



Northumberland

County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 11th February 2025

Northumberland Food Strategy: Developing Northumberland's Food System

Report of Councillor(s) Cllr Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Supporting Business and Opportunities and Cllr Veronica Jones, Cabinet Member for Tackling Inequalities.

Responsible Officer(s): Simon Neilson, Executive Director of Place and Regeneration and Gill O'Neill, Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

- **Driving Economic Growth** – Enabling the development of Northumberland's food system will drive growth of the sector and associated sectors such as tourism. This will support the Council in delivering its corporate priority of driving economic growth.
- **Tackling Inequalities** – Enabling the development of the food system at the community level and supporting local independent businesses from farmers or fishers, local producers, shops, cafes and restaurants, we can tackle social inequalities and create a stronger, cohesive culture around food in Northumberland
- **Achieving Value for Money** – enabling the growth of economic sectors and promoting access to nutritious food will support wider economic and social outcomes for residents.

2. Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to agree the strategic objectives and high level delivery priorities to support the development of Northumberland's food system and agree early interventions.

3. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 1) Endorse the Northumberland Food Strategy objectives and high-level delivery priorities as a framework for better integrating and realising the value of the county's food system;
- 2) Agree to collaborate with Food and Drink North East to develop a Northumberland food brand and standard to promote Northumberland's food story by summer 2025. This will support growth of the food and drink sector and the visitor economy and enable closer supply chain links;

- 3) Agree to the creation of a task and finish internal officer working group to define, by autumn 2025, the subsequent delivery phases and proposed partnership governance within the context of the emerging regional food infrastructure and local partnership arrangements.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

October 2024

5. Background

- 5.1 In February 2023, Cabinet considered the Council's response to the recommendations of the independent Future of Farming in Northumberland Inquiry, led by Dr Sally Shortall. The purpose of the Inquiry was to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the range of farmers and landowners in Northumberland in moving from the current regime of subsidy funding to the new benefits system for environmental land management.
- 5.2 One of the key themes from the Inquiry explored how best to maximise the benefits from locally produced food. The relevant section from the Inquiry report is reproduced at Appendix 1. In response, Cabinet agreed to commission a Northumberland Food Strategy in dialogue with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) – an independent national charity set up to help shape the future of food and farming, land use and the countryside.
- 5.3 Following further discussions with the FFCC, two complementary pieces of work were commissioned, in June 2023 with support from the North East Combined Authority, as follows:
 - the facilitation of a consultation with local residents as part of a wider national process called the 'food conversation' being coordinated by the FFCC
 - the preparation, by Fork Consulting, of a comprehensive food strategy and action plan for the county
- 5.4 Residents involved in the food conversation consultation spent over twenty hours together over the course of four online workshops and two in-person sessions. They heard from specialist presenters about food system challenges and potential solutions. These were then discussed and reflected on before each location produced their view of what should change, how and who is responsible for that change. It directly asked participants what they truly want from food, fostering in-depth discussions and actionable insights.
- 5.5 The Northumberland food conversation was undertaken in Spring 2024 focused on four key themes, as follows:
 - Justice and power
 - Food, farming and land use including climate, nature and biodiversity
 - Food environments, child nutrition and public procurement
 - Food system policy making and governance.The key findings from this process are summarised at Appendix 2.

6. Northumberland Food Strategy

- 6.1 Northumberland's food system is extensive, not just in geography but in depth and breadth; an abundance of farmers, fishers and food producers producing some of the best quality food in the country, through to both rural and urban consumers and an abundance of visitors from across the world. The headline analysis of the food system in Northumberland is outlined in the Northumberland Food strategy at Appendix 3
- 6.2 The food sector contributes significantly to our economy. Looking at the STEAM tourism economic impact modelling, the food and drink sector in 2023 accounted for £452m in expenditure, representing 48.2% of total visitor spend in Northumberland. This is an 8% growth in value and growth in percentage share from 35.8% of all spend from 2022 data. Over the ten-year period from 2013 there has been growth of 73.2% in the economic impact of food and drink employment, in line with the total growth of the Northumberland visitor economy growth of 73.4%.
- 6.3 In 2023, food and drink supported 4,895 jobs, up 2.2% on 2022 figure of 4,789. Over the ten-year period from 2013 there has been growth of 22.7% in food and drink employment, the visitor economy's fastest employment growth sector with around 1,000 new roles created, up from 3,989 roles in 2013. Looking at these stats it is clear that the food and drink sector is growing and represents a potential for further growth and integration across the food system.
- 6.4 In terms of the challenges, farming, fishing and food production has been extractive and unsustainable for some time. Climate change has the potential to further compound this, whilst global events such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid pandemic have shown the need to be more self-sufficient and resilient. It also has to be recognised that, currently, levels of diet-related ill health and food poverty coupled with social inequalities are worsening and risk being unable to right themselves without significant hardship.
- 6.5 Equally, however, of all the foods we grow, rear, catch and produce, there are opportunities. From pop-up street food stalls, freshly prepared, ready-to-eat shellfish to heritage wheat - there is an abundance of food to get excited about and champion. There are exceptional artisan bakers, cheesemakers, brewers, distillers and retailers to name a few; each could sell more locally or directly which could generate significant economic, environmental, health and social outcomes.
- 6.6 The development of the Northumberland Food Strategy looked at the entire food chain from field to fork. As such, it considered the food system from soil, nature and food production to consumption and beyond taking in aspects such as waste and recycling. Within that, it also considered what it would take to future-proof the food system for Northumberland, considering economic, environmental, health and social outcomes that would ultimately make the food system more equitable. Thus, tackling some of Northumberland's biggest issues such as socio-economic inequalities, diet-related ill-health, climate change and nature restoration alongside the growth of the sector.
- 6.7 The purpose of the Northumberland Food Strategy is threefold:
- To provide a framework for decision-making, investment and governance that bolsters food security in Northumberland;
 - To improve local prosperity and health whilst reducing inequalities and climate impact; and
 - To maximise the benefits of locally produced food

Vision and Strategic Objectives

6.8 The vision is for Northumberland to have a strong food culture that balances the way it produces and consumes food both now and, in the future, so that its people, businesses and nature thrive.

6.9 This is underpinned by the following strategic objectives:

- **Building a food secure future** - Food is a fundamental part of life in Northumberland but without a strong universal culture it will not thrive. Much of the control of our food system is beyond our control, dictated by global markets and large corporations. To have a more resilient and robust food system that works for everyone in the county, we must develop and diversify what we do and how we work. To do this we need to maximise all our assets both people and place and develop co-benefits to cement a food system fit for the future. This means aiming to reduce food poverty, diet-related ill-health, economic inequalities, food waste and carbon emissions; and ensure our nature and biodiversity thrives.
- **Fostering healthier, more sustainable food production and consumption** – To ensure our nature and people thrive, we need to use more regenerative and less extractive ways of growing, rearing, processing, cooking, and eating food. Focusing on the food that the public sector procures has the potential to deliver meaningful impact – reaching the producers and consumers simultaneously. To do this more equitably we have to be efficient in how we use resources, reducing waste and collaborating more effectively.
- **Establish Northumberland as an agri-aqua-food destination** – Northumberland has a richness in the food that is produced here, but it is often undersold. Our goal is to create an enhanced value proposition for products from farming, fishing and secondary food production. Food has the power to drive economic growth through growth of the sector, tourism and regeneration. We need to communicate the story of our food effectively – the quality and sustainable methods of production that make it special. By increasing the value perception of our food, we also aim to raise the bar in what it means to be employed in the sector. We will use this to help build a food culture through the people who work in the sector, their families and communities forming a sense of identity.
- **Enhancing local food economies** – Northumberland currently sells a significant amount of produce out of the county. We need to grow the number and types of enterprise and businesses so that more of that added value is retained within our boundaries. By utilising more direct selling and short supply chains, we can grow the sector and retain the value within our communities.
- **Enable communities and businesses to take action** – We want to increase self-sufficiency of communities and the businesses that serve them. We want to increase local connections, pleasure, and spend on local food. To do this we need to increase skills through education, and peer support. Good food has the power to heal; by increasing the pathways and provision of space to grow food we aim to build a food social movement. Some aspects of the food system are not possible to control so we need to work differently whilst ensuring that activity

is viable. Growing more food at community level and supporting local independent businesses from farmers or fishers, local producers, shops, cafes and restaurants, we can tackle social inequalities and create a stronger, cohesive culture around food in Northumberland.

6.10 The development of the local food system in Northumberland also aligns with environmental and rural growth priorities as outlined in the North East Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Growth Investment Plan. Our natural assets have a big role to play in decarbonising Northumberland and the North East and supporting the transition to net zero. There is huge potential to decarbonise our agricultural, agrifood, forestry and fisheries sectors and provide secure local food supplies.

7. Delivery Approach

7.1 To ensure Northumberland has a strong food culture that balances the way it produces and consumes food both now and, in the future, so that its people, businesses and nature thrive, there is a need to design and employ several mechanisms for change. The food system is complex; it, therefore, needs different types of action to bring about change; some deep-rooted, some tried and tested, some innovative and a significant amount of amplification, acceleration and connection of the good work already happening. This is a journey, not an endpoint, and therefore, incremental growth is preferential, using strategic investment where necessary, but largely relying on shifting how we work so that it is sustainable in design. As a local authority, Northumberland County Council has a convening role which can focus on a whole food system partnership approach, strategy integration across economy, environment and health, knowledge sharing and collaboration.

7.2 The following priorities for delivery based on the objectives above and developed through consultation with stakeholders include:

- Four thematic programmes focused on areas of opportunity within Northumberland to improve the local food system:
 - Mainstreaming regenerative farming
 - Building out our food story
 - Building household food security
 - Delivering healthier, more sustainable public sector catering and procurement
- Place-Based Anchor Projects focused on showcasing specific approaches within different localities to harness the potential value of food. Building on existing assets placed based approaches could be strengthened in Hexham, Ashington and Blyth initially.
- An Innovation Challenge Programme aimed at stimulating new ways of working to better integrate food production, nature recovery, and tourism.

Building Northumberland's Food Story

- 7.3 The immediate priority and first action is to develop a strong Northumberland food story building on existing assets in order to support the growth of the sector, help connect the County's food system and help tackle inequalities.
- 7.4 Northumberland's food system is extensive, not just in geography but in depth and breadth; an abundance of farmers, fishers and food producers producing some of the best quality food in the country, through to both rural and urban consumers and an abundance of visitors from across the world.
- 7.5 The County's food story is ever-evolving. Northumberland and the wider North East region are positioned as a food tourism destination, with visitors drawn to local produce and acclaimed restaurants. The future of Northumberland's food system is deeply tied to maintaining sustainable practices, valuing local products, and honouring the culinary traditions that have shaped its story for centuries. It is not just about sustenance, but also about a sense of place—an enduring connection to the land, the sea, and community.
- 7.6 The Produced in Northumberland accreditation scheme is an initiative designed to support and promote local businesses and producers within Northumberland which was originally developed to endorse beef produced in the county. The scheme was expanded over time to recognise other products and the hospitality sector using foods produced in the county. It aims to ensure that products labelled as "local" are genuinely made, grown, or sourced within the county, fostering trust among consumers and enhancing the visibility of Northumberland's high-quality goods. The scheme preserves and celebrates Northumberland's rich heritage and diverse production capabilities.
- 7.7 As suggested through the development of the Northumberland Food Strategy, the development of the overarching food story and associated food brand for Northumberland can significantly enhance the impact and value of the Produced in Northumberland scheme by creating a cohesive narrative that connects the county's unique offerings. Developing an overarching Northumberland food brand that speaks to quality as well as being produced in the county can help promote Northumberland's food story and amplify the development of the food sector in the county, enable the integration of localised supply chains and promote the County as a food destination.
- 7.8 A compelling Northumberland food story could have the following impact:
- **Strengthened Identity and Awareness** – a unified food story would showcase Northumberland's rich agricultural heritage, culinary traditions, and local products in a compelling and cohesive way which in turn would make it easier for consumers to identify and trust products associated with Northumberland. It would also help differentiate Northumberland's produce from competitors, emphasising its unique qualities (e.g., coastal seafood, high-quality meats, artisanal products).
 - **Increased Consumer Engagement** - A well-crafted food story could resonate emotionally with consumers, enhancing their loyalty to local products; visitors would be more likely to explore Northumberland as a food destination if they associate it with a distinctive culinary experience; and the story telling would connect food with the county's history, traditions, and landscapes, deepening its appeal.

- **Boosting Business Opportunities** – a recognisable food brand would encourage partnerships among local producers, restaurants, and retailers, creating a stronger local supply chain in addition to opening doors to new markets, both nationally and internationally. A strong food brand provides a platform for hosting food festivals, tastings, and promotional campaigns that highlight Northumberland's products and connect residents and visitors with local produce.
- **Support Sustainability** - Highlighting local will encourage consumers to choose locally sourced products, reducing food miles and a compelling food story can raise awareness of sustainable practices within the county, from organic farming to eco-friendly seafood harvesting whilst also promoting food waste reduction.

7.9 It is proposed that the Council collaborate with and Food and Drink North East (FADNE) as the region's sector representative body to consult with Northumberland businesses and stakeholders to develop a value added proposition, building on the existing Produced in Northumberland scheme, and shape an overarching Northumberland food brand to build and promote Northumberland's food story. Northumberland County Council and FADNE will work together to improve the identity of food and drink in the county, to enable businesses within the sector to grow and to improve the story telling of Northumberland's offer.

7.10 A reinvigorated brand which encompasses compelling story telling of the food sector in Northumberland will be launched by Summer 2025 and will contribute to the creation of a vibrant, integrated and supported sector within Northumberland and the region, enabling easier connections, supporting local and regional identity and enabling sector growth, whilst potentially providing a model for roll out throughout the wider North East region. The approach will aim to create a set of values and identifiers that underpin the entire supply chain in the county, providing a coordinate approach that can represent a range of factors – such as locality, provenance, true to origin quality, and full integration into a local supply chain.

Tackling Inequalities

7.11 Northumberland's food story and brand can become an enabler not only for economic growth but also for fostering social equity, improving health outcomes, and creating opportunities for all members of the community. A strong food story can promote access to healthy, affordable food and support awareness raising regarding nutritious, locally grown food, encouraging healthier eating habits in communities that might lack access to fresh produce.

7.12 The Food Strategy recognises a need to reduce food poverty and tackle inequalities. It suggests progressing food banks to community food buying groups, building food production and catering skills, and opportunities to reduce costs of locally produced food. The Northumberland Hardship and Poverty Action Plan provides a platform to work with the Northumberland Nourish Food Network, foodbanks, and other food provision to ensure support is sustained while demand remains high, and that insights from this work contribute to future planning for more resilient approaches to food insecurity.

7.13 The Food Strategy also identified that public sector catering, and procurement could have more aspirational standards for local, ethical and sustainable food for children across the whole school day, including breakfast, lunch and after school clubs. The Northumberland Healthy Weight Declaration includes a pledge to review contracts and provision at public events, in all public buildings, facilities and providers to make healthier foods and drinks more available, convenient and affordable and limit access to high calorie, low nutrient foods and drinks (this should be applied to public institutions scrutiny given to any new contracts for food drink provision, where possible).

8. Next steps

8.1 Since May 2024, the devolution arrangements for the region have been driven by the new North East Combined Authority (NECA) which covers the geography of seven local authorities – Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Sunderland. In the delivery of a Northumberland Food Strategy and Action Plan the Council will demonstrate how it contributes to progressively building a region-wide approach to the challenges and opportunities associated with the North East food system.

8.2 There is already scope to achieve this with the importance of food to promoting economic growth, addressing inequality and meeting environmental objectives already recognised within the emerging regional infrastructure, as follows:

- at its Cabinet meeting in November 2024, NECA approved the North East Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Growth Investment Plan which identifies “Food Security and Decarbonisation” and “Rural and Coastal Business Growth” as two of its investment priorities
- the North East Deeper Devolution Deal published as part of the Budget in May 2023 includes a commitment to create a regional food covenant or charter to help boost local production and help create a prosperous agri-food sector
- the Association of Directors of Public Health North East are collaborating with Sustain (the alliance for better food and farming) through a systematic mapping and benchmarking exercise to progressively develop a shared Good Food Framework for the North East

8.3 The delivery of the Northumberland Food Strategy and Action Plan will reflect the opportunity to shape and contribute to these regional policy drivers outlined above. There is much good work taking place across Northumberland, which can be amplified and extended by better coordination and connection locally and regionally. Beyond local delivery and facilitation roles, there is the need to advocate on behalf of stakeholders in Northumberland and the region. Working with the North East Combined Authority and others in the region there is potential to accelerate change through unlocking investment, co-designing policy and sharing best practices.

8.4 Establishing a Northumberland Food Partnership could provide the mechanism for this coordination and influencing role. Consisting of a balanced membership from across the food system to represent the various interests, it would help in generating a positive dynamic – for example, in ensuring that supply and demand are in step; policy and business practices are aligned; and conflicts between economic, health, and environmental factors are resolved.

- 8.5 It is proposed that a task and finish internal officer working group is established to maximise the benefits of early activity outlined in section 7, define the subsequent delivery phases aligned with regional policy drivers, and consider the appropriate partnership governance including the role of existing partnerships such as the Healthy Weight Alliance. In line with the food strategy objectives outlined in this report and building on the action plan developed to date in consultation with stakeholders, it is proposed that an update is considered by Cabinet by Autumn 2025.

9. Implications

Policy	The farming sector is important to the local economy of the county with the sustainability of its future fundamental to the delivery of the Northumberland Economic Strategy, the Northumberland Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the North East Environmental Stewardship, Coast, and Rural Growth Investment Plan
Finance and value for money	The activity outlined in this report will be met through existing resources.
Legal	No implications identified
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	N/A
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	Not required
Risk assessment	Full risk assessment will be undertaken as part of delivery.
Crime and disorder	None identified
Customer considerations	This report is based on a "food conversation" process with local residents and customer considerations will form a key part of delivery.
Carbon reduction	The food system connects to many different policies and strategies. To transform the food system so it is more equitable, healthy and sustainable requires direct integration with local

	strategies that pertain to the economy (investment, regeneration, work and skills, tourism, planning), environment (carbon reduction, land use, nature recovery) and health (healthy weight, equality). Regenerative Agriculture has a key role to play in creating a more sustainable food system:
Health and wellbeing	The Food Strategy and Action Plan will support the health and wellbeing of residents with specific recommendations relation to the Healthy Weight Alliance and the Northumberland Hardship and Poverty Action Plan . Tackling inequalities in health being a main outcome of this work
Wards	(All Wards);

10. Background papers

[Northumberland Healthy Weight Declaration](#), report to the Council's Health and Well Being Board, October 2022

Cabinet Report, February 2023, Council response to the report of the independent future of framing in Northumberland Inquiry

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s13318/11%20Future%20of%20Farming%20Inquiry.pdf>

11. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable

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Appendix 1: Extract from the independent Future of Farming in Northumberland Inquiry report relating to maximising the benefits from locally produced food

Food is the UK's largest manufacturing sector, contributing £120bn to the economy and employing four million people. Crucially there are food production businesses right across the UK, often providing jobs in less prosperous areas, including rural and coastal communities such as Northumberland.

Yet, the Inquiry heard that there is a strong sense across the farming sector in Northumberland that the relative importance of food production has diminished in favour of the environment. However, local produce can contribute to carbon reduction, healthy eating, visitor spend and food security.

There is considerable evidence of the scope to further develop local markets for local food and drink. Northumberland-based food producers and distilleries would like their products to be universally sold in local shops and supermarkets.

There are also further opportunities to shorten the food chain and develop the Northumberland tourism industry to promote itself as purveyors of food of local provenance. Local restaurants and hotels could also be incentivised to source food produced in the county.

The Inquiry recognised that the "Produced in Northumberland" brand provides an excellent foundation for this approach but considered that more could be done to "mainstream" the sale of local produce. Within this context, it was suggested that the North Eastern Co-operative Society might be interested in developing a more local food purchasing strategy consistent with similar chains on the continent, potentially through a pilot located in a deprived community in the first instance.

Equally, as highlighted in the recently published Government Food Strategy, the Inquiry considered that more could be done to better connect local food production to supporting the endemic challenges associated with reducing diet-related ill health and inequality. Examples cited to the Inquiry included:

- Rolling out across the public sector (including schools) more 'aspirational' standards for local, ethical and sustainable food procurement.
- Optimising the access to fresh food for school breakfast and after school clubs.
- Ensuring all secondary school pupils leave school with "survival cookery" skills to support their transition into work, training or further/higher education.
- Supplying food banks (while acknowledging that the wider aim is to remove the need for food banks to exist) with locally grown produce including via community allotments.
- Continuing to educate and innovate to minimise food waste and food packaging, both within households and across the food industry.

The Inquiry recommends that the County Council coordinates the development and delivery of a Northumberland Food Strategy; that will build on the existing "Produced in Northumberland" brand, and champion the value of local produce to further economic growth and reducing ill-health and inequality.

Appendix 2: Extract from the Northumberland Food Strategy detailing the Key Findings from the Northumberland “Food Conversation”

The Food Conversation, launched by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) in June 2023, seeks practical and radical solutions to the climate, nature, health, and economic crises. Engaging citizens through inclusive, evidence-based workshops and storytelling, the initiative explores how to improve the current food system.

Unlike assumptions about public preferences, The Food Conversation directly asks participants what they truly want from food, fostering in-depth discussions and actionable insights. Northumberland County Council provided funding for The Food Conversation in the county in spring 2024, highlighting local commitment to addressing food-related challenges.

Some of the key findings are as follows:

- **Systemic Change for Fairness and Sustainability:** Participants in Northumberland advocate for a fundamental shift in the food system, prioritising fairness, health, sustainability, and affordability. They call for policies that support healthier and more sustainable diets, reconnect people with the origins of their food, and rebalance priorities towards citizens, farmers, and the environment over large corporations. Improved
- **Standards and Education:** There is a strong demand for enhanced institutional food standards, better education and awareness about the food system in schools, and measures to reduce Ultra Processed Foods. Participants also highlighted the need for support for farmers to adopt more sustainable practices, reduce food waste, promote local food provision, and improve food access through supportive policies.
- **Addressing Key Concerns and Challenges:** Key concerns include the health impacts of ultra-processed foods, the high cost of nutritious food compared to processed alternatives, and the effects of the food system on the environment and animal welfare. Participants emphasised the need for strong leadership, local food systems, equitable practices, and regulation and funding to ensure a fair distribution of risks and rewards and to promote the restoration of nature and biodiversity.

Some of these findings can be addressed locally, while others can be advocated for nationally. At a local level, policy can be developed to deliver many of these actions. This includes procurement and food standards, enhancing education through work with schools, and supporting and connecting farmers to sources of expertise. Additional actions involve funding and peer mentoring, as well as significant facilitation and coordination in developing more localised, short supply chains. Enhancing the use of technology for food sharing, developing food growing skills, and creating space for communities to grow their own food are also important local initiatives.

Nationally it is possible to influence decision-making which will impact locally. This includes responding to consultations on key policy areas such as front-of-pack food labelling, farming subsidies and land use frameworks. This also includes national public sector food procurement policy and establishing metrics that relate to reporting of food businesses' environmental, social, health, and governance performance, which enable consumers to make educated choices.

These are all elements that could be coordinated through appropriate local governance.