

COMMON CAUSE LOCAL PRODUCE SURVEY

The survey:

Common Cause recently commissioned a short piece of research to survey the market demand for local produce amongst nearly 100 Lewes-based businesses, all of which perform some amount of commercial catering. The overall aim of the work was to improve local food links by putting interested businesses in touch with local producers. The survey also provided an opportunity to analyse why businesses are interested in local produce, what kinds of food are in greatest demand, the problems businesses have with using local produce and to record the specific requirements of particular businesses relating to supply and delivery.

Outputs useful to producers:

This report is a summary of the comments of the 20 businesses that responded. Details of each business's specific demands are available from Katharine Rayner at Common Cause (tel: 01273 470900; email: katharine@commoncause.org). All businesses that were interviewed were given a copy of the Sussex Food Finder (produced by Action in Rural Sussex) to help them locate producers as well as a copy of the Friendly Vegetable Book (produced by Common Cause and the East Sussex Food & Health Partnership) to help them cook using produce commonly supplied by vegetable box schemes.

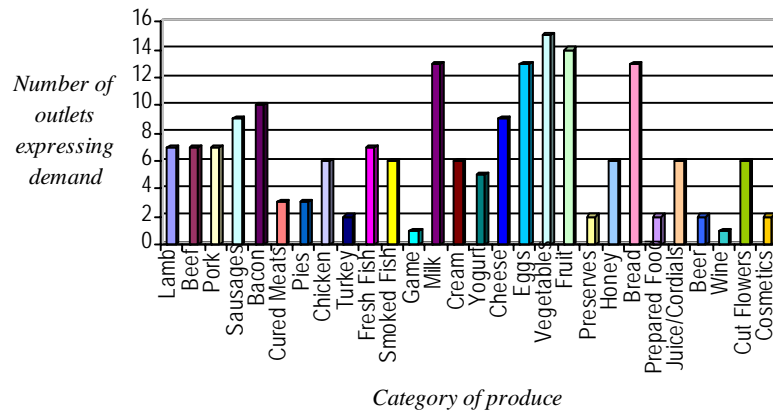
General Results:

The response rate indicates a genuine interest in local food among a range of Lewes businesses including B&Bs, hotels, cafes, restaurants, care homes, private schools and colleges. The reasons behind this interest included concern about food miles, animal welfare standards, traceability, the environmental impacts of intensive farming and childrens' exposure to chemical residues in food. There was also interest in supporting the local rural economy and in positively promoting distinctively local products and dishes. Turning interest into practice was conditional on overcoming certain current stumbling blocks, including price, continuity of supply, frequency of deliveries and knowledge of where to obtain local produce, as well as the convenience of doing so.

What produce is in demand?

Figure 1 overleaf is an indication of the kinds of produce most in demand by businesses in the area, although the results are not statistically significant. Products cited most frequently were, in descending order, vegetables, fruit, eggs, milk and bread, bacon, sausages, cheese, other meat and fish. It is noteworthy that only 4 respondents specified that they required organic produce, and of those none used exclusively organic foods. At least one respondent placed a greater emphasis on organic production standards for products higher up in the food chain. Although sausages, bacon and eggs all rated highly, most B&Bs were not keen on the idea of taking delivery of these breakfast items together through a possible 'Sussex Breakfast Box'. The main reason being that they did not want to change their current supply of one or more of the breakfast ingredients.

Figure 1: A breakdown of demand for local produce by category, based on postal questionnaire responses



Existing stumbling blocks

Three respondents were able to meet all their demands using local sources and the majority of others are already sourcing a proportion of their produce locally. However, the following stumbling blocks continue to exist.

1. Cost:

- *B&B's & cafés:* The perception of increased costs was the most commonly cited obstacle for B&Bs & cafés. Unless B&Bs or cafés use local sourcing or ‘paying a fair price’ as a marketing tool they have to absorb any extra costs and seem reluctant to do so in the absence of evidence that this will pay off.
- *Care homes and colleges:* None of these can afford to pay a large premium for local food unless they undergo an internal policy change.

2. Perceived customer demand:

There seems to be a lack of confidence that customers will pay a premium for local produce. This is especially the case where customer knowledge of a? specific product is limited, for example if selling sandwiches containing local cheeses or breeds of livestock.

3. Availability of fresh produce:

There is an unmet demand in the Lewes area for regular and reliable deliveries of fresh local fruit, vegetables, milk, very fresh eggs and bread. This may be due in part to a lack of knowledge about where to source such goods, but the availability of some products, e.g., milk and organic fruit is genuinely limited. We have given businesses a copy of the Sussex Food Finder to help them locate producers. This will also allow them to find shops supplying local produce, for example Full of Beans sells bread from the Crynel Bakery and Barefoot Herbs sells bread from the Real Patisserie.

4. Distribution:

- *Continuity of supply:* Most businesses are in the habit of buying from the same suppliers all year round, and are nervous about switching suppliers and /or changing to more seasonal sourcing practices. Several respondents suggested they would be happier for producers to buy in goods from further afield during any lull in production, rather than to change suppliers themselves*. In some cases businesses may be confusing *continuity* of supply with *reliability* of supply: in which case they need evidence that switching suppliers on a seasonal basis can be planned and doesn't entail the panic that can result from being let down by a supplier at the last minute.
- *Frequency of delivery:* The majority of businesses interviewed, with the exception of B&Bs, relied upon having all their produce delivered. All have limited storage facilities, so need deliveries of fresh foods at least once a week in winter and 2-3 times a week in summer. Everyone we spoke to said it would be useful to receive different kinds of produce in the same delivery, meaning there is scope for co-ordinating distribution. B&B owners tended to shop for most items at supermarkets or town centre retailers. Some were able to visit farm shops and bought occasional items from the Lewes Farmer's Market, some of which they could store by freezing. Most were interested in deliveries, but for fresh items such as eggs, bread and vegetables these would need to be available at least twice a week.
- *For box schemes: Advance knowledge of box contents:* For schools and care homes basic menu planning needs to be completed weeks or months in advance, meaning they would need as much notice as possible of what to expect in a weekly vegetable or fruit box. They would also need to negotiate excluding items that are not popular with children or the elderly.

Potential next steps for producers:

- Contact us if you are interested in delivering or supplying any of the produce demanded.
- Tell us if you are interested in co-ordinating your distribution with other local producers.
- Let us know of any of problems with supplying the Lewes area.
- Tell us if you want the contact details of the outlets expressing demand.
- Inform us if you are interested in selling gluts at a negotiated price.
- Consider introducing a catering vegetable/fruit box scheme (not necessarily organic) or bulk sales of single items.
- Promote deliveries of meat boxes.
- Investigate fundraising opportunities for co-ordinating delivery.

Potential next steps for a supporting organisation:

* Common Cause are currently working on a funding bid to develop sustainable direct trading links between European producers and producer groups. This could help local producers to source non-UK produce and out of season produce to provide the continuity of supply and extended product lines in demand. Contact Katharine Rayner for more info. Katharine@commoncause.org.uk.

To facilitate a switch to local produce in the commercial catering and tourist sectors:

- Chase up unmet requests for interviews and complete customer database results.
- Make customer database available to interested producers.
- Advertise market opportunities to producers.
- Investigate fundraising opportunities for co-ordinating delivery.
- Repeat the research process, with some methodological amendments, across a wider geographical area. This could be particularly significant if producers want to proceed with the 'Sussex breakfast box' idea.
- Work with a local butcher to see if he would take a whole pig and butcher it to make sausages and bacon (Richard's already sells sausages made from local free range pigs when available).
- See if the butcher could deliver a wider range of goods if there was no producer-led delivery, including working with a local egg producer to distribute very fresh eggs.
- Investigate which local producers are already popular with B&Bs and whether they would be interested in joining a Sussex Breakfast box scheme.
- Market research on regular customers and tourists to determine the extent of their appetite for local produce and their willingness to pay a premium for local food.
- Research on outlets that already successfully use local sourcing to attract customers willing to pay the premium.
- Find ways to encourage B&Bs etc to market their sourcing of local produce to attract customers.
- Produce a comprehensive database of producers who are interested in supplying the tourist sector, to include their aspirations regarding future production capacity, distribution and marketing.

To facilitate a switch to local produce in the care and education sectors:

For other businesses with more complex catering demands, such as schools, colleges and care homes, switching to using cost-effective local produce, e.g., a catering vegetable box, would involve some fairly significant changes in food preparation routines and storage methods, as could using meat boxes or gluts of seasonal produce.

Supporting activities for these outlets could include:

- Sharing of good practice of local procurement.
- Providing cookery training and recipe ideas.
- Putting caterers in touch with relevant local producers.
- Encouraging larger organisations to break contracts down into smaller parts.
- Linking local producers to existing suppliers to avoid the tendering process.
- Run some New Economics Foundation LM3 studies which show the economic benefit to the local economy of local sourcing policies.