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University of
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A “Safe” and “Just” Regional Food System



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In the last decade, during a period of intense financial austerity, Kirklees Council has oscillated between a “managerial” approach to local food governance and the desire for a regional “place-based” approach.¹ A “managerial” approach is one that bypasses local producers and retailers in favour of alliances between local authorities and multinational retailers/ supermarkets in line with national food policy. A “place-based” approach, by contrast, is one in which local authorities form local and regional collaborations to inspire and pursue food system reforms that challenge “managerial” ways of working.

Taken together, the findings presented in this short report illustrate how it is possible to extend connections within and beyond the boundaries of Kirklees if the local authority is motivated to lay the foundations and set common goals in a way that facilitates food system collaboration. Before the pandemic, regional and local food system actors were largely overshadowed by those embedded in national and international scale food systems. The crisis, however, quickly allowed them to become more visible to a wider range of consumers within the local foodscape, thus emphasising the potential of a place-based approach to regional food system reform.

Throughout our research, the benefits of developing a regional food strategy and partnership that can bring together a wide range of policy and food system actors (from across the public, private and third sectors) were clearly evident. Moving forward, implementing and strengthening these ways of working should be a key policy objective if an environmentally safe and socially just food system is to be put in place to ensure food security for future generations.

This report draws on research conducted between April and December 2020 involving over 30 interviews with regional food system and local/ national policy actors. The research set out to understand; 1) the pressure points in that emerged in food supply and demand across the Kirklees region during the Covid-19 crisis; 2) the solutions that emerged in response to these challenges; and 3) the innovations required to enhance food system sustainability and food security for future generations.

Specific Findings

1. Vulnerabilities and pressure points

- During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, the limitations of the prevailing managerial model of local food governance became evident. Almost immediately, the extent of food insecurity came to the fore. Increasing numbers of people were unable to access food from supermarkets, and community emergency food providers struggled to meet the increasing demand brought about by job losses, reduced incomes and health vulnerabilities.²
- Some interviewees argued that a lack of strategic and spatial planning over many years, including the decision to let old food system infrastructure (such as markets) fade away in favour of supermarkets and out of town shopping, had left the region unprepared for sudden and dramatic changes brought about by Covid-19. Concerns were also expressed by regional farmers and growers about the knock-on effects of “managerial” ways of working linked to national food policy, notably the demand to produce cheap food for supermarkets.
- Another vulnerability discussed was the growing threat posed by climate change. Referring to the impact of a three-month dry spell at the start of the pandemic, growers supplying produce for food businesses in Kirklees confirmed that the price of regionally grown fruit and vegetables had increased dramatically at this time. For some regional farmers and growers, this was a double-edged sword. While they lamented the impact of climate change, they also welcomed the high prices they were receiving to combat the constant downward price pressure from supermarkets.

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S074301671830812X>

² <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/174665/>

2. *An emerging place-based food system as a source of solutions*

- Regional farmers, growers and food producers who were not locked into supermarket supply chains provided the foundations upon which a place-based approach emerged, as they were able to adapt more quickly compared to supermarkets. As emergency food providers struggled to source food from supermarkets to feed the region's vulnerable populations, regional farmers, growers, independent retailers, farm shops, and allotment owners, among others, quickly self-organised to fill gaps in provision. While farm shops developed new ways of working to help vulnerable groups, independent retailers also responded to requests from food banks to fill gaps in supply.
- Kirklees Council very quickly began mapping all support services across the region, and throughout the summer of 2020 they opened old food infrastructure networks such as markets (and also schools) in towns such as Batley, Dewsbury and Huddersfield as coordination and distribution points. They also seconded public health workers to help facilitate the development of a centralised system of support through which those requiring help could order a food parcel online. Support was also provided for a self-organising network of mutual aid groups on a hyper-local basis, while in North Kirklees mosques helped to get food to the region's South Asian communities. All these developments worked well and new "place-based" connections within the pre-existing "managerial" model of local food governance started to emerge.

3. *Innovations required*

- The research highlighted new opportunities to contribute to the expansion of a "place-based" food system. A regional grower supplying food into Kirklees explained how his farm had recently stopped selling vegetables to supermarkets because of price related issues, and how he had since innovated to supply a more varied customer base. To instigate this type of innovation, a communication plan should be put in place to allow information sharing and support the development of intra and cross sector partnerships.
- Further understanding of the foodscape across Kirklees is needed to identify where there are gaps or clusters of activity that can build on the initial mapping activity conducted by the council. For example, several interviewees mentioned the need for farmers cooperatives, food hubs, community fridges, and mobile abattoirs, all of which were seen to be critical to extend to develop and embed the emergent place-based regional food system. Some interviewees argued it was also '*desirable*' for national Government to invest in new infrastructure such as greenhouses to grow produce at different times of the year to reduce the UK reliance on imports and increase food security.³ Opportunities to contribute towards the development of a regional circular bio economy by making better use of the by-products of production were also identified,⁴ as was the need to think about the land use issues impacting farmers as a result of the Governments new environmental land management schemes.⁵
- Providing opportunities to sell is also important. As a farmer and food producer stated: '*if you want to develop a local food economy you've got to develop ways for people to sell*'. There was also recognition that there are areas across West Yorkshire where different types of produce can be grown in larger quantities if the incentives are there to make it worthwhile. Identifying *where* they are opportunities to work in this way, and *where* new infrastructure can be most usefully located, is a key aspect of furthering the development of a place-based regional food system.
- To coordinate, develop and embed the activities that emerged during 2020, more attention needs to be given to working out how to create a multi-dimensional food foodscape that creates and facilitates connections and co-dependencies between different parts of that ecosystem. Because the food system involves multiple actors across various policy fields,⁶ a systemic approach must be adopted to focus on the connections between, and enhance collaboration across, the horizontal dimensions of local food governance (e.g. environment, health, infrastructure, and education) and the vertical dimensions of the food value chain (e.g. food production, processing, storage, transport, retail, consumption and waste).

³ Between 2016-2018, Lang (2020) reports that less than 50% of unprocessed food consumed in the UK was grown in UK: <https://vimeo.com/476539797>

⁴ See: <https://resourcecoveryfromwaste.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/trfw-ppn-the-organic-waste-gold-rush-web.pdf>

⁵ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview>

⁶ See: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d0c725de-6f7c-11e8-9483-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

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