

“Feeding South Yorkshire”. Report of event Tuesday 27th October.

Over 70 people came to the workshop “Feeding South Yorkshire: First steps in developing a sustainable food strategy for our region,” on Tuesday 27th October, hosted on zoom by Green New Deal South Yorkshire, (GNDSY) in collaboration with ShefFood - Sheffield’s Food Partnership.

Slides used during the event can be [found here](#). This report consists of notes taken by workshop participants, compiled and edited by Heather Hunt & Dinah Ward, Green New Deal South Yorkshire and Gareth Roberts, ShefFood.

INTRODUCTION

Dinah Ward from **GNDSY** welcomed everyone and clarified the aims of the workshop:

- *Celebrate and share good practice from around the South Yorkshire region*
- *Bring together a diverse range of groups and organisations to discuss the importance of a sustainable food system for our region*
- *Encourage groups to participate in developing that system, through building relationships and sharing experience*

Heather Hunt from **GNDSY** began by discussing **why a regional sustainable food system is so important now** and why it needs to be included in the region’s economic recovery plan. Our present food system, relying on 50% food imports and industrial agriculture, is not resilient to the shocks of climate breakdown and Brexit, and importantly is not addressing food poverty. We are all very aware in these Covid times that increasing numbers of people in our region are using food banks and going without healthy food. She suggested that a regional sustainable food system would have nature-friendly food growing as its base, with soils sequestering carbon and reducing runoff (a key flood prevention measure), with local supply chains of healthy food supporting local sustainable business, and with anchor institutions (universities, hospitals, prisons etc.) procuring local nature friendly food. Schools and communities would be connected to local food growing, which would be beneficial for everyone’s physical and mental health.

Gareth Roberts from **Regather** and **ShefFood - Sheffield’s Food Partnership** presented on “Pathways To Sustainability”, and asked the question “What could a regional food partnership, and a regional food strategy look like?” Gareth welcomed food partners from across South Yorkshire to the workshop - **Gemma White** from **Doncaster Food Partnership**, **Gary Stott** from **Good Food Barnsley** and **Rob Hardy** from **University of Sheffield** - who each gave an update on their food partnership activities and their perspective on developing a regional ‘good food’ movement. Gareth highlighted the national **Sustainable Food Places** programme, their six key issues for sustainable food and their best practice guidelines for food partnerships and food strategy development.

On behalf of all South Yorkshire food partners he proposed the following actions as ‘next steps’ as a “Pathway to a Sustainable Food System for South Yorkshire”:

- Connect **Food Partnerships** in Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham
- Maximise opportunities created by **Sheffield Climate Alliance** Climate Action Fund programme
- Continue working with the **Sustainable Food Places** programme
- Raise awareness of sustainable food, farming and food systems within the **Sheffield City Region** Local Enterprise Partnership and City Mayor Office
- Promote the co-production of a **Regional Food Partnership & Strategy** for South Yorkshire

On November 2nd 2020 **Sustain** launched their report “[How can Local Enterprise Partnerships put better food and farming at the heart of the economic recovery?](#)” making the case for economic recovery based on [targeted LEP investment to drive a resilient, fair, sustainable system of food, farming and fishing](#).

PRESENTATIONS OF GOOD PRACTICE

Four speakers then presented short, beautifully illustrated examples of good practice in our region.

Darrel Maryon from **Heeley City Farm** illustrated all the co-benefits from his years of **nature-friendly food growing**, with photos of fruit and veg reaching 1000 households a week from healthy organic soil rich with mycorrhizal fungi. His nature-friendly farming includes companion planting, seedlings raised from leaf mould and composting, all of which enhance biodiversity, which he illustrated by showing baby grass-snakes in the compost heaps. He challenged the view that conventional farming has higher yields than organic farming, arguing that when the equation takes into account the energy and carbon costs of industrial fertiliser and pesticides, it is the other way round.

Corrine Moss followed with heart-warming photos and stories of the well-being generated and sustained on the Ouze Road allotments, a **Darnall Well Being project**. She clearly illustrated the potential for green social prescribing.

Hamish Cunningham, University of Sheffield Sustainable Food Institute then spoke about a pilot system for aquaponics, currently being developed on the mini farm behind Regather on Club Row. He outlined the potential for aquaponics, which uses a closed loop water circulation system with fish and plants in symbiosis, to be a low carbon, intensive food growing system which could utilise the underused brown field sites in Sheffield. The catch is the high start-up costs due to the complexity of a system that ensures ecosystem balance.

Rene Meijer completed our examples of good practice, offering ways to rethink the food system. He challenged the idea that we need to grow more food. Rather we need to work out how to better distribute what we have and minimise waste. These principles are put into practice at three **Food Works** hubs in low income parts of Sheffield. In the hubs, surplus food from big food suppliers, which otherwise would be wasted, is upcycled into delicious cooked meals, or available as grocery boxes or to buy, all at low cost. Rene further suggested that we present ourselves in relation to food not as consumers or subjects, but as food citizens, who are active agents in developing a food system that feeds everybody. In the process we can re-discover our humanity.

A full set of slides from the workshop can be [viewed here](#).

Participants then joined one of three workshops of their choice.

WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1 – Nature-friendly food growing - how can it be promoted and scaled up in our region?

Participants shared more stories of good practice in the region, including Regather Farm in the Moss Valley, which is improving the soil on the 12-acre site with green manures to become a diverse and nature-friendly farm, supplying local vegetable boxes and small organic food outlets. Participants then heard about the much larger Polybell Farm of 100 ha. near Doncaster, who currently employ over 100 workers in a mechanised but organic venture. They also heard about projects to grow food sustainably within the cities, for example on allotments or using soilless techniques such as aquaponics.

A big question for this workshop was how such practices could not only be encouraged but scaled up, so that sustainable agriculture becomes a major producer of food within the region. Participants discussed some of the key obstacles.

- One of these is the multiple pressures on land use, including the climate-related need to simultaneously increase uncultivated green spaces. It was recognised, however, that there is currently a lot of unused land in cities, for example in gardens or in waste land, more of which could be used for growing vegetables. There are also vast areas of agricultural land around Doncaster currently under conventional “industrial” agriculture.

- Another major problem is the current system of agricultural subsidies, which favours the large growers – this is in the process of being reformed under the Environment Land Management Scheme. If small growers are to flourish, weighting needs to be given to healthy food and numbers of people employed, as well as healthy soils and bio-diversity.
- The Kickstart programme, a current government initiative for engaging young people as apprentices for 6 months, was highlighted as an initiative that could be used to support young people and nature-friendly growing. Voluntary Action Sheffield is coordinating the scheme with the Chamber of Commerce.
- Resources for organic farming will also need to be scaled up if it to become widespread. Compost, for example, is crucial: we need creative thinking such as tying up with supermarkets to make use of food waste.
- Finally, we must not neglect the protection of soil – the foundation for food production and locking in carbon, and a key component in flood prevention.

Feedback after the workshop included two initiatives:

- Find funding for community-based growing champions, encouraging and modelling vegetable growing in gardens and local available green space.
- A working group to continue working on these issues

Workshop 2 – economic and policy incentives to create a better food system

Participants began by defining the goals of a good regional food system.

- Food that is **affordable, fresh and accessible** – a food system that feeds everyone and addresses inequalities
- Food that is grown **locally** as much as possible, and is environmentally sustainable with low impact
- Food that is **healthy and appropriate**, suiting the diverse customs and habits of the regional population.
- Food that is **economically just**, where workers in the food industry are paid a fair wage, and the value in the food chain isn't all going into the pockets of large international retailers, wholesalers and food producers, but stays within the region.

Participants then moved on to talk about the barriers to achieving this:

- Lack of a region-wide policy: the cities themselves do not have the capacity to grow enough food, and some areas e.g. west of Sheffield are moorland rather than agricultural – only the region as a whole can be considered rich in agricultural land
- Domination of regional policies by short term economic goals and by sympathies for 'industrial' aspects of production, so likely to favour large-scale, low-wage food manufacture rather than alternatives
- Under-resourced regional and local policy-makers who are structurally tied to national government and local business goals
- Tendency for land-use to favour more profitable ventures – houses, housing, peri-urban development
- International impacts that are hard to control: Brexit; cheap, low-standard imports etc.
- Subsidies that encourage farmers to adopt unsustainable practices
- Timidity in implementing change, e.g. the limitations of the sugar tax

Informed by this discussion, participants began considering potentially effective incentives, whether economic or regulatory, that the region could adopt, and how we could help make this happen.

- We need to re-think our ideas about what a regional economic policy is for: to support essential sectors such as food rather than simply to make money

- We need to change the perception of urban agriculture to one of a public good – changing the dynamics of how subsidies are made available, and looking at any money available for land-based activity as a public good (as suggested by the Land Workers Alliance)
- We need to lobby MPs and policy-makers
- We need investment in small scale farming – rebalancing the subsidies
- We need regulation of and dialogue with the big producers
- We need to communicate the joy of food and its impact on our well-being – something that can help us, and makes our message positive
- We should tie our ideas into the language of net-zero emissions, as the Local Enterprise Partnership, which advises and makes decisions for Sheffield City Region, is already committed to this
- We need to develop a strategy for the retail and hospitality sectors as well as food production

Workshop 3 – Spreading food messages: raising food awareness in a financially and socially divided society

Several people working in food activities in the region shared their experience. Points that were stressed were:

- The need to make sure we are not ‘telling people what to eat’, but are giving information and support in a way that is sensitive to people’s customs and that helps people draw their own conclusions over time.
- With this in mind, it was suggested that a system of ‘food champions’ be developed: a network of trusted people who could make connections and convey information across the community, exploring a variety of different ways to support sustainable food appropriate to each locality and demographic.
- There is a need for paid, long-term support to develop and maintain this and to keep other valuable educational and training projects going, both within and outside schools (e.g. in allotment communities).

In the general discussion the following points were made:

- launch a region-wide, basic, centralized presentation on the subject of food and climate change, involving food production, food distribution, food waste etc. Follow by open discussion to try and really understand where people are coming from in relation to food in their lives.
- In building on this,
 - don’t be prescriptive: allow for an organic process that is accepting and creative at its heart
 - don’t be abstract, make it real, start from where people are (including their concerns)
 - find the connecting threads. What motivates people?
 - make connections between food and a healthy environment
 - make rural/urban connections
 - empower people to take small actions
 - keep it simple and accessible to all – ‘if you eat, you’re in’
- build on the experience and connections made during the Covid period around food banks, food parcels, community support networks
- build also on the messages of the Covid era: the generally popular message of ‘build back better,’ growing awareness of food poverty, support for social justice in relation to food, free school meals, greater community mutual support etc.
- we need consistent messaging through a range of media, e.g. social media, posters, newspapers, allotments, schools, places of worship etc.
- use the Government’s National Food Strategy – an ‘expert’ position that can support our arguments

NEXT STEPS

Gareth Roberts explained ShefFood will continue to work as part of the wider Sustainable Food Places movement to promote the co-production of a Regional Food Partnership & Strategy for South Yorkshire, and offered anyone interested to get involved an invitation to get in touch by emailing: info@sheffood.org.uk

Dinah Ward thanked everyone for their participation and contributions. GNSY has a regular newsletter and welcomes new members so she invited people to get in touch: greennewdealuksy@gmail.com

OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND INFORMATION TO FOLLOW UP

Prof Peter Jackson from Institute for Sustainable Food wrote the Institute is available as a resource, including help with bid writing. He is also keen to be involved with next steps: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sustainable-food>

John le Corny, Heeley City Farm recommended "Feeding Britain" by Prof Tim Laing

Corrine Moss said the Darnall allotment is open to everyone. Get in touch: c.moss@sachmha.org.uk

Food Works: <https://thefoodworks.org/>

Regather: <https://regather.net/>

Green New Deal UK: <https://www.greennewdealuk.org/>

Green New Deal South Yorkshire: <https://www.sheffieldclimatealliance.net/gndsy>

Land Worker's Alliance: <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/>

Sustainable Food Places: <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>

Kickstart programme: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>