



Plunkett's Community Food Approach:

Creating Fairer Access to Food for All

Summary

The threat to food security during the Covid19 pandemic, and the community-led response that followed, has led Plunkett to re-evaluate the potential for community businesses to play an even greater role in food supply and creating fairer access to food for all.

Our vision brings together our concerns on injustices in the current food system, specifically in rural areas, and begins to outline our strategy for how community businesses could overcome these.

We anticipate this strategy being developed in close liaison with key partners and in full consultation with other existing organisations working to create fairer access to food.

Introduction

From our foundation in 1919 creating farmer owned co-operatives, through to our current development of community owned businesses which focus on the production, processing and retailing of food and drink, Plunkett has long had an involvement in putting food supply in the hands of communities. In the last 25 years alone, Plunkett has helped to establish over 700 community businesses from farms, vineyards, fisheries, harbours, dairies, distilleries, bakeries, farmer's markets, village shops and pubs.

Our practical support has focused on creating businesses with significant community impact and longevity – currently boasting long term survival rates in excess of 95%. Our role extends to raising awareness of the community business model and undertaking policy and advocacy on behalf of the sector.

Fair access to food for all in rural communities

Plunkett believes that using the community business model will drive the development of an equitable food system where there is a fair access to food for all regardless of a person's background or where they live.

There are fundamental flaws in the UK's current food system which result in injustice and inequality for many, including entire rural communities, and especially those on lower incomes. For example:

1. Food is more expensive and less available in rural areas.
2. The pandemic has highlighted greater risk to food security in rural areas. With between 50-80%¹ of the UK's food consumption being sourced internationally, food security is a real concern for all, especially in times of national crisis such as natural disasters, trade disputes and warfare. However, food shortages during the pandemic demonstrated how rural communities are disproportionately affected.
3. Local food systems with short supply chains could be a part of the solution to food security and resilience in rural areas, with added benefits in terms of quality, freshness, nutrition and environmental credentials. However, localised food systems can often be more expensive and out of reach of many owing to there being fewer economies of scale, and the price more accurately reflecting the true cost of sustainable agricultural production.



4. Communities taking control of land and food production could also be a part of the solution to food security and resilience in rural areas, but they are prevented by financial and cultural barriers. Due to a lack of investment in agricultural policy since the Second World War, British agriculture has become an intensive, centralised system with fewer landowners controlling more land, resulting in limited diversity in what is grown locally and regionally.

There is growing interest from communities wanting to reverse this trend by setting up community owned farms, community supported agriculture, and agroforestry and wishing to embrace regenerative farming practices such as mixed farming, diversifying land use to grow crops that reflect the modern British diet, and taking land out of production for re-wilding. However, the key barrier to communities who want to diversify the system is access to land and the cost of land. Land rarely comes to market, and when it does, is often inflated with development potential, so is therefore out of reach of the average community.

Potential for community businesses to respond to these injustices

Community businesses have a long track record for putting food in the hands of local communities, creating more sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems, providing fairer access to all:

- There are over 450 community owned shops trading throughout the UK. Having been established in response to market failure, they are safeguarding access to vital food supply in rural areas. Without them, these communities, plus a further 1,800 or so surrounding villages, would have no access to the most basic food supplies and services.
- There are a growing number of community businesses championing shorter and localised supply chains to increase the resilience of food supply in rural areas. Community farms and community supported agriculture, for example, put the community in control of its own food production and they sell or distribute their produce amongst their own membership. Community shops, pubs, cafes, farmer's markets and bakeries too, pride themselves on local sourcing.
- Community businesses enhance access to nutritious food by local sourcing. Unlike food produced as part of global supply chains, localised food systems tend to grow 'in season' with lower levels of pesticide and fertiliser, and cultivate when 'ripe' - boosting the nutritional value.
- Community businesses also enhance access to healthy and nutritious food for all by reconnecting people to sustainable food production through education, training, and awareness raising activities. From the bakery courses held by Slaithwaite community bakery, school meals provided by the Kings Arms community pub at Shouldham, seasonal recipes cards promoted in Exbourne community shop and school visits facilitated by Fordhall community farm.
- An added value of community businesses is their network of volunteers who have proven to look out for those most vulnerable in these communities at times of threat to food security.



Plunkett's outline vision for increasing access to good food for all

We believe putting communities in control of how food is produced, processed, and retailed is the best means of tackling injustice in the present food system and ensuring fair access for all. Our vision for realising the potential of community businesses to do more focuses on three central opportunities:

1. There is an opportunity to accelerate the growth of community retail, specifically in more sparse rural areas, and areas of obvious financial and service deprivation. This will lead to greater access to essential foods in rural communities. This includes:
 - a. Helping to set up more community shops in sparse rural areas as a means to safeguarding essential access to food
 - b. Supporting community pubs and cafés to diversify into sourcing and selling essential food supplies where no alternative exists
 - c. Promoting initiatives that help level up access to food for all whilst reducing food waste, such as community fridges where local residents can share and access surplus food, including donations from local food businesses
 - d. Establishing community buying groups where communities co-ordinate on-line ordering of goods from local producers and suppliers in order to create some consistent supply and demand
 - e. Supporting communities to bring back or buy-out struggling market town retailers such as butchers, bakers, and grocery stores
 - f. Supporting farmer-led co-operatives setting up farm shops and farmers' markets in market towns and villages
2. There is an opportunity to help existing community businesses expand their local sourcing operations in order to increase the supply of healthier, more nutritional and more resilient food supply in rural communities. This includes:
 - a. Raising awareness amongst community shops of the added value local sourcing offers them and their customers
 - b. Providing advisory support, training and practical toolkits and manuals helping community shops to navigate their way through the practicalities and complexities of purchasing from multiple smaller scale producers or suppliers rather than one sole wholesaler
 - c. Creating educational programmes, classes and materials to help community businesses promote the benefits of local produce to their customers, especially those on lower incomes
 - d. Facilitating collaboration between community businesses and between community businesses and independents in order to introduce efficiencies and economies of scale in the supply and distribution of local food



e. Connecting food producers and suppliers to our network of over 700 community businesses

3. There is an opportunity to scale up the development of community food production and processing including farms, orchards, kitchen gardens, fisheries and harbours through to distilleries, dairies, abattoirs etc. This includes:

- a. Running a communications campaign to raise awareness of these underrepresented community business models and their potential to scale up local production and re-localise supply chains
- b. Providing advisory support, training and practical toolkits to help more communities succeed in setting up and running a broader range of community food businesses beyond shops and pubs.
- c. Designing funded support programmes with relevant partners to scale up these underrepresented community food businesses, similarly to how More than a Pub accelerated the community pub sector.
- d. Working with landowners to bring new community entrants into the market, for example, by helping independent farmers lease redundant land to communities wanting to setting up CSAs and kitchen gardens by leasing from existing private landowners, and connecting retiring farmers to sell or lease their land to a community farming group

Next steps:

The potential for scaling up community food businesses and their role in securing fair access to food in rural communities is immense. Plunkett recognises that we must work collaboratively with existing organisations to maximise the impact of this work.

The outcomes:

We are seeking to create a considered, informed and realistic community food strategy that enables community businesses to confidently maximise their role in creating a fair and equitable food system creating fairer access to food for all. This would be measured through:

- An increase in existing community businesses sourcing and providing fresh, healthy, local food to their communities regardless of circumstance
- Greater adoption of the community business model to create greater diversity within the community food sector – e.g. more food businesses turning to the community business model such as fisheries, orchards, farms, abattoirs, butchers, farm shops.
- Creation of employment, volunteer and training opportunities through a growing network of community food businesses; reaching young people in rural areas in particular



- Increased engagement with marginalised neighbourhoods through community food businesses
- Small scale and local food producers reporting increased market reach through community business networks ensuring increasing their long-term survival rate.
- A ripple effect of community businesses addressing wellbeing, loneliness, and health benefits to community members
- A widespread positive environmental impact as a result of shorter supply chains, including:
 - Reduced food waste/ packaging/ food miles
 - Community initiatives such as 'community fridges', composting and repurposing 'near end of life' ingredients

We are enormously excited by our ambitions to release the potential of new and existing community businesses, small scale producers and local food suppliers, as well as national and regional partners, to address this issue of food access and equality. We will continue conversations with funders, partners and strategic organisations to secure the funding and expertise to secure the support and funding required to further our ambitions.

James Alcock, Chief Executive, Plunkett Foundation