



Increasing collaboration between farmers and local communities: The benefits and barriers

July 2012



Introduction

An increasing number of farmers are looking to work more closely with community groups and local businesses. This can be achieved by leasing land to communities to produce food, selling products at farmers markets or selling through local businesses like independent shops. At the same time an increasing number of local communities and local businesses are looking to develop closer links with their farming community.

This publication shares the key findings of a piece of research, the first of its kind, into what farmers believe to be the benefits of working with local communities and businesses and the barriers that they feel stand in the way of them making it a reality. This research, commissioned by Plunkett Foundation as part of Making Local Food Work, aimed to explore the perceived role of stronger local networks in the future of farming. This publication outlines the key findings from the research to help both farmers and local networks contribute to finding long term answers to the challenge of creating a greater future for farming within local communities.

Research Summary

This research was completed by **SPA Future Thinking**, an independent market research company, and was completed in two stages:

Stage one: Gathering quantitative data

A database of 5,000 farm contacts was purchased from Farmers Weekly magazine to complete the research. Sampling was then conducted in proportion to farm size within English region, according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) latest population statistics. A postal survey was sent out to the sample of 5,000 in December 2011. 441 respondents returned completed questionnaires and fieldwork was completed by January 2012. Larger farms were found to be more likely to respond to the survey, so data was weighted by size of farm.

Stage two: In-depth qualitative research with a selected sample from the completed postal surveys

The second stage of the research was undertaken in February 2012. Of the 441 farmers to respond to the postal survey, 172 agreed to be re-contacted. Of these, 15 were contacted (sample breakdown below) for a further telephone interview. Each 30 minute telephone interview was conducted to explore the issues raised in the survey in more depth.

Region	Under 50 hectares	50-100 hectares	100+ hectares
North	1	2	2
Midlands	2	2	1
South	2	1	2

The sample interviewed included those who currently work with community enterprises and local businesses, those who would consider doing so in the future and those who reject the idea completely.

Headline findings

- **Approximately 1/3** of farmers **currently work** with local networks/ businesses, and a **further 1/3 would consider** doing so in the future.
- **Over a third** of farmers surveyed **would consider** being part of a distribution scheme or working collaboratively to secure contracts in the future.
- **Younger farmers** (under the age of 45 years) are **significantly more likely** to currently work co-operatively with other farmers and community groups than their older counterparts.

The perceived benefits of working with local businesses

- **47% of farmers** surveyed believe that working with local businesses and networks would be **more profitable** and would create a fairer pricing structure for producers.
- **7 out of 10 farmers** surveyed believe that there are **financial incentives** to working with local businesses.
- **35%** believe that through working with local businesses there would be the **opportunity to tap into new markets**.
- **Over a quarter of farmers** believe that working with local businesses and networks makes it easier to **respond more directly** to customer needs.
- **Almost a quarter of farmers** surveyed feel that they would have a **greater say and control** over their products if they worked with local businesses.



The perceived benefits: 'We would consider working with local networks because...'

The main benefits identified by those farmers that would consider working more closely with local networks included:

- **63%** because it is more **environmentally friendly**;
- **60%** because we would be **supporting** the local community;
- **42%** because it enables more **ethical food production**, such as a higher standard of animal welfare;
- **34%** are attracted by the **social aspect** and **meeting** their customers;
- **One in five** farmers cited greater **security around contracts** as a motivation to consider working with local networks.

A common theme that farmers felt would be an advantage when working with local networks was having more say over what they are producing. It was also felt that customers would have a greater understanding of the seasonality of their produce – and rather than seeing this as a limitation, it often created impulse purchases.

There is the perception that working more locally achieves greater environmental benefits as a result of fewer food miles and the need to use fewer chemicals on produce.

Local businesses were seen to make fewer demands on farmers' produce, compared with supermarkets.

Ultimately farmers felt that by working locally they were providing their customers with fresher, better quality produce.

"Being more in touch with your buyers gives you a better idea of what you are supposed to be producing."

Farmer that would consider working with local businesses, North

"Working with local networks gives us more money too. People are prepared to pay more and it cuts out the middle man."

Farmer that currently works with local businesses, South

"You are supporting local people and local money. Local money is then being spent in the local area."

Farmer that would consider working with local businesses, North



The perceived barriers: 'It's a nice idea, but...'

The research has identified a strong movement towards greater collaboration within the farming world, as well as a greater interest of working more closely with local businesses. However, the research also identified a number of perceived barriers which need to be addressed to facilitate greater collaboration on a local scale.

This publication is supplemented by two additional guides offering practical help and signposting. One is available for farmers wishing to work with local communities and networks, whilst the second encourages communities and local businesses to work more directly with local suppliers and farmers.

The top barrier for those considering working with local businesses is a **lack of time**.

Other key barriers identified were:

Supply:

■ **61% of farmers** surveyed flagged issues with supply as a key barrier, such as providing smaller quantities or accessing distribution networks.

And of those that would consider working with local businesses:

■ **35%** felt they didn't have the right **equipment**;

■ **24%** felt it wasn't viable to sell the **smaller quantities** required.

Time:

■ **55%** of all the farmers surveyed felt that **added time pressures** was a barrier to working with local communities.

And of those that would consider working with local businesses:

■ **53%** felt they were already **too busy**;

■ **41%** anticipated there would be **additional paperwork** to complete.

Farmers perceive time as a barrier to working more closely with local businesses as it is anticipated that they will have to process and package many smaller orders as opposed to larger orders from supermarket contracts.

Finance:

■ **52% of farmers** surveyed stated **financial reasons** would make it harder to work with local markets:

And of those that would consider working with local businesses:

■ **36%** felt activity **wouldn't be profitable enough**;

■ **30%** thought they would need to **hire more staff**;

■ **26%** required **start-up finance**.



The incentives needed: 'To make it work we would need...'

Farmers felt they needed support to work more closely with local networks, including a range of tools, resources and advice.

Of those that would consider working with local businesses:

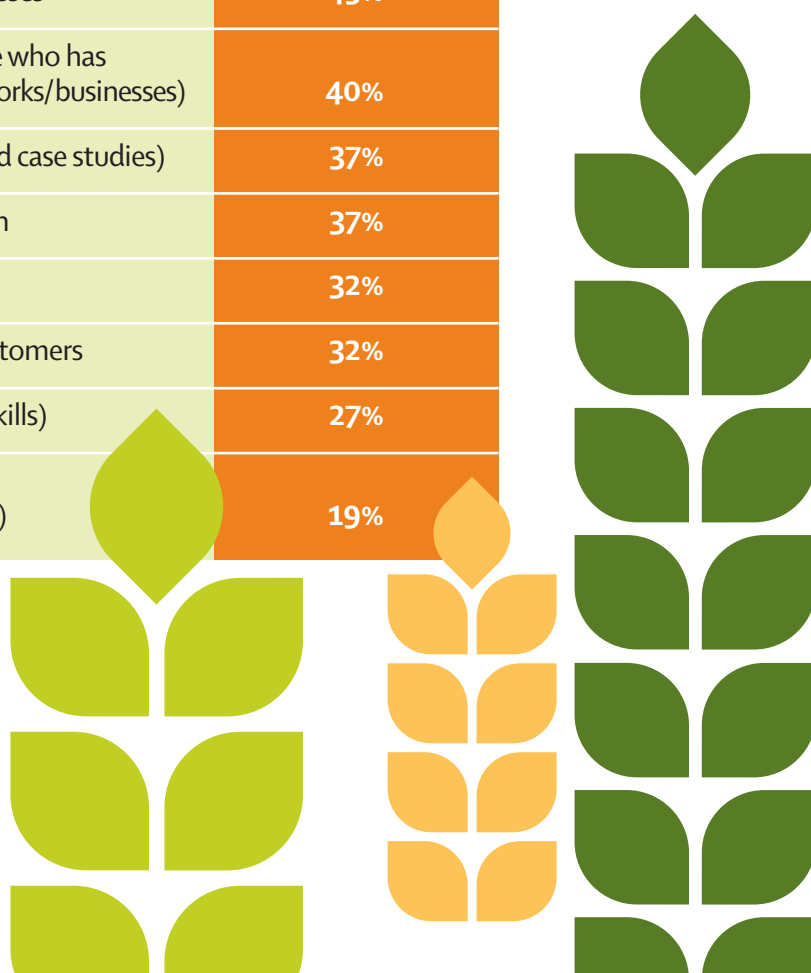
■ **36%** felt that lack of awareness of opportunities and viability was a barrier.

"If there was somebody that was already doing it, it would be quite nice to get in touch with them and talk to them about their experiences."

Farmer that would consider working with local businesses, Midlands

The table below summarises the top incentives to working with local networks highlighted by farmers that have already stated an interest in working more closely with local businesses and communities.

Incentives	Farmers that would consider working with local businesses
Proof/evidence of benefits to my business	71%
Awareness/publicity/information about opportunities of working with local networks/businesses	45%
Word of mouth (i.e. knowing someone who has recommended working with local networks/businesses)	40%
A tried and tested model (examples and case studies)	37%
Guidance on regulations and legislation	37%
A financial guarantee	32%
Market research/ knowledge about customers	32%
Training and support (e.g. marketing skills)	27%
Templates which I could use (e.g. management and legal structures)	19%



Supporting a local future for farming: findings and recommendations

The research summarised within this publication can now be used to inform the development of support and materials required by farmers to create closer working relationships with local businesses and communities. A key finding of the research is that there is a lack of awareness of the options open to farmers. Therefore, our recommendations for increasing collaboration between farmers and local communities are:

- **Highlight to farmers evidence** of successful models and provide access to guidance on working with local businesses and communities from trusted organisations.
- **Provide better guidance to local communities and local businesses** about what farmers need in order to build closer working relationships with local businesses and communities through local food, or what is required to make stocking their produce viable in local shops or markets.
- **For policy makers and central and local government, the research has identified the desire for greater collaborative working** amongst local networks, and central and local government has a strong role to play fostering these links and opportunities. This can be achieved through reducing demands on the farming sector and local businesses and communities working together, as additional paperwork is a high concern for farmers. It was felt that the government had the power to incentivise these links further through offering tax benefits and grants to support greater localised activity within farming.

"In an ideal situation, it would be nice to get some sort of co-operative going... a dozen producers all working together."

Farmer that would consider working with local businesses, Midlands

"Farmers are very bad at marketing their own produce. Marketing support would be good."

Farmer currently working with local businesses, South

"It works well. People like to know where their food comes from. They like to know where it was reared and that it was enjoying life. It is a nice thing to do to produce local food."

Farmer currently working with local businesses, South

"The planning authority needs to be more helpful. It is one big struggle. They need to be more supportive of farm diversification"

Farmer that would consider working with local businesses, South

A more co-operative future for farming?

The research revealed a clear interest from farmers in working more closely with local networks and in making the most of local business opportunities. Having identified the essential benefits and incentives required by the farming sector, support and signposting can be developed to help support greater networking and collaboration across farming, local communities and local businesses.

This publication is supported by a guide for farmers and a guide for communities to work together and can be found at www.plunkett.co.uk and www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk. This research will also contribute to our ongoing campaign at a local and national level to provide greater support for communities, farmers and producers working with local food.



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The Plunkett Foundation helps rural communities through community ownership to take control of the issues affecting them. To do this, we focus on four key areas of work to make sure we deliver the best support available. We do this by:

- Promoting and supporting the development of community food and farming enterprises by delivering targeted support programmes.
- Supporting rural communities to establish a wide range of rural community-owned services, like shops, pubs and transport systems.
- Advocating and raising awareness amongst policy makers, support organisations and rural communities themselves of the potential rural communities have of taking control of the issues affecting them through community ownership.

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Plunkett Foundation
Registered company number: 00213235 (England and Wales)
Registered charity number: 313743

July 2012

design: www.wave.coop

