

2024-27

Northumberland Food Strategy

Prepared for:

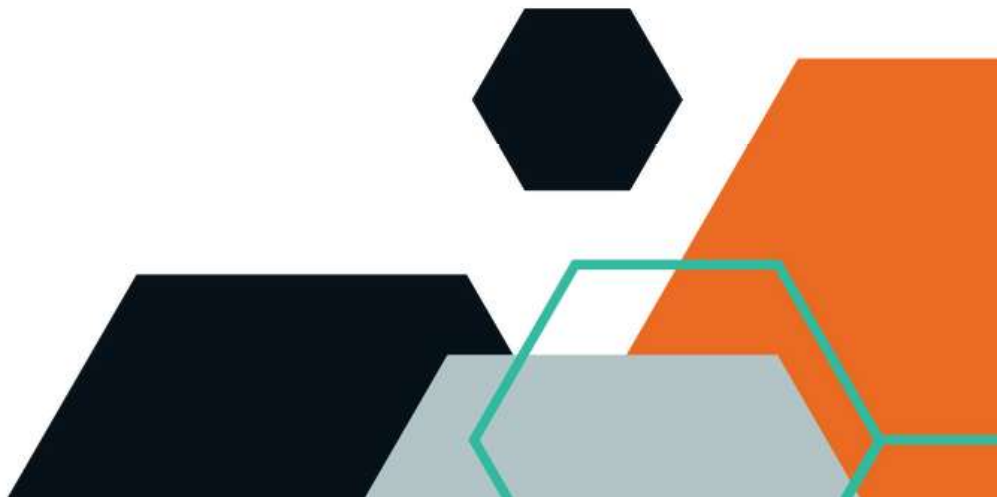


Prepared by:

Fork



1: Introduction



1 Introduction

Fork Consulting has been commissioned by the North of Tyne Combined Authority on behalf of Northumberland City Council to produce the Northumberland Food Strategy and action plan.

The purpose of this work is to create a comprehensive strategy that addresses the vision of Northumberland becoming the UK's leader in demonstrating clean, inclusive growth within a rural context by 2027. The strategy will encompass the entire food chain, from production to consumption, and will involve various stakeholders including producers, processors, retailers, and policymakers. It aims to integrate food considerations across all strategic objectives and rural growth priorities, enhance the value of local produce, reduce diet-related ill-health, tackle social inequalities, and contribute to the county's net zero ambitions. The strategy will be dynamic and responsive, aiming to develop, test, and scale novel solutions for rural growth and stewardship, and share successful models with other regions.



2: The current context and the need for change



2 The current context and the need for change

2.1 Why do we need to change our current system?

Current food production is unsustainable. This is leading to record losses of farmers, fishers, independent retailers and caterers and the skills and expertise they have. The custodians and operators of our land and waters, town centres and communities are hollowing out.

The way we consume food is unsustainable. Rising levels of obesity and overweight¹, diabetes and cardiovascular disease in children and adults, in addition to malnourishment in older people, are directly affecting people's health and causing secondary economic waves. The nutritional quality of the food we produce along the 'value chain' is worsening², reducing the value of food to us as humans but not providing financial benefit locally either. People want cheap food but cheap food ports problems elsewhere³.

Approximately a third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions are linked to agri-food⁴. Wider global issues are also disrupting our food supply and long-term security through conflict, drought, and migration. In the longer term, this will impact availability and create price volatility of foods that we have come to rely on⁵.

The current food system is overly commoditised, extractive, and unsustainable. It lacks resilience and the focus to deliver equitably for its stakeholders from farm to fork.

We need to grow and evolve our food production, bring food consumption in step with this, maximising the effective use of our resources and reducing the systemic inequalities that have arisen. Much is happening across the UK and abroad, but there is a lot of noise. There are ways to work with the current food system, but also diversification and modifications that can be employed to strengthen the socio-economic return to our communities and build a more robust and resilient system.

2.2 Shifting the way we produce and consume food has the potential to deliver significant wider benefits:

- Livelihood resilience and growth through diversification of income streams for farmers, fishers and other food producers.
- Reduction in emissions, improvement in natural capital, biodiversity and flood alleviation.
- Reduction in inequalities through increased opportunities for enterprise, better food jobs, improved skills and education that can be used at home and work.
- Improved food security through taking a longer-term view to ensure we strategically consider food access and availability of sustainable, nutritionally appropriate food for all people regardless of income, locality, age, ethnicity and ability.
- Improved health and wellbeing through shifting diets to ones that are more food secure; shifting the protein balance - better meat but less of it, increased consumption of pulses and legumes, increasing the consumption of fibre alongside eating more fruit and veg and reduction in the consumption of Ultra Processed Food.
- Build food culture from within, promote it beyond and champion the change we want to see.

2.3 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 emphasise 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.

2.4 Northumberland Farming Enquiry

The Northumberland Food Strategy was born out of the Northumberland Future of Farming Enquiry.

The enquiry noted the need to find the right balance between sustaining food production with the national ambition for widespread nature recovery, tree and woodland planting, peat restoration as well as continued housing development. It sought to look at ways to fully unlock the role of agriculture in tackling climate change through the considerable opportunities to maximise carbon capture while progressively reducing greenhouse gas emissions from food production.

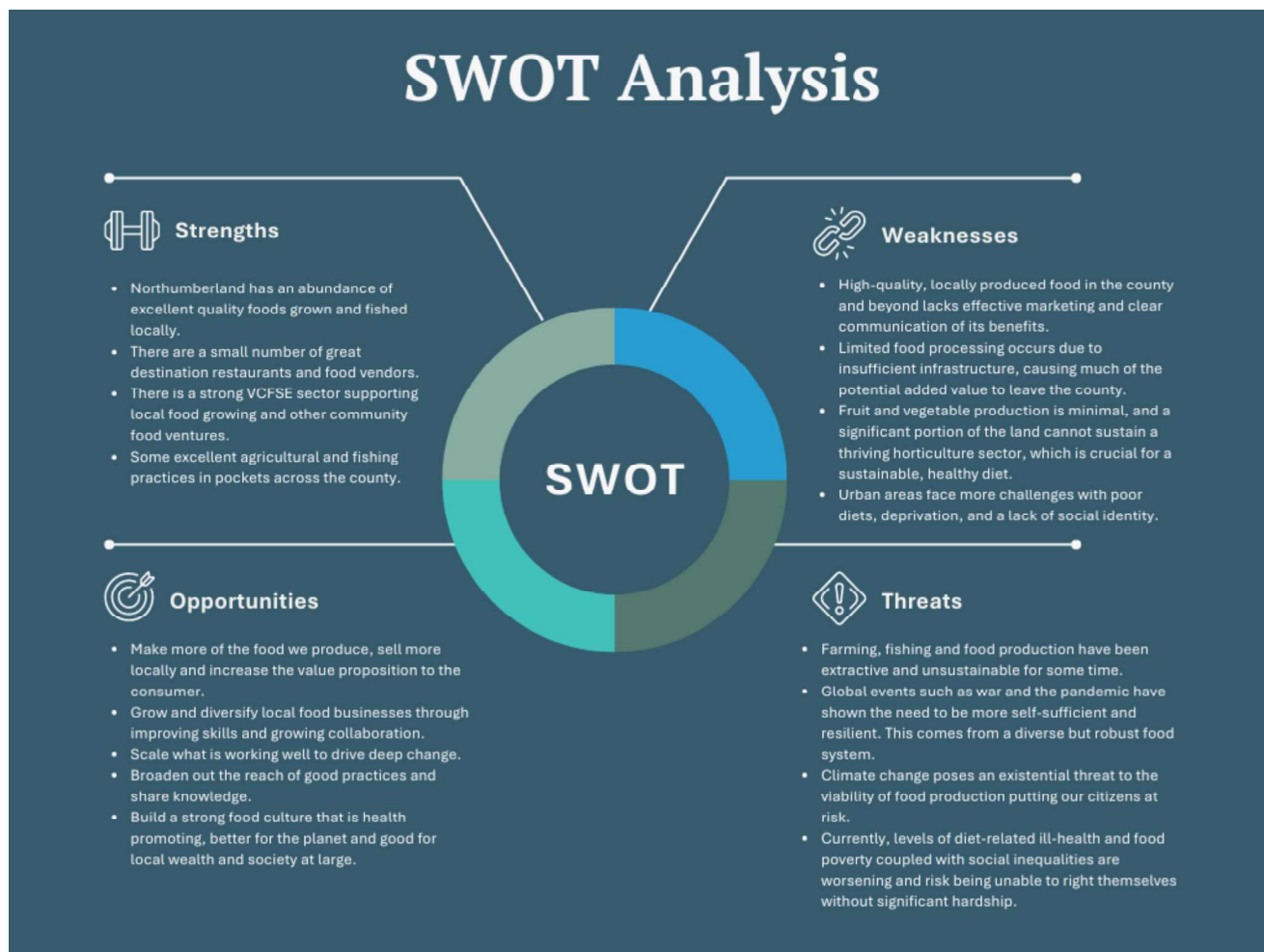
Some of the ideas coming out of the enquiry which were to be considered as part of the development of the Northumberland Food Strategy include:

1. **Promote local:** There are significant opportunities to create short supply chains and facilitate more direct selling through farmers markets, local retail, catering and hospitality. By promoting local food through initiatives like Produced in Northumberland, we can help grow local food economies. Local produce has the potential to contribute to carbon reduction, healthy eating, visitor spend, and food security.
2. **Improve public sector food standards:** Public sector catering and procurement could have more aspirational standards for local, ethical and sustainable food across the whole school day, including breakfast, lunch and after school clubs.
3. **Develop young people:** All secondary school food pupils leave school with “survival cookery” skills and are educated on how to reduce waste. We also work with farmers, fishers, processors, chefs and retailers to create campaigns and education that encourage young people into food-related professions.
4. **Improve local food processing infrastructure:** Sustain and expand the locally produced food market, consider an abattoir service, cold storage and skilled processors like butchers.

2.5 Analysis of the food system in Northumberland

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.

Some of the headline analysis of the food system in Northumberland is outlined below:



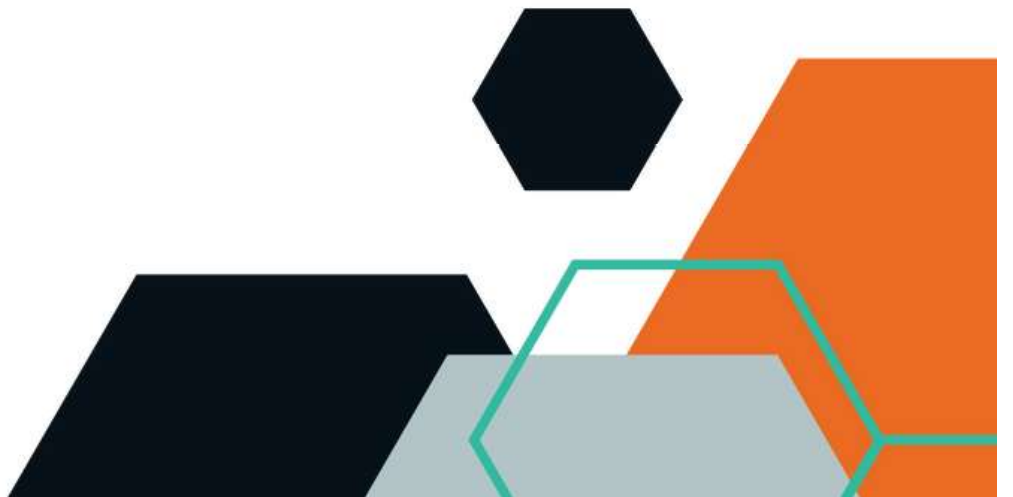
There are significant challenges and opportunities across the food system in Northumberland. The challenges often can be tackled using solutions which achieve multiple outcomes. For example, deer are culled as part of conservation efforts in the county to enhance biodiversity and allow nature to thrive. It is an essential part of rural life, bringing socio-economic benefits. It is environmentally positive meat consumption; the animal has had a healthy, nature-fulfilled life, and it is lean and rich in nutrients. But so much of the venison is not consumed locally or even nationally. At a time when public sector food is in a constant debate around red meat on menus (health, cost and environmental concerns), can this be solved by facilitating a local supply chain for venison?

Throughout this work, suppliers, gamekeepers, caterers, procurers, etc., have been engaged. By working together and trialling new routes to market, it is possible to improve the health and sustainability of the food we produce and consume across the county.

For all the foods we grow, rear, catch and produce, there are opportunities; venison is just one. 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, cheese-makers, 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.



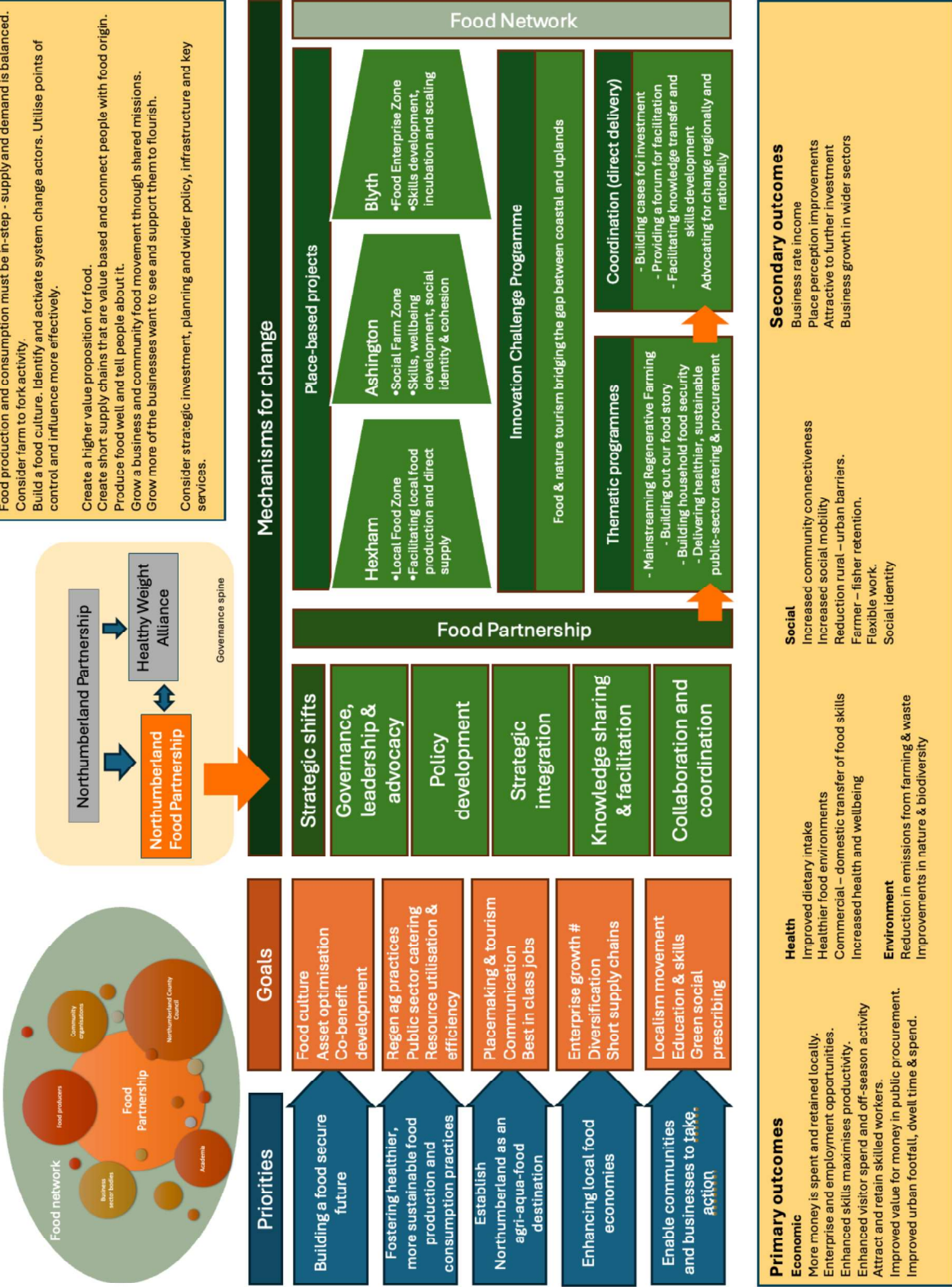
3: The way forward



3 The way forward

3.1 The Northumberland Food Strategy Blueprint

Northumberland food strategy blueprint



3.2 What is the purpose of the strategy?

- 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
- To maximise the benefits of locally produced food

3.3 What is the scope of the Northumberland Food Strategy?

Geographically, the scope of this work focuses on Northumberland County. It considers the food system from soil, nature and food production to consumption and beyond taking in aspects such as waste and recycling. It considers all stakeholders whether that is businesses, enterprises, local government, healthcare, academia, community and individuals. Within that, we have 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.

The Northumberland Food Strategy aims to focus on what can be controlled at a local level. It acknowledges that it is a journey to a more healthy and sustainable food system and that it is a complex picture that requires a pragmatic, synergistic, and collaborative approach to bringing often marginal activity into the mainstream.

3.4 What is our vision for the food system in Northumberland?

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.

3.5 What are our priorities, goals and the rationale for that focus?

Through extensive analysis and consultations, outline priorities were drafted based on existing levels of activity and interest from local partners and stakeholders. These were then road-tested in roundtable formats to ensure that they were the right areas to focus on and that they were both realistic and deliverable; goals were formed, and rationales for development were communicated, debated and refined. These are explored below:

Priorities	Goals	Rationale
<p>Building a food secure future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food culture - Asset optimisation - Co-benefit development 	<p>Food is a fundamental part of life in Northumberland, but without a strong universal food 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 Northumberland, 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. Through this goal, we aim to reduce food poverty, diet-related ill-health, economic inequalities, and emissions and ensure our nature and biodiversity thrive.</p>
<p>Fostering healthier, more sustainable food production and consumption practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regen ag practices - Public sector catering - Resource utilisation & efficiency 	<p>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 public sector food as a key element 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.</p>
<p>Establish Northumberland as an agri-aqua-food destination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Placemaking & tourism - Communication - Best in class jobs 	<p>Northumberland has a richness in its ingredients, but they are 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 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 food, we 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.</p>
<p>Enhancing local food economies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enterprise growth - Diversification - Short supply chains 	<p>Northumberland currently sells a significant amount of produce out of the county. We will be looking to grow the number and types of enterprises and businesses so that more of that added value is retained in the borough. By utilising more direct selling and short supply chains, we can retain the value within our communities, building quality, nutritious food.</p>
<p>Enable communities and businesses to take action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Localism movement - Education & skills - Green social prescribing 	<p>We want to increase the self-sufficiency of communities and the businesses that serve them. We want to increase local connections, pleasure and spend on local food in an area. 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 grow 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.</p>



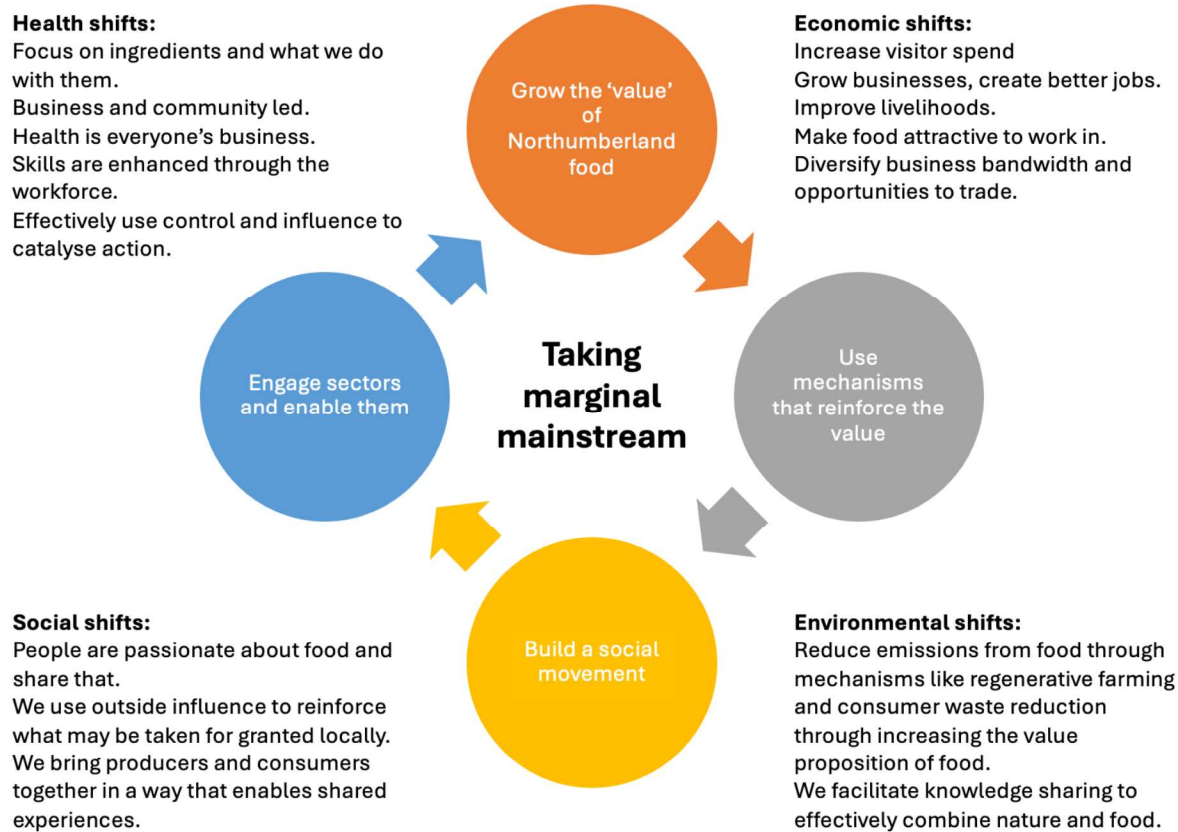
4: Mechanisms for change



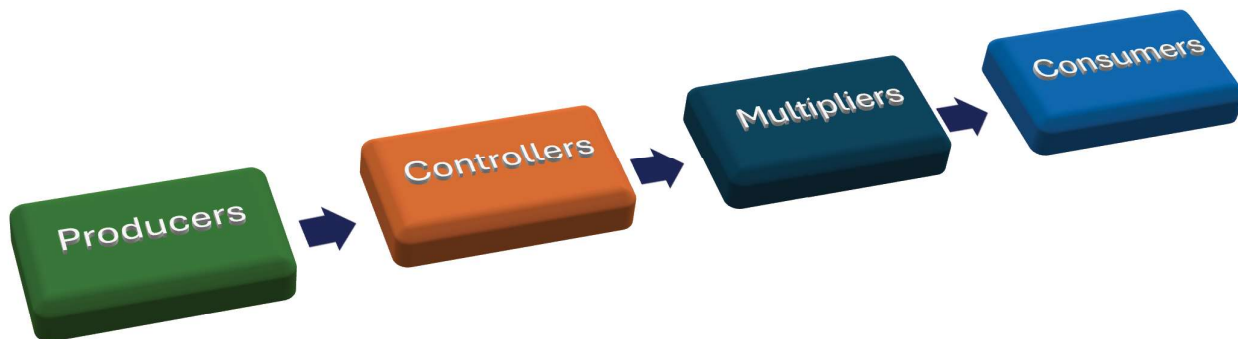
4 Mechanisms for change

4.1 Take the marginal mainstream

The central thread to a theory of change is as follows: Building a stronger value proposition for food in Northumberland to make the best use of its assets across people and places and unlocking the full potential of food across the county



4.2 Engage every 'actor' in the food system:



Producers:

- Primary: Farming & Fisheries
- Secondary: Processors and Producers

Controllers: (but also can be enablers)

- Councils (policy and process), regulators, public sector procurers, training providers.

Multipliers:

- Entrepreneurs & businesses (catering, hospitality, retail), bodies, investment, hubs, skills development agencies, etc.

Consumers:

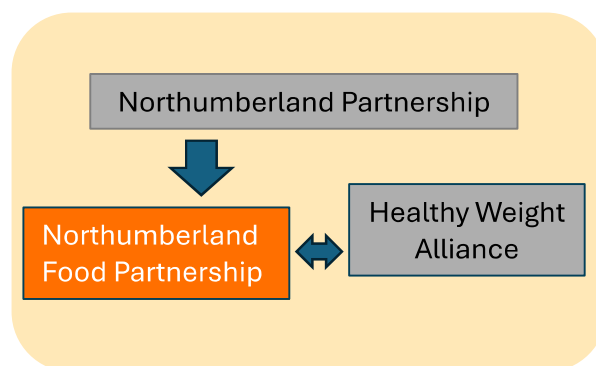
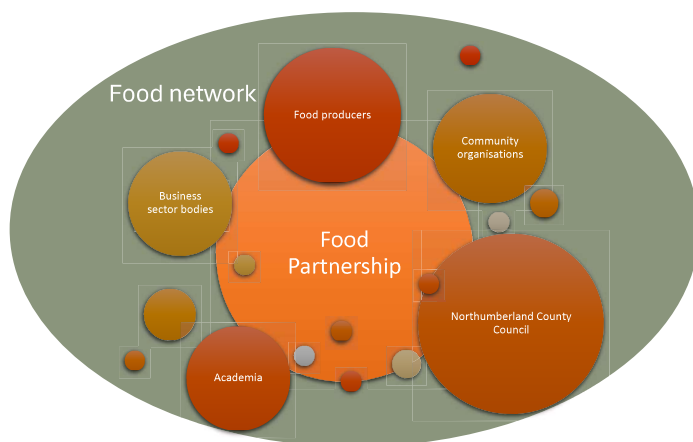
- People in the home and in out-of-home settings

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, we need to design and employ several mechanisms for change. The mechanisms involve several strategic shifts; they use a strong multi-sectoral food partnership, enable key cross-cutting anchor projects to be developed and scaled, deploy disruptor growth funds to spark innovation and provide forums for collaboration and coordination of key activity. This enables several outcomes to be realised and shifts to be made.

Food 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 of the good work already happening. This is a journey, not an endpoint, and therefore, organic growth should be used where possible, using strategic investment where necessary, but largely relying on shifting how we work so that it is sustainable in design.

4.3 Create required strategic shifts:

4.3.1 Governance, leadership and advocacy



To enable a whole food system transition, we must have strong governance, leadership and power to advocate for change beyond the county, influencing regional matters and national government policy and regulation development. Northumberland County Council, as a significant partner, has a duty to ensure that how it operates (projects, resource allocation, investment etc), the policy it develops, the knowledge and awareness of staff and the organisation's behaviour complement the vision for food in Northumberland and lead the change we are trying to facilitate. Food cuts across all sectors make a significant contribution to all the priorities of the County Partnership. To facilitate the whole system working, therefore, the food programme should report into the Northumberland Partnership. The lead directorate should be responsible for delivery within the Council; this being Place and Regeneration, supported by Public Health, Stronger Communities and Inequalities. This

is due to the mechanisms for change being biased towards stronger economies which in turn bring about health, environmental and social improvements.

The Northumberland Food Partnership (NFP) should be formed with key actors across each sector. These should be ‘gatekeepers/enablers’ in their sector and have the power to drive change and offer real insight and expertise. The partnership should be apolitical as far as possible in its make-up and be Chaired by a sector stakeholder who has a strong understanding and influence across the whole system. The Council is advised to fund some coordination resource, and as such, it may be prudent to have the commissioner of that resource as Vice-Chair if this is provided outside of the Council. The NFP should strive for a dozen or so members across various sectors with no more than a quarter of members being from Northumberland County Council. This has been shown to be an effective balance and enable policy making but also capacity building beyond the public sector.

The NFP will have a relationship with the Healthy Weight Alliance (HWA); however, the precise nature of this needs further development. There are a number of shared objectives around the development of healthier food environments that benefit both the delivery of the food strategy and the work of the Healthy Weight Alliance and the corresponding commitments made through the signing of the Healthy Weight Declaration which is linked [here](#).

The Thematic Programmes (discussed in section 5.2), “Building household food security” and “Delivering healthier, sustainable public-sector catering and procurement” should be coordinated and delivered with the Healthy Weight Alliance to ensure the necessary leadership, associated policy development and advocacy can be achieved to deliver impact. The same can be said for the Place-based projects specifically, the Ashington Social Farm Zone.

The Northumberland Food Strategy recognises that modifying food consumption is complex and resource-intensive and has often failed against the might of industrial marketing techniques. People’s lives are complicated, and people have less agency to make change. This strategy recognises this and works to exploit the areas where we can make a difference while improving local economic outcomes, which so often is a key barrier to eating well.

4.3.2 Policy & Strategic integration

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).

Local policymaking is effective in providing levers to support actionable change on the ground. Some examples of this include advertising restrictions on public-owned assets, healthier school food, local plans which facilitate access to space to grow food, etc. Northumberland has several existing policies and strategies that touch the food system and, upon their refresh, can be updated to reference their touch-points with food.

Regional policymaking is also extremely effective and can lead to shifts at scale; providing investment, facilitating learning and being an efficient vehicle to enable collaboration. As the food system is global, it can be difficult to get the economies of scale at a local level. Working across the region can help overcome resourcing challenges, such as the procurement of better ingredients for the public sector and can help create a level playing field for suppliers and working at scale to

source healthier, more sustainable food. The newly formed North-East Mayoral Combined Authority has a significant opportunity to support pilots in Northumberland that can scale across the region.

4.3.3 Knowledge sharing and facilitation

There are subject-matter experts in the county, from academia to community development, marine conservation to regeneration. The Food Partnership provides a forum for people to come together and share their knowledge. However, due to the complexity of the food system, this is best being segmented; focusing on a particular area, e.g. regenerative agriculture or a particular challenge in the system, e.g. neighbourhood planning as a tool – can often be more productive. Facilitation of these groups and targeted support is essential in delivering meaningful change. The mechanisms for change are designed in a way to support this through different types of action. Knowledge sharing should take different forms, from digital circulation lists to meet-ups. Much of what needs to occur without any additional funding, using existing knowledge or capacity where possible. For example, marketing skills or development of local, short supply chains. Using existing capacity, well facilitated, will enable people to learn from each other without the formality of official training while also keeping costs low. This approach is easier for people to engage in and can help reduce inequalities.

4.3.4 Collaboration and coordination

Food Partnerships provide a great forum for different types of stakeholders to meet and find new ways to collaborate. Collaboration should be celebrated and normalised through the sharing of the work publicly i.e. through a newsletter or website. This inspires others and creates momentum for a social movement. Effective coordination provides administrative support for the partnership and these groups share knowledge of the system, which connects people. Coordinators often work in a ‘hub and spoke’ type of model to support the partnership. However, matrix models are more desirable due to the risks of something being highly personalised and the social capital being held by one person. For Northumberland in the early days, however, it is essential to have a central point of contact who can lead and pull strings to bring things together. Once established, this can be more of a matrix-style model with several ‘leads’ for various work plans beyond the coordinator. There are several people and place-based assets across the county; through collaboration and coordination, we will look to make the best use of all assets. A good example of this is the game larder that is being built at Kielder; there is an opportunity to co-locate cold storage and support more independent, local supply chains.