

# **FoodLink NE**

## **A Feasibility Study for a new Local Food Network in Aberdeenshire**

### **Funding Proposal**

**16th May 2024**

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

The present proposal shows the rationale, goals, and methodology of a feasibility study for the development of a Local Food Network (LFN) for Aberdeenshire. Such a network, in some form, is expected to become an alternative strategy to supermarket food procurement by connecting producers and customers using the shortest possible supply chains, while achieving social, economic and environmental goals.

## 2.0 Introduction and Project Background

Scotland is facing significant social and economic challenges as it strives to maintain the sustainability of its agrifood and environmental systems. At the same time it is facing unprecedented threats from climate change and supply chain disruptions<sup>1</sup>. Such a scenario is expected to have a knock-on effect for the local economy and the wellbeing of the population.

Supporting more localised food systems aligns with the Good Food Nation Plan and is key to improving public health and environmental sustainability, as well as maintaining the resilience of the Scottish agri-food systems in the face of shocks. Small-scale horticultural businesses using organic and agroecological principles together with other local food and drink enterprises and supported by short supply chains, have the potential to underpin local economies and improve community resilience. Such systems can also bring multiple environmental, social, employment, financial and productivity benefits<sup>2</sup>.

This proposal seeks to make a relevant contribution to the local food system in Aberdeenshire as well as to the work of the Fair Food Aberdeenshire Partnership and the local Food Plan.

This study is working on the basis that larger studies have already clearly identified a change to the wider food system is urgently needed so justification of this fact is not included within the scope but instead works on the principle that many local initiatives will contribute to a meaningful change. The aim is that a sustainable Local Food Network in Aberdeenshire will become one of these local initiatives.

The term 'Local Food Network' (LFN) in this document is defined as any commercial system that is used by producers to sell local produce to the end customer using the shortest possible supply chain. LFNs include:

- scheduled sales from the farm gate eg regular pick up from Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes
- 'veg box' schemes usually with a home delivery option
- food hubs that utilise an online platform to take customer orders then pass on bulk orders to producers (platform eg: Open Food Network, Ooooby and NeighbourFood)

Please note: Ad hoc sales from the farm gate and sales made at farmers markets are not included within the term Local Food Network within the context of this document. While both are very valuable sales opportunities, their very nature means they are less predictable and hence will not be included in detail within this study.

Foodlink NE is a culmination of many months of informal discussion between members of the project team, prior to the formation of any formal group. The time is right to undertake the study as there is now an opportunity to contribute to and collaborate with other concurrent projects and institutions

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<sup>1</sup> Reay, D et al. (2020). From Farm to Fork: Growing a Scottish Food System That Doesn't Cost the Planet. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 4:72.

<sup>2</sup> Loughton, L. (2024). Horticulture Across Four Nations. The Landworkers Alliance. 52p.

eg Fair Food Aberdeenshire Food Plan, the James Hutton Institute through the Macaulay Research Fellowship on Sustainable Food Systems, and the University of Aberdeen Visionary project. The Research Fellowship is working with local food-related actors to explore how place-based food production & distribution systems across the North East can help to meet the outcomes of the Scottish Good Food Nation Plan at the local level, while the Visionary project is running a Cross Country Visit in September involving local food actors from across Europe and the Foodlink NE team intend to participate in the event. The project can also build on the real lived experiences of the Deeside Food Hub which ran from October 2020 to November 2022, the work of North East Scotland Climate Action Network and will also reflect on learnings from other relevant projects where possible e.g. The Landworkers Alliance Resilient Local Food Systems project.

### 3.0 Project Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the feasibility study is to assess whether a Local Food Network, in some form, could enhance the current local food system by providing easy, affordable, and reliable access to locally grown fruit and vegetable staples as well as other locally farmed products, all produced using sustainable farming methods.

Initial research will take place around a wide area of Aberdeenshire and as the project progresses focus will be given to natural geographic 'hot spots' which become apparent by demonstrating specific demand, activity levels or relevant circumstances. It is hoped that any new system of distribution that is set up as a consequence of this project can be proven on a relatively small scale initially and then duplicated in a wider context.

#### **Box 1: A transformational vision for the food systems in Aberdeenshire**

##### **What do we want from the new system?**

To increase the region's access to locally produced good food, at a fair price for all  
To minimise the environmental impact by reducing energy consumption, by reducing food waste and by supporting sustainable farming practices  
To decrease the region's reliance on imported food and retain local land based jobs  
To support our local producers and so boost the local economy.  
To engage the community with where their food comes from and how it was produced

In order to fulfil the above-mentioned vision we need to:

- Understand the current food landscape in Aberdeenshire, recent trends and whether it is sufficiently developed to meet the local demand. This will include an investigation into the potential horticulture skills pool in the area.
- Identify what type of support is key for producers to upscale the local food provision, and what are the barriers
- Benchmark against other areas of Scotland and the UK where resilient models already exist
- Identify communities collectively seeking to initiate or improve their local food system and would welcome a new initiative, or indeed are already running their own local food supply system and could collaborate in some way.
- Design a sustainable Local Food Distribution Network, appropriate for the area, that provides new opportunities for economic, social and environmental benefit

The above aims of the project are in line with the Fair Food Aberdeenshire Sustainable Food Plan 2023-2026, the Aberdeenshire Food Strategy 2020 and Granite City Good Food Sustainable Food Action Plan 2021-2024

#### 4.0 Project Rationale and Data Collection Methods

The project proposal will place special emphasis on bringing forward a transformational vision of the local food system in Aberdeenshire (see Box 1). To develop a new Local Food Network which can support this vision, the project is using a systems-based theory of change.

The project will use a foodscape approach<sup>3</sup> and will be carried out by four members of the Foodlink NE working group, all of whom have backgrounds in the local food scene. The activities and results of the feasibility study will contribute towards the transformational vision for the food system in Aberdeenshire.

Foodlink NE is working on the basis that any sustainable local food network must have the supply of fresh fruit and vegetables at the core. The justification for this is:

- Eating more fresh fruit and vegetables will help to improve the nation's health - currently just over one-in-five adults in Scotland consume the recommended 5 a day (The Scottish Health Survey 2021 and NHS guidance)
- The system needs to be designed around the fresh produce supply due to the short shelf life of vegetables and fruits
- As the offering of fresh vegetables constantly changes with the seasons it is very appealing to customers - Deeside Food Festival saw a marked increase in sales during the harvest season
- Customers who do eat vegetables request a wide range and a large quantity
- It has been proven by Berwick Wood Produce that it is possible to grow over 70 different varieties of vegetables in just a 1 hectare plot in the North East of Scotland. This greatly enhances the product range on offer within any local food network system
- The polycultural nature of growing sustainably farmed vegetables is shown to have a positive effect on the environment
- Large quantities of vegetables can be produced very efficiently using a small amount of land and could potentially provide new job opportunities too

Building on the concept that fresh produce must be at the core of any LFN, a key piece of research will be to identify and survey the market gardeners and field scale growers in Aberdeenshire who are potentially seeking to use or are already using short supply chains. In addition it will be important to understand the entire skills pool of horticulturalists within the area and their aspirations.

In terms of structure and methods, the project will undertake a mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The main data collection methods will be:

- Desk-based research of online resources
- Semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary producers, retail customers and other stakeholders
- A customer survey and focus groups
- A participatory "restitution" workshop - to be held once initial research has been collected

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<sup>3</sup> Peters, C. et al. (2008). Foodshed analysis and its relevance to sustainability. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, Volume 24: 1, 1-7.

## 5.0 Project Structure

Foodlink NE comprises a Core Group who is responsible for delivering the feasibility study and a wider Steering Group who provides guidance and support in kind. The Core Group and the Steering Group share a Whatsapp chat and are in constant contact. Progress reports will be shared with the Steering Group on a weekly basis through the Whatsapp chat during the course of the project with full update meetings taking place every three weeks either online or in person.

Support from local producers is key to the success of the project so careful consideration has been given to making those connections. Producers will be initially approached for an interview during the research stage in Phase 1 and they will be invited to a restitution meeting to review the interview findings. Foodlink NE will also share the Phase 1 Report with all key stakeholders. In Phase 2 a producer focus group meeting will be held to review the various system options and feedback from this will help shape the final solution. At the end of Phase 2, the final project report will be shared with all key stakeholders.

If it is found that any producer, approached during the initial research, is keen to become more involved with the project they will be welcomed onto the Steering Group.

The feasibility study has been divided in two phases, comprising a number of work packages (labelled WP) each with several tasks (labelled T) within each package and specific deliverables (labelled D). Table 1 below shows the breakdown of the work by each collaborator and indicates timescales. The collaborator of each task will be responsible for completing the deliverable however contributions will also be made by other members of the working group where required.

### 5.1 Phase 1: Current Conditions in the Food Landscape

The first phase of the study will focus on understanding the current situation of the region which will act as the foundations for any new system.

WP 1: The current Aberdeenshire food landscape

- T1.1. Understand local food production, distribution, and consumption in Aberdeenshire, highlighting recent trends, and assess whether it is sufficiently developed to meet the local demand
- T1.2. Investigate the potential horticulture skills pool in the area
- T1.3. Assess level of interest from producers to participate in a LFN
- T1.4. Identify what type of support is key for producers to upscale the local food provision, and what are the barriers
- T1.5. Assess future potential growing capacity

WP 2: Benchmark against other Local Food Networks

- T2.1. Analyse various models in other areas of Scotland using desk based research in combination with semi structured interviews. This will provide essential learnings that will aide the new system design stage in Phase 2
- T2.2 Understand learnings from initiatives no longer operating

WP 3: Potential customer areas

- T3.1. Identify receptive communities who are collectively seeking to initiate or improve their local food system through networking and local conversation

WP 4: Phase 1 Summary

- T4.1. Create a series of recommendations with linked evidence which should be actioned before or considered when moving into the new system design stage in Phase 2
- T4.2. Share Phase 1 outcomes

## **5.2 Phase 2: Network Conceptualisation and Feasibility**

The second phase will focus on the practical and financial considerations of a Local Food Network.

WP 5: Assess various design options

- T5.1. Build on the recommendations from Phase 1 by providing a number of practical design options and assess the feasibility of each within the given context
- T5.2. Consult with potential consumers on particular design aspects through surveys and focus groups within targeted communities
- T5.3. Consult with producers through a focus group to ensure producer opinions are considered and to develop buy in for the project

WP 6: Final solution

- T6.1. Work up a full practical design of the chosen system including business structure and all associated legal considerations
- T6.2. Make the business case with cash flow forecast
- T6.3. Share full project outcome

## 6.0 Timescales

### Collaborator Key:

MP
CH
APdV
RG
Members of Steering Group

### Phase 1: Current Conditions in the Food Landscape

Week commencing:	03/06/2024	10/06/2024	17/06/2024	24/06/2024	01/07/2024	08/07/2024	15/07/2024	22/07/2024	29/07/2024	05/08/2024	12/08/2024	19/08/2024	26/08/2024	02/09/2024	09/09/2024
<b>WP 1: The current Aberdeenshire food landscape</b>															
T1.1. Understand local food production	D111, D112, D113														
Restitution meeting for producers	D111, D112, D113									D115					
Overview of recent trends	D114									D115					
SWOT analysis		D116													
T1.2. Investigate food growing skills	D121														
T1.3. Assess level of producer interest	D131														
T1.4. Identify key support required	D141														
T1.5. Assess future potential growing capacity	D151														
<b>WP 2: Benchmark against other Local Food Networks</b>															
T2.1. Review LFN models elsewhere in Scotland	D211, D212														
T2.2 Understand learnings from past initiatives	D221														
<b>WP 3: Potential customer areas</b>															
T3.1. Identify receptive communities				D311											
				D311											
<b>WP4: Phase 1 summary</b>															
T4.1. List of recommendations with evidence										D411					
T4.2 Share phase 1 outcomes														D421	
Attend Visionary Project 'cross country visit' event															13th

### Phase 2: Network Conceptualisation and Feasibility

(Phase 2 kickoff will depend on phase 1 outcome and funding windows)

Week Number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<b>WP 5: Assess various design options</b>															
T5.1. Assess feasibility of various design options	D511														
	D511														
T5.2. Consult with potential consumers				D521, D522											
				D521, D522											
				D521, D522											
T5.3. Consult with producers						D531									
						D531									
<b>WP 6: Final solution</b>															
T6.1. Work up full practical design									D611						
									D611						
									D611						
									D611						
T6.2. Make the business case with predicted cash flow											D621				
											D621				
T6.3 Share full project outcome															D631

## **7.0 Meet The FoodLink NE Team**

### **7.1 Feasibility Study Working Group**

Ana Pena del Valle holds the Macaulay Development Trust Research Fellowship in Sustainable Food Systems at the James Hutton Institute. She is an action researcher working with stakeholders and interdisciplinary researchers in Scotland to identify pathways to increase the impact of local food systems with respect to supporting national scale nutritional sustainability and food supply resilience. Ana is currently focusing on the Aberdeenshire area and contributes to the discussion groups for the Aberdeenshire Food strategy and the Food Security partnership.

Coralie Henke has created Lapwings community mill in partnership with Newton Dee Camphill community in Aberdeenshire. She is an agronomist and also works as a general farm worker and consultant in agroecological farming. In previous roles, she supported collectives of farmers in creating local and organic supply chains in France (organic medicinal plant production, collective dairy, collective farms).

Mhairi Player owns and runs Berwick Wood Produce from a woodland farm near Hatton of Fintray, Aberdeenshire producing vegetables, fruit, herbs, forest raised pork and timber using ecological and regenerative methods. She has developed a number of community focused short supply chains to sell her produce locally. She is a member of the Landworkers Alliance and presently sits on their Scottish Policy Committee helping to ensure issues around land governance, food security and access and fair conditions for small farms are represented. She also works as a freelance mentor and trainer for other agroecological growers.

Rachel Gambro is the founder and Operations lead at The Mixing Bowl Aberdeen which is a community group based in the west of Aberdeen. Up until Covid, the main focus of The Mixing Bowl was monthly cooking workshops for the community, the creation of two short films promoting local producers and 5 years of the annual Deeside Local Food Festival. At that point the Deeside Food Hub was initiated as a response to supporting local producers during and post pandemic. Rachel also works freelance as a consultant on food, tourism and hospitality projects.

### **7.2 Steering Group**

Francesca Clair is the North East Scotland Climate Action Network (NESCAN) Community Development Officer for Buchan and Banff. Francesca has extensive experience, both in the UK and abroad, working within Community Food, Health & Wellbeing, Market Gardening, Farming, Community Music, Practical Conservation and Seabird Monitoring. Francesca is passionate about raising awareness of sustainable food, seed sovereignty and how to grow a local good food movement.

Natalie Jurdeczka is an experienced advocate for well-being and community empowerment. Since August 2023, she has served as the Well-Being Volunteer Coordinator at the Haven in Stonehaven, where she focuses on coordinating a Community Fridge and facilitating food growing and cooking education activities for the local community as part of the National Lottery Funded Community Wellbeing Project. Her diverse background encompasses various fields, including ecological restoration, activism, the 3rd sector of the Arts, Naturopathic clinical practice, and organic and health food retail. Natalie is also a Landworkers Alliance Member Organiser for NE Scotland, working towards sustainable agriculture and food justice based solutions for our broken food system and ongoing climate crisis.