on Bain community farm, and a second visit to Lincoln during which I attended a Food Partners' social gathering, hosted by the chair of the Lincolnshire Food Partnership, Caroline Kenyon, attended a meeting with Laura Stratford of Lincolnshire Food Partnership and Kate Bell of City of Lincoln Council, and also had visits to Middle World CSA farm and Washingborough Academy.



The Three Pillars

Duncan has identified three 'pillars' which, together, would provide the foundation of a successful Food Hub project. These are...

1. The prospective Local Food Ecosystem
2. Support from local authorities and availability of resources
3. The anchor organisation

Duncan's assessment of an area in terms of the prospect of undertaking a Local Food Ecosystem project is based upon his appraisal of these three pillars.

The report is broken down into individual assessments of each of the three pillars. In each section Duncan also makes recommendations of next steps that could be taken to strengthen that pillar or advance the Food Hub project.



The Local Food Ecosystem

What is Duncan Looking For

The 'members' of the local food ecosystem are local food producers, both large scale and small, food processing businesses, independent food retailers, cafes, restaurants, caterers, institutional caterers (e.g. schools and colleges), social enterprises (especially ones whose mission is improving access to healthy and sustainably produced food), and any other local stakeholders who are intrinsic to the local food system.

When doing his assessment of the prospective Local Food Ecosystem Duncan will be looking at the independent food enterprises that already exist in the area and considering things like the overall number of local food enterprises, the diversity of local food enterprises (i.e. are all of the enterprise types listed above represented), and the extent to which locally and sustainably produced food is already making its ways directly to market.

Duncan will also be assessing the attitude of the practitioners and business owners in the area. Is there already a culture of sustainability? What are the levels of engagement like, and are stakeholders open to the prospect of working in unity with one another as part of a sustainable food system? Is there any resistance to the idea or key stakeholders who are unwilling to participate?

Duncan will also take into consideration the degree of establishment/viability of the local food enterprises as they currently stand. However, this is not factored into the assessment of the strength of this pillar: the premise of the Food Hub is that it is very hard to run a small scale local food enterprise, and therefore purpose of the Food Hub is to improve trading conditions, and therefore viability, of these enterprises.



The Local Food Ecosystem

Duncan's Appraisal of the Prospective Local Food Ecosystem in North Lincolnshire

In my opinion I rate Lincoln very highly and believe the area has an excellent kernel from which a vibrant Local Food Ecosystem could emerge.

A lot of the reasoning behind this assessment comes from my experience while conducting the 'Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem' workshop. The workshop was not only well attended by a good selection of relevant stakeholders, the participants also engaged positively and with enthusiasm. I picked up on high levels of respect and appreciation towards Greater Lincolnshire Food Partnership for convening the event, as well as a (at points emotional) sense of hope and excitement that the workshop might lead to something tangible that would fulfil an unmet need and support what the participants are trying to achieve in their respective enterprises.

Towards the end of the workshop Martin of Middle World Farms voluntarily asked the rest of the attendees who, if any, would be interested taking things to the next stage and everybody put their hand without hesitation. This is a fantastic indication of the level of buy-in that could be expected if Lincoln were to go forward with a Food Hub project.

The foundation of any Local Food Ecosystem is primary food production, i.e. farmers and market gardeners. I was encouraged that there were two local market gardens represented at the workshop; Middle World Farm and Brattleby Gardens. Both are relatively new strat-ups, and therefore going through one of the most challenging periods an enterprise ever faces. Anyone who has access to land and the skills and inclination to grow food for the local market really ought to be regarded as immensely precious. I sincerely hope that both Elena and Martin and his team are able to make it through the critical start-up phase they are currently going through to become well established food producing enterprises. A Food Hub would certainly help this to happen, although what Middle World Farm and Brattleby Gardens really need at this moment is an already well-established Food Hub that is already in a position to help them market their produce.

These local market gardens aside, Lincolnshire is famously well known for having some of the best land for growing in the UK. I have no doubt at all that there will be more growers who would welcome



The Local Food Ecosystem

Continued... the opportunity to market their produce locally through a Food Hub, and that the creation of the Food Hub itself would encourage yet more local producers to consider adopting sustainable production techniques and seek to address the local market.

In terms of local production Lincoln ranks very highly and to me represents an exciting opportunity to create an exemplar Food Hub.

But of course, there is much more to a Local Food Ecosystem than simply primary producers...

The independent food retail sector is a bit thin on the ground in Lincoln. In fact, as far as I could tell there were literally no shops that would qualify for 'Better Food Traders' membership (i.e. selling locally produced organic fruit & veg). The only representative of the local retail sector at the workshop was Johann of Lincoln Eco Pantry. While Lincoln Eco Pantry is a superb zero waste/refill shop, and Johann herself committed to forward-thinking retail and actively looking to engage with local food products, she is also limited in the extent to which she can stock fresh produce by the terms of her lease.

Likewise I didn't encounter a huge number of food processing enterprises.

The relative absence of a local independent food retail sector can be viewed both positively and emade market for the produce that will be distributed by the Food Hub. But an alternative, positive way of viewing this is that there is a blank canvas to work with. There are very few established local supply chain that you have to worry about disrupting or existing enterprises that might feel threatened by a Food Hub coming into existence.

One might argue that the absence of retailers selling local organic produce is an indicator that there is not a strong market for this type of food, that the demographic of Lincoln is not optimal for an organic food business, and that it doesn't make much commercial sense to establish such an enterprise there. Well, these things are probably true, but that isn't a reason not to do it. In fact, I would argue that this is very much a reason for establishing a Food Hub in the area. The objectives of a Food Hub project go way beyond commercial success; it should be there to help local food enterprises to thrive. For this to happen the Food Hub really needs to be there to stimulate the local market.

The final observation I would like to make in terms of my assessment



The Local Food Ecosystem

of Lincoln's prospective Local Food Ecosystem is that I was pleased to see good levels of buy-in from some of Lincoln's well-established commercial institutions, namely Stokes Coffee Roasters and Doddington Hall. Having these two highly respected organisations involved will be an enormous boost to any prospective Food Hub project.

Recommended Next Steps

There should definitely be some follow-up action to try and maintain the momentum generated in the Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem workshop. My suggestion is to try and capture the spirit in the room when Martin asked who wanted to be a part of such a project on paper. This could maybe take the form of a 'memorandum of understanding' which broadly outlines the project (this may need to happen in consultation with the enterprises who would form the Local Food Ecosystem, and I am happy to help with this as well) which the stakeholders can then sign in order to say that in principle they are supportive of the project and will participate in it should it come into being.

This document will be a very useful aid to show to any organisations who are going to be approached when resources for the project are being sought. I would suggest that twenty signatories would be needed to demonstrate a good foundation for a Local Food Ecosystem; around 10 'producers' (farmers, market gardeners, food processing businesses) and 10 'buyers' (shops, cafes, restaurants etc.).

I would also recommend trying to think of a scheme that can be implemented which demonstrates the 'Local Food Ecosystem' concept in practise and can become a high-profile statement that puts the project on the map. The equivalent scheme that we operate in Cambridge is our Green Coffee Shop Scheme, and I believe that this scheme could easily translate to Lincoln. Indeed, Stokes Coffee Roasters would be an ideal business to partner with to do this.

However, I do have another idea for a mini project that would fit the bill. One person who I met at the Pathway to Local Food Ecosystem workshop whose story really inspired me was Tamsin Leakey. Tamsin was passionate about wanting to preserve a genetic strain of haricot



The Local Food Ecosystem

bean that her father had bred, and was keen to create a business around this. In particular she wanted to be able to grow these beans. In my eyes Tamsin absolutely epitomises the kind of local food entrepreneur we should all be rallying around and supporting if we want to transform our food system for the better (and there were several such individuals present in the workshop incidentally). Whenever you have someone like Tamsin who is so eager to grow food sustainably for the local market then we really must do all we can to make it possible for them to do that.

My idea was that Tamsin (and indeed some of the other growers who would be members of the Lincoln Local Food Ecosystem) would grow these beans. The beans would then be processed and served in a 'baked bean' sauce according to a recipe created by Gemma of Veg Out Catering, and packed into reusable/returnable jars. The jars are then sold through local retail outlets such as Lincoln Eco-pantry, and direct to customers who belong to the local veg box scheme, and the Food Hub can easily collect the empty jars to be put back into circulation.



Institutional Support and Resources

What is Duncan Looking for?

For projects such as this support from local authorities is essential. In fact, ideally the local authorities would not merely 'support' the project, but take ownership of the project so that it actually becomes a local authority enterprise, and the Food Hub building a local authority owned or joint-owned asset.

There are three ways in which local authorities can support the project; funding, location/premises, and policy.

Because the project is commercial in nature, it will not be eligible for charitable funding. And because the emphasis is on provision of service, social and environmental benefit rather than profitability, this makes it unattractive for commercial investment. Also, were the project to receive commercial investment this would change the objectives of the project. Therefore, local authorities are the obvious choice as provider of resources for the project.

A Food Hub project should be viewed by funders as a facility that supports multiple local food enterprises, and stimulates a vibrant local food economy that will create new business opportunities and employment. Also, this new local food economy will be managed with environmental sustainability as a core objective. For these reasons a Food Hub project is an ideal match for funding initiatives such as Shared Prosperity.

Local authorities will also have a role to play in finding an optimal location for the Food Hub building. An ideal location for a Food Hub will be as a part of a major new development project. By incorporating the Food Hub into the new development you are integrating sustainable food into the overall concept of the new community that is being created, as well as creating benefit for the city in general. A Food Hub may also satisfy section 106 requirements, as well as enhancing the overall desirability of the new development. It is also beneficial for the Food Hub building to be a new build; this way it can be specially built to be fit for purpose, and can incorporate cutting edge sustainable features such as low-energy/hydrofluorocarbon gas free cold storage, and use of bio-materials (hemp) in its construction.

It should be remembered that a Food Hub will generate rental income, and therefore a return on investment.



Institutional Support and Resources

I would also encourage local authorities to 'think big' in terms of a Food Hub project. The social and environmental issues that face our food system are critical and they are urgent, and the appropriate response should be to create something significant and transformational. A Local Food Ecosystem needs to achieve a critical mass in order to deliver the benefits that are envisioned of it. If the scale of the project is not significant, then the impact of the project will not be either.

Another thing necessary for a Local Food Ecosystem to take root within an area is for authorities to support the initiative through policy. Policies need to be in place that will encourage food buyers, both institutional and commercial, to source more food directly from local producers. Support is also needed to encourage citizens to change their food buying habits to more sustainable alternatives.

Duncan's Appraisal of the Institutional Support and Availability of Resources in Lincoln

I was very impressed by the levels of interest demonstrated by both local councils and other local institutions. Both the workshop, and the presentation that I gave were attended by representatives of City of Lincoln Council and Lincolnshire County Council. And the representatives of these demonstrated interest in the concept.

On my second visit to Lincoln I attended a meeting with Kate Bell of City of Lincoln Council and Laura Stratford of Lincolnshire Food Partnership. In this meeting Lincolnshire Food Partnership were encouraged by City of Lincoln Council to submit a funding bid for the Shared Prosperity fund. This is a very encouraging signal.

I understand that there are some significant developments planned for the west of the city, which could be a suitable site for a Food Hub project.

Next Steps

Without question Lincolnshire Food Partnership should follow up on City of Lincoln's invitation to submit an application for funding to the shared prosperity fund. In the short term the purpose of this funding



Institutional Support and Resources

Continued... would be to establish a pilot enterprise that would eventually be the anchor organisation in the Food Hub building.

I would like City of Lincoln Council to consider taking on the Food Hub building project as their own, creating an asset that would not only bring enormous benefit to the city of Lincoln, but should also pay for itself and bring a return on investment.

It would also be good if City of Lincoln Council could speak to the developers who are undertaking the development to the west of the city and make it clear that they would like to see a Food Hub incorporated into the vision for the area. Providing that is indeed what they would like of course.



Anchor Organisation

What is Duncan Looking For?

The Anchor Organisation is the entity that would undertake the actual daily operations of the Food Hub. In other words, this is the organisation that would manage the trading platform, run the vehicles that distribute the food, perform the administrative tasks, employ people, and everything else involved with the running of the Food Hub. Ideally this would also be the organisation that drives the Food Hub project during its formative process, by undertaking to build the Local Food Ecosystem membership, and the recipient of project funding.

The anchor organisation could either be an 'already existing' enterprise, or a new organisation which is created especially for the purpose. There are pros and cons to each approach.

The types of 'already existing' enterprises that would make good anchor organisations would be ones that already operate in the sustainable food sector, such as a local organic box scheme, food hub (i.e. shopfront on the Open Food Network), or a food related social enterprise. The benefits of having an already established enterprise as the anchor organisation are that they will already have trading connections with many of the local enterprises who would become members of the local food ecosystem, have space and equipment that could be used for Food Hub operations, and people who are experienced at working with local food. If such an enterprise does exist in the area then it would be the obvious choice for becoming the anchor organisation, and should certainly be given first refusal of that role, as starting a new enterprise that would compete with an existing one could be counter-productive in terms of the objectives of the project.

The potential disadvantages of having an 'already existing' enterprise as the anchor organisation are that it could be difficult to re-structure the business and ownership model to make it compatible with the needs of the Food Hub, and if there is more than one candidate for the role this could also cause disruption.

Of course, there could well be a situation where there is a very well established 'already existing' enterprise, that would be an obvious choice for becoming the anchor organisation, but does not want to take on that role, and is resistant to the idea of a Food Hub operating in the area. This would be something of a red flag in



Anchor Organisation

in terms of establishing a Food Hub.

If there is no obvious choice of existing enterprise to take on the role of anchor organisation then creating a new enterprise is a perfectly acceptable alternative. In some ways this situation is advantageous, as the new enterprise can be purposely designed to suit the Food Hub project from the ground up. However, it can also be hard, and costly, to build a new enterprise from scratch.

Duncan's Appraisal of the Anchor Organisation in Lincoln

To the best of my knowledge there is not an enterprise in Lincoln or North Lincolnshire that would be an obvious choice for becoming the anchor organisation for a Food Hub project.

The one exception to this would be Eden Farms, who are based in Spilsby. They are around 30 miles away from Lincoln, which in my opinion is too far from Lincoln to be a location for the Food Hub. Although I need to do more research about Eden Farms, they appear to be a well established organic farm, farmer's market and box scheme enterprise of the type that I respect enormously. They are precisely the type of enterprise that we want to be thriving, and we want to see more of. Regardless of whether Eden Farms has potential for being the anchor organisation for the Food Hub, they should certainly be viewed as an important member of the Local Food Ecosystem that the Food Hub should seek to support.

I have been incredibly impressed by Martin of Middle World Farms. He certainly has the drive and initiative needed for a project such as this, and indeed has already put some work and effort into starting an OFN shop front. The main reason why I would say that Martin and Middle World Farms are not suitable candidates for being the anchor organisation is that they are far too valuable a resource in terms of being a primary producer. In other words, Martin is a skilled and knowledgeable grower, and we want him to be putting his time and effort into growing and building Middle World Farms. People with Martin's skills are few and far between. Apparently Middle World Farms has access to additional land. I would say that a good objective of Lincolnshire Food Partnership would be help Middle World Farms expand their holding, and maybe create some apprenticeship positions so that budding, would be producers can work with Martin and learn from him.



Anchor Organisation

In Lincoln's case I think that starting a new enterprise from scratch is probably going to be the route that needs to be taken with regards to the anchor organisation.

Next Steps

One of the first things on the to do list should be to speak to Eden Farms. It would be good to find out the extent to which Lincoln features in their business model, and also their future and succession plans.

The fact that there is not already an obvious anchor organisation operating in Lincoln is perhaps an indicator that Lincoln is a difficult area in which to establish such a business. This is not a reason not to proceed with a Food Hub project, indeed I would say it is more of a reason to start a Food Hub, as the independent food enterprises that do exist in an around Lincoln at present will need all the support they can get. What this does mean is that it will hard to establish an anchor organisation type enterprise in Lincoln without a source of start-up funding. So another next step is to ascertain what funding could be available for such a project.

The anchor organisation needs to precede the main Food Hub project, as the Food Hub building project would need proof of concept before work commences, and will also need an established organisation ready to move into it once complete.

The other next steps, therefore, are to research and plan for a start-up enterprise which would act as a pilot for the main Food Hub project. If necessary I can help with the writing of a business plan, and costings. Two of the key ingredients for the pilot will be a premises for it to operate from, and the people who will manage and run it.



Conclusion

SWAT Analysis

Strengths

The idea of a Local Food Ecosystem has gained traction from multiple different stakeholders, including local council, the university, and well-established/influential institutes such as Stokes and Doddington Hall.

The existing network of local food enterprises is a strength, not least in terms of their attitude towards working in unity with one another.

Lincolnshire Food Partnership includes some excellent people who are forward-thinking and who get things done.

Weaknesses

The lack of any outlets to buy locally grown organic produce at present suggests that Lincoln is a challenging city in which to establish a successful sustainable food enterprise.

As things stand there are no resources or assets with which to start the project.

Opportunities

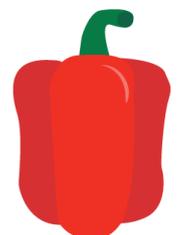
Located, as it is, surrounded by very productive land, Lincoln has the potential to be the epicentre of a truly astounding Local Food Ecosystem. If done well Lincoln could become an exemplar of local, sustainable food systems that other UK cities would look towards for inspiration, raising the whole status of the city.

The market for sustainable food is very underserved in Lincoln at present.

Sustainable food is still an emerging market. As the government continues to move towards net-zero targets, and the climate crisis deepens, then the market for locally and sustainably produced food is going to snowball.

Threats

As amazing as the existing local food enterprises were, I got the impression that many of them were either recently established, or operating on a small (i.e. sole-trader) scale. There is nothing wrong with either of these things of course, and indeed enterprises like this are precisely what the Food Hub should be there to support. However, they all were all struggling financially, and my fear is that some will not weather the tough economic situation the country is currently facing.



Conclusion

Conclusion

If I'm honest, the proposition of a Local Food Ecosystem project in Lincoln excites me very much. Because there is no pre-existing anchor organisation, or much in the way of an established local food supply-chain, Lincoln is something of a 'blank canvas' with which to create a visionary Local Food Ecosystem without compromise. This, combined with Lincoln's enviable ability to draw upon the abundant food production that is taking place on its doorstep, represents an almost irresistible opportunity to create a showpiece local food project that would not only bring social and environmental benefit to the people and food businesses of Lincoln, but also be an exemplar for other cities to aspire to.

As far as I could tell the idea for a Food Hub project in Lincoln is something that many key stakeholders want, would be supportive of, and would participate in. It appears to be something that the council also wants, and would be prepared to support with resources.

I'm not saying that the project would not be without its challenges, not least because the market for sustainable food does not appear to be strong in Lincoln. But overall my assessment of Lincoln as a place for a Local Food Ecosystem is very positive and would love to see Lincoln proceed with a Food Hub project.

