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Farmers' markets: actions needed by local authorities

The Issue

Farmers' markets are food markets where local farmers and producers bring their produce for sale direct to the public. In 1997 there were no farmers markets in the UK. Now there are 200 - in rural and urban areas - with a total turnover of £65 million a year. Farmers, local economies, consumers and the environment all benefit from farmers' markets. They are:

Good for farmers:

- they are a different source of revenue, often crucial in today's difficult farming climate
- they give farmers greater control over their economic lives
- farmers can get higher prices - as the middle man is cut out
- farmers diversify their skills - gaining marketing and

business expertise

- farmers get increased networking and learning opportunities with other farmers

Good for the local economy:

- more money is spent in the local economy, increasing the multiplier effect
- there is high knock-on spending in other shops on market days
- they provide an outlet for local produce, spurring local value-added start ups and expansions
- they reinforce local job and business networks, maintaining local employment

Good for consumers and the environment:

- there is increased choice for fresh, healthy produce usually at competitive prices
- they can offer extra fresh, affordable produce in areas with few such options
- they strengthen community - a key factor in the quality of life in Britain
- food travels less far and has less packaging
- they are a vital outlet for farmers selling organic and less intensively-produced food

Evidence from the UK and other countries such as the USA clearly shows that the potential for further growth in farmers' markets is substantial. Although at least four of every five established farmers markets are self-financing, support is required to encourage their development, help with start-up costs and networking at the local authority level - local authorities are in an ideal position to provide such support.

The issue for Local Authorities

Farmers' markets can offer big returns for local authorities in local economic development. A survey of Rural Economic Development in New York State found that *"Though they are not an economic development panacea, farmers' markets should be considered an important component of a comprehensive local economic development strategy"*. For every dollar invested in a "Jersey Fresh" marketing program, \$46.90 was returned to the local agricultural economy, and \$15.20 was generated in net farm income for local growers.

Farmers' markets can also bring fresh, healthy produce into urban areas - with local authority help they can be located to maximise benefits to people who otherwise have problems getting fresh produce.

There is support from national Government for farmers'

markets. Nick Brown, Agriculture Minister, has written to all council leaders, 31/3/2000, urging them to get involved with and promote farmers' markets.

Many councils are already supporting local food initiatives as ways of meeting environmental, economic and social goals together. Liverpool City Council has backed the Merseyside Local Food for Local People project and has part funded it. Kirklees and Calderdale Councils are backing a project to promote local Yorkshire food. Mira Kubula from Kirklees Environment Unit said *"The popularity of the Holmfirth Farmers' Market shows that local people want to be able to purchase local, fresh, affordable produce. The demand is there; we need to encourage our farmers, voluntary groups and individuals to satisfy this demand"*.

Actions for local authorities

Farmers' markets have great potential, but there are several actions which Local Authorities need to take to ensure their development. Local authority support is needed particularly to deal with:

- C Start-up costs
- C Publicity, promotion and information exchange
- C Helping to ensure a permanent farmers' market location
- C Ensuring that farmers' markets also set up in poorer areas
- C Market charter issues
- C Co-ordination of local markets - eg no clash of dates

Farmers' market managers will have to deal with a range of local authority departments - for example dealing with planning, LA21, market charters, advertising/publicity, local economic development, trading standards, health and safety, and licensing. Lack of co-operation of just one of these departments can

stymy the development of markets; so overall:

- a strong steer from the chief executive's office is needed.

Ten reasons for supporting farmers' markets development:

ECONOMIC POTENTIAL: There are currently 240 farmers' markets in the UK, with a turnover of £65 million a year. There are over 2,000 in the USA with turnover over \$1 billion.

85 per cent of US farmers' markets are economically self-sustaining.

STRONG LOCAL ECONOMIES: \$500 million sales at Ontario farmers' markets generated \$1000 million in spin-off activity. Local stores near Winchester farmers' markets reported 30 per cent increases in takings on farmers' market days.

SAFEGUARD JOBS: 24,000 people are directly involved in preparing and selling food at Ontario farmers' markets.

HELP FARMERS DIVERSIFY: 81 per cent of farmers in a US survey said that the ability to test market new products at their farmers' market was beneficial.

HELP FARMERS SURVIVE: 97 per cent of UK farmers selling at farmers' markets said that the main reason they did so was to secure vital extra income.

HELP FARMERS' SKILLS: 75 per cent of farmers selling at New Mexico farmers' markets said their marketing and business skills had improved since selling there.

CONSUMERS WANT THEM: 99 per cent of visitors to the 1999 Winchester farmers markets wanted to attend more.

SOCIAL INCLUSION: Farmers' markets have the potential to make healthy, affordable food available in areas with few such options. Organic food at farmers' markets has also been surveyed as being 33-37 per cent cheaper than at supermarkets.

ENVIRONMENT: Farmers' markets reduce food miles, packaging and food waste. They are also an outlet for organic and less intensively produced food.

WIDER CHOICE: Farmers' markets offer an additional shopping alternative. There is a wide variety of produce on sale at the markets; the high quality food attracts both local people and tourists.

Action specific to particular local authority departments includes:

Local Economic Development Office:

- C Co-ordinating farmers' markets, especially in setting-up, networking and marketing.
- C Explaining the economic benefits to other departments and elected members.
- C Liaising with Local Chambers of Commerce to elicit their support and minimise potential for conflict between farmers' markets and local food retailers.
- C Highlighting potential benefits to all local traders.

Help will often be needed with set-up costs, eg a rent-free period, or grants for equipment such as refrigeration units can enable a farmers' market to get off the ground.

Local Agenda 21 team:

The roles of setting up, co-ordination and networking can also be taken through the Local Agenda 21 office. LA21 officers also have a key role in promotion both to producers and to the local community.

Environmental health and trading standards:

Giving guidance on health and safety issues to potential stall holders at an early stage, and provide training to those wishing to set up stalls.

Chief Executive's Office:

Ensuring that the different departments within the local authorities are working together to promote farmers' markets.

Ensuring that the legal department allows a flexible approach to the interpretation of Charter rights laws - allowing for example farmers' markets to operate on different days to conventional markets.

Planning:

Positive treatment of planning applications for farmers' markets in recognition of the multiple benefits they bring. Help in identifying suitable sites, and issuing guidance to those wanting to set up a market.

Licensing:

Take a positive stance on trading licenses for farmers' markets.

Local retailing strategies:

Ensuring that farmers' markets and other local food initiatives - as providers of multiple economic, environmental and social advantages - are integral parts of local retail strategies.

Urban Local Authority actions:

Sometimes it may not be possible or necessary for the local authority to co-ordinate farmers' markets - if for example there is already a strong co-ordinator, or if the local authority lacks the additional resources to set up and manage a farmers' market. The latter could well be an issue in London, but London and urban authorities with strong competing demands on financial resources still have a major role to play.

For example, the biggest barrier to farmers' markets in urban areas is sites - which can be expensive. Local authorities should offer sites such as council office car parks, where a market can be organised by a third party - such as a local community group or farmers' co-operative. In the US markets pay no or peppercorn rent for sites on federal and local government property.

Even if the local authority is not managing the market, the market co-ordinator will have dealings with many local authority departments. Putting one person in charge of co-ordinating the authority's response to farmers' markets is crucial

Conclusion

If local authorities take these actions, then we can expect to see a network of thriving, dynamic farmers' markets, helping to revitalise local economies, protect farmers' livelihoods and provide community and environmental benefits.

Local Authorities should:

- C Set up and co-ordinate farmers' markets, through the Local Economic Development Office, or help with start-up costs
- C Chief Executive's office should ensure a co-ordinated approach to farmers' markets across different departments
- C Provide a site for markets, as well as planning and licensing help
- C Ensure farmers' markets are an integral part of local retail strategies
- C Provide marketing and publicity support

Contacts

A longer briefing on the economic benefits of farmers' markets is available - send an A4 SAE marked "farmers' market briefing" to the Information and Enquiries Unit, Friends of the Earth 26-28 Underwood Street, London N1 7JQ, or download from:

http://www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/food_and_biotechnology/pdf/farmers_markets.pdf

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