

Bringing it all together - exploring models of multi-functional food hubs

From supporting new forms of food retail and distribution to providing training and incubation units for new food entrepreneurs or creating a space for community education and action, there is growing interest in multi-functional food hubs. This workshop will examine existing and conceptual food hub models and explore whether there are 'ideal' forms that could not only serve a wide range of local needs but also provide income streams to help local SFC programmes become sustainable.

Workshop contributors

Tom Andrews, Sustainable Food Cities

Clara Widdison, Chair of Lambeth Food Partnership

Clara Walker, Director of Forth Environment Link

Duncan Catchpole, Founder of COFCO and Treasurer of Cambridge Sustainable Food

Dr Liz Charles, Manager of Food Durham

Gareth Roberts, Director of Regather in Sheffield

Tom introduced the session by reflecting on his experiences of visiting various forms of multi-functional food hub and local SFC programmes. These had developed commercial income streams for aspects of their food work that helped to subsidise other areas for which it was more difficult to cover costs. These included:

St Sidwell's in Exeter - an independent charity based in a building that was originally a church but was converted into a community centre in 2001 providing food, a place to meet and support for those in need. The centre includes a vibrant community café, cooking and baking classes, and evening meal extravaganzas showcasing food from around the world. Within the gardens is a community allotment supplying vegetables to the kitchen. A local community composting group is also based at the site, collecting local green waste and converting it into soil improver.

Community Shop in West Norwood - a social supermarket where members on low incomes are able to buy a full range of discounted food and domestic products and to get training and support as they work to improve their confidence and vocational skills. The site includes a community café, staffed by members, which brings in income that supports other aspects of the site's functions, and a growing area on the site that includes raised beds and composting facilities run by volunteers.

Greenwich Community Development Agency (GCDA), which supports both Good Food in Greenwich and Lewisham Food Partnership, has a number of commercial strands which generate income that helps to subsidise their wider food work, including:

- Greenwich Kitchen, a state of the art production and training kitchen which, as well as being used to deliver cooking and nutrition training for those in need, is also rented to small scale professional catering companies; and
- Vinyl Canteen and Catering Company (Hayes) which trains and employs volunteers from different backgrounds from the long-term unemployed to people with learning disabilities in a successful commercial catering business.

Tom highlighted that interest in the concept of multi-functional food hubs was growing rapidly and that from an SFC perspective, multi-functional hubs could play a vital role by creating visible, accessible and inspiring sites that capture the essence of what good food culture and a good food system look like and that deliver a wide range of activities and opportunities across all six SFC key food issues that local people could engage with. He suggested that local SFC partnerships could potentially instigate or support the development of multi-functional food hubs that as well as helping them deliver their good food ambitions could also help secure their programme's longer term financial sustainability.

Tom then introduced three speakers who presented their multi-functional food hub concepts which varied significantly in scale, constituent elements and stage of development. These were: Clara Widdison on a London borough based hub called Farm City; Duncan Catchpole on a city fringe hub called the Cambridge Sustainable Food Hub; and Clara Walker on a hub and spokes model in Stirling.

See their presentations here:

<http://sustainablefoodcities.org/about/sfcconference2017>

Some of the themes that came out of the workshops included:

There is no one way to approach the development of a hub - some start with the non-commercial elements and then work to create income streams while others begin with the commercial proposition and try to get that functioning well before adding on wider social functions.

Both single-site and multi-site food hubs are possible and have different merits. All recognized the value of having a physical site that could attract large numbers of customers and users but where urban centre rent is prohibitive and hub and spokes or city fringe model may be more financially realistic.

Funding models too varied significantly though there was a consensus that for a hub with a large site and many functions funding would be needed from multiple sources, potentially including free/reduced rate space, section 103, crowd-funding, community share offers, lottery and other grants and commercial loans. While complicated, it was felt that one could approach funders for different elements.

After the presentations we heard brief reflections from Dr Liz Charles, Manager of Food Durham and Gareth Roberts, Director of Regather in Sheffield. Their reflections included the need to ensure that you have someone with a strong commercial background to develop the commercial elements of any hub, even if it means buying these in and that in order to reduce risk and maximize the chances of success it was important to take a staged approach in establishing hub functions.

There was a consensus that the workshop had only been able to scratch the surface of the issues and opportunities relating to the development of multi-functional food hubs and Tom therefore offered to organize a separate day long workshop for interested parties to drill more deeply in to the subject. This workshop will be held in Autumn 2017, so if you are interested in participating and have not already expressed that interest, please email Tom at tandrews@soilassociation.org