Report on the Launch of the Food-Link Project

The 30th June marked the launch of the Totnes Food-Link Project. All elements of the local food sector were invited to meet together, providing a rare opportunity to get producers, processors, retailers, restauranteurs and those involved in wholesale and delivery all in one room. Of the 300 organisations contacted 37 were represented and 45 invitees attended the launch event.

The aims of the evening were twofold:
1. To provide background information on the wide range of food related activities that have preceded the Food-Link project
2. To encourage the sector to explore some of the barriers to the growth of the local food market and come up with some potential solutions

Break-out sessions
Six key challenges/barriers, identified in the CPRE report, were highlighted and participants were allowed to choose one to concentrate on. Twenty minutes was allocated for each group to discuss the issue and come up with solutions. Each group had a facilitator. After 20 minutes participants moved to a different table to discuss a different topic, the facilitator remained in order to provide consistency.

Challenges discussed:

1. Small Growers and Suppliers spend a lot of time distributing their produce at the expense of growing or producing food
   What could collectively be done to reduce this burden
   How would this be done?
   What resources would be needed to enable these ideas to work?

2. Retailers and restauranteurs interested in purchasing local food have limited time and resources to spend finding multiple small suppliers and dealing with the resulting number of separate invoices, having multiple customers is also a paper burden on farmers.
   What could collectively be done to reduce this burden?
   How would this be done?
   What resources would be needed to enable these ideas to work?

3. Would a wholesale version of the Food Hub solve the issues with
delivery, efficiencies of scale, and retailers issues of dealing with multiple suppliers? If so what existing infrastructure could be used to deliver from the hub to the retailers?

4. Is it beneficial for both producers and retailers/restaurants to develop working relationships that encourage producers to grow to the specific requirements of their retailer/restaurant needs? If so what feasible information does each party require from each other?

5. What infrastructure does Totnes need to enable processing of more Local Produce? How could this be done? What resources would be needed to enable these to work?

6. Would a 'Grown in Totnes' label be a useful symbol for Retailers to use on a marker stick that they display in locally produced Produce (grown within 30 miles of Totnes)? If so could this link in with a 'Made in Totnes' marker?

Feedback
At the end of the session each facilitator reported back to the wider audience and identified a key solution that came out of each of the two sessions.

Solution Commitment
The key solutions identified were written up on flip-chart paper and placed around the room. People were requested to show their level of support or commitment to the solution by writing their name on a different colours post-it notes. The different colours representing different levels of commitment:
Green – I support this idea
Orange – I want to be involved in this solution
Pink – I want to lead on this solution

Outcomes
The discussions and solutions are summarised below. It was found that although there is some cross-over essentially there were 3 principle areas that the range of discussion fell under, namely education, resources and distribution. To clarify, the items that fall under the ‘education’ category identify many of the traditional habits that the non-localised food economy currently fosters. These habits, or expectations, were seen to hinder development in the new localised food economy that we aspire to. Discussions that fell under ‘resources’ identify those physical or financial limiting factors that prevent growth in the local food economy and the category ‘distribution’ identifies requirements, needs and limitations involved in the delivery of local produce.

Education
Issues
- Restaurants demand and producers are currently led by this demand. In an economy that has greater support for the local producers there is a need for a change in emphasis where restaurants are responding more to the availability of produce from their local suppliers.
- Chefs are not seeing the potential of local food in attracting consumers and are not creative in adapting menus to suit in season produce and gluts of local produce.
- Education of the general public about seasonality. It is perceived that customers expect consistency in their choice of food, whether from a shop or a restaurant at any time of year.
Better communication with retailers and their producers to ensure that they produce what is required within realms of possibility

**Solutions:**
- Establish whether restaurant menus could be more dictated by availability of produce from local growers and assess how customers respond to this change
- Restaurants to promote a specials board that focuses on what is local/in season, this would address the need for consistency and would raise the profile of local produce by providing an ever changing Specials Menu
- Provide and online notice board for producers and their end markets, to provide details of produce availability and allow exchange of ideas and requirements among producers
- Training of chefs to use local produce creatively, to use all of the edible parts, to understand seasonality, to be able to respond to gluts etc
- Retailers and restaurants to be given the story behind the produce - to sell the story
- Have a 'Grown in Totnes' logo/marker that clearly identifies goods that meet ethical and sustainability criteria as well as being local.

**Resources**

**Issues**
- The frequency of deliveries that restaurants require is dictated by their storage facilities
- High amounts of paperwork are generated when dealing with multiple retailers/producers
- Retailers need to make a certain mark up. How does this fit in with our desire for producers to get a fair price?
- Conventional milk producers need capital investment for processing cheese/ bottling milk/ making yogurt
- Processors have a demand for prepped and diced vegetables, including some organic), there are no local facilities
- There are no local drying facilities for e.g herbs, apples, toms, grains, pulses etc
- There are no local milling facilities and a lack of plant based proteins/flours grown in this country/country
- Ability to sterilise packaging materials for their re-use

**Solution:**
- Expand the proposed Totnes food hub to cater for both wholesale and retail
- Recognise the enthusiasm of the local producers and many customers willingness to support them by providing informative communication between the two
- Provide support for small producers, in particular mentoring and access to facilities
- To carry out research in to the following areas:
  - Identify demand and likely throughput of various commodities for the specific processing facilities highlighted
  - Provide information on the standards and legal requirements etc
  - Research in to the availability of current processing facilities and quiet times, identify any necessary improvements, including the need to increase capacity, e.g abattoirs
  - Processing know-how – seaweed, nuts etc
  - What support do producers need
  - Look in to appropriate management structures for communal processing facilities and examples of best practice co-operative etc
  - Identify who is growing what plant-based proteins/grains to build up a comprehensive picture of what is suitable in this climate and make this info more widespread to encourage further growth

**Distribution**

**Issues**
- Individual producers need advanced warning of orders and can not act on tight timescales
- Restaurants and retailers need set delivery days in order to be able to plan around them
- The amount of time spent delivering means that skilled hours are spent doing unskilled work, away from the farm and fuel costs are increasingly prohibitive
- Many growers have gluts of the same produce at the same time
Solution:
- Enable a shared distribution service from a diversity of suppliers to help reduce costs, save time and extend the supply period of produce
- Use existing delivery systems and backload vehicles
- Link in with the Food Hub to provide a wholesale version that runs in parallel to the proposed retail version. This would mean that producers upload information once, but provide two pricing structures, access would be dictated by the type of customer. The resulting centralised transaction system would remove much of the paper burden.
- Online platform - producers say what they have/will have and what producers want as well as provide opportunities for growers to share delivery, transport facilities
- Plan growing calendars co-operatively in order to extend individual items growing seasons and ensure diversity – plan a growing calendar together
- Find drop off points for growers to collaboratively drop off produce and then get it picked up/re-delivered on a localised level
- Co-operative use of vans/buying vans, including specialist transport facilities for fresh produce e.g refrigerated vans etc co-operation between farmers/growers
- Using social media such as Twitter e.g when someone has a glut in order to shift produce quickly
- To carry out research in to the following areas:
  - what is a suitable timescale for producers to be able to work to, that is workable for restaurants and retailers?
  - look in to delivery options – Challices and Riverford, Panino, buses, post vans, milk lorry companies e.g ‘milk and more’ vans, Caterfood – need chilled, ambient and frozen options

Stories and Connections Made

Below is a snap-shot of the connections that resulted from the launch, these are currently being followed up to see to what extent they have progressed.

- Farmer – “If I knew when my neighbour was planning on sending his cattle to market I could ensure that mine did not overlap with his – this would mean that together we extended the period of availability of local beef and did not compete with one another”
- A Farmer producing beautiful yogurt from approx 45 cows was looking for more locally produced milk, at the launch he made contact with another small farmer, with approx 75 cows, who was looking for a local processor of his milk
- A retailer informed a farmer that he would like to source local aubergines, but couldn't find any, the local farmer had not realised that there was a local market for aubergines and so had not previously grown them.
- A restauranteur met a biodynamic fruit cordial processor and told him he was happy to stock cordials as an alternative to bottled drinks as they took up less space and required less deliveries, the cordial processor until that point had not been sure whether restaurants would have the time to dilute cordials
- A Dartmoor farmer arranged to show one of the town's butchers around his farm with a view to encouraging the butcher to stock meat from the Dartmoor Farmer's Association
- A restauranteur would like to source local coriander. One producer present at the launch grows coriander already, another has been prompted to plant some and aims to supply the restaurant.
- The local butcher was going to contact the egg producer to discuss the possibility of stocking her eggs
- Various interest shown for a shared dehydrater, amongst herb and fruit growers
- A market gardener made two potential connections for selling edible flowers, one of whom may also buy other veg and fruit from them too.
- A market gardener met the previous grower at the site and learnt some important history about the site.
- A farmer made contact with a local restaurant to possibly grow veg crops to order and to
perhaps supply local dexter meat on the ’specials’ menu
• A farmer spoke to a local processor with reference to supplying prepared, washed and diced vegetables and has agreed to talk further in October
• A grower made a couple of contacts which could potentially be used in the plans for a Forest Garden
• A new cafe on the outskirts of Totnes is now stocking the cordial that was used at the launch, made just a few miles down the road.
• Hi Holly, Just to say how much Martin and I enjoyed the Food Link event. We aren’t great at “networking”, so to be in a room with like-minded producers and traders was invaluable. What I felt came out of the evening was the need for additional communication tools between these two parties. Loved the idea of an online notice board / chat page, but actually there is nothing like meeting face to face and the Food Link event enabled us all to do that. It would be great to make these a regular thing maybe every two months (making it a realistic frequency that people would be able to attend). Each event could be centred around different issues, displaying produce etc etc, but also allowing time to chat. Again thank you for staging the event and look forward to speaking soon.

Conclusions

It was interesting to note that the solutions that came out of the different break-out sessions were frequently repeated in the other sessions. There was a strong sense that many of the solutions to the key challenges were common and the organisers came away from the event with a sense of a very clear direction ahead.

The key priorities (in order of priority) and way forward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Solution</th>
<th>How to be Achieved</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Future Activity</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online Platform</td>
<td>As part of the Food-Link website</td>
<td>Discussions underway with website designer</td>
<td>Ensure regular communication with stakeholders to ensure meets identified need</td>
<td>Continuous to end of project and beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale version of the food hub</td>
<td>linked in with food hub</td>
<td>Awaiting outcome to Local Food application</td>
<td>Contact producers to update on progress with the Food hub</td>
<td>Outcome due late Sept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a grown in Totnes Marker</td>
<td>Working with identified team to explore issues raised at the launch</td>
<td>Have held an initial meeting with chamber of commerce + others</td>
<td>To see if Making Local Food Work can support a research trip to Ludlow to learn from ‘Local to Ludlow’</td>
<td>Within next 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Networking Opportunities</td>
<td>Host various producer:retailer events</td>
<td>Key focus areas identified at the launch</td>
<td>To be arranged</td>
<td>Continuous to end of project and beyond</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training of Chefs</td>
<td>Possibly link up with Ashburton Cookery School</td>
<td>Discussed with Schumacher college and the chef is keen to provide training</td>
<td>To contact Ashburton Cookery School and Occombe farm to explore potential</td>
<td>Within next 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a story behind the produce</td>
<td>Part of Food Hub website</td>
<td>Work with Dartmoor Farmers to promote the Dartmoor brand</td>
<td>Contact DFA to explore putting in a funding bid ot the Dartmoor Sustainable Development Fund</td>
<td>Within next 3 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore distribution solutions</td>
<td>Run a focused event and contact existing networks</td>
<td>Non made to date</td>
<td>Arrange event</td>
<td>Within next 3 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research local processing facilities, and methods plus growing of gap crops e.g. pulses</td>
<td>possibly a small funding bid</td>
<td>Non made to date</td>
<td>Research appropriate funds and sources of local info</td>
<td>Within next 6 months</td>
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Feedback

- Participants were asked to rate their answers for questions one, two and four between 1 and 10; where 10 is 100% positive, 5 is neutral and 1 is 100% negative.
- For question three they were requested to Score between 1 – 10, where 10 is all of it and 1 is none of it.
- Questions five and six were open questions*

Twenty Two attendees filled in a feedback form at the end of the evening and the following responses were received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>No. of response(s)</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How valuable did you find the talks in the 1st half of the evening?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Were the identified barriers the most effective ones to work to overcome?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<td>3. How much of the information was new to you?</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. How useful did you find it to meet retailers, producers and processors together?</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<td>5. What was the most important outcome of this event?</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Would you like further opportunities to network with producers and/or retailers?</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Despite these questions being open questions the responses in 20/22 cases to question five was that the networking opportunities were the most important outcome of the event and 20/22 responses to question six indicated that they would welcome further opportunities for networking.

There was a strong sense from the evening of a real thirst for building closer working relations and a sense that the time was right for this to happen. The enthusiasm and excitement from the participants for the opportunities that this event could help to germinate was tangible, to the extent that when cakes and coffee were announced at the end of the evening, hardly anyone moved from their seats, so deeply were they engrossed in conversation!