

Local Food Strategy Concept Note

Monmouthshire County Council 2024



1. Background

We are developing a local food strategy that will guide our work for the next five years and beyond. We recognise that the changes we want to see in our local food system will: a) take longer than one council term; b) cannot happen unless we work collaboratively with farmers, producers, wholesalers, retailers, consumers and communities; and c) depend on Welsh and UK farming, food and procurement investments and policies.

In this concept note we present the bones of our emergent strategy. The purpose, approach, principles and potential thematic areas have been identified through conversations and discussions within the Council, with colleagues across many organisations, and with individuals who work in our food system and/or have an interest in making that system fairer, more ethical and more locally based. We have also drawn on a wealth of evidence about our local food and farming context and what works in contributing to a healthier, more sustainable system.

We now want to ground-truth this nascent strategy. This is where you come in. Are we focusing on the right areas? Is it realistic? Are we working with the right people and organisations? Where are the best bets for driving change that could make a significant difference? Your inputs will be vital in shaping the final version of our local food strategy.

2. The Context: Our Understanding of the Current Situation

Current Land Use

- Most of Monmouthshire's land is laid over to grassland for livestock, which is predominantly beef, lamb and dairy with some growth over the last 10 years in poultry, pigs and goats.
- Only 20% of Monmouthshire's land is currently being cultivated for crops, which include barley, wheat, maize (for feed and biofuel), stock feed and other cereals.
- There are currently nine primary vegetable producing businesses across Monmouthshire; those selling direct to the public are small, the largest being 6 hectares (15 acres).
- Monmouthshire County Council owns 24 farm holdings and 40 areas of bare land amounting to 1,122 hectares (2,773 acres) in total, primarily located in the south of the county and in the Severnside area. Most of this land is tenanted or leased to graziers. The majority of the holdings are mixed livestock farms, with few remaining dairy units. There are three market gardens. The Council also owns the Monmouthshire Livestock Market at Raglan.
- The agricultural industry is experiencing challenging times as Government subsidy, trade deals and immigration policy change post-Brexit, and pressure to reduce the environmental impact of farming grows through Government policy, the supply chain, media, and public opinion.

Enterprise and Economy

- From primary production through manufacturing, retail, and hospitality, the food sector accounts for approximately 5,000 jobs in Monmouthshire – with many more jobs in secondary industries connected to food (vets, machinery, logistics, etc.). Monmouthshire is known as a food destination and the 'food capital of Wales'.
- Broadly, the sector's significance in GVA is forecast to increase between 2024 and 2042, though more granular data reveals nuances within the macro-forecasting in terms of job gains or losses in different parts of the supply chain, and GVA per job.

Monmouthshire County Council Local Food Strategy: Concept Note – February 2024

- A large majority of Monmouthshire food enterprises are micro-businesses (0–9 employees), though there are also successful SMEs and larger businesses operating in the county’s food industry.
- Food and drink businesses sometimes struggle to find suitable premises (and/or secure planning permission) to allow them to move into the county or scale-up within it, potentially limiting growth.
- Supply-chain gaps and precarities limit the viability and/or long-term resilience of local supply chains (e.g. slaughtering facilities for livestock; processing and logistics for grains and horticultural crops).
- Staffing and skills are concerns in many areas of the food industry locally, from primary production through manufacture and retail. These concerns are often linked to housing availability and costs.
- One of Monmouthshire County Council’s main interventions in the food economy is in purchasing food for school meals and the county’s meals-on-wheels service (‘public-sector procurement’). Traditional procurement models have excluded small and local suppliers but there has been recent progress towards a more socially responsible procurement strategy that focuses on local wealth creation, taking a more enabling approach to engage with small suppliers.

Community and Health

- Just under 20% of pupils aged 5–15 are eligible for free school meals or transitionally protected (2021–22 data), and just over 25% of children are living in poverty, after housing costs (2020/21 data)
- The roll-out of Welsh Government’s Universal Free School Meals policy is complete across all Monmouthshire’s Infants and Juniors, though uptake is patchy and often lowest in areas with highest eligibility.¹ School-meal budget and lunchtime food waste are areas of concern.
- Healthy Start uptake varies month by month, usually between 60% and 80%.
- Approximately 15% of 4–5-year-olds and over 50% of adults aged 16+ are obese.
- Trussel Trust food banks gave out approximately 4,000 food parcels in 2021/22. Additional free or low-cost food parcels or meals are provided by other community initiatives across the county, including independent food banks, community fridges, food clubs, lunch clubs, soup kitchens, etc., all of whom report rising demand.
- Demand for allotments and growing space is high, with supply and demand often unbalanced across the county.
- Public health practitioners and campaigners are increasingly reporting that traditional health messaging, which seeks to influence individual decisions, is inadequate; they are turning instead to different approaches that attempt to shift the wider context in which individuals make their choices.

Questions

- Do you recognise the current situation as we describe it above?
- Do you recognise the challenges, opportunities, and drivers for change?
- What have we missed?

¹ At present all primary-age children are eligible for a free school lunch. Previously, there was a means-tested approach, and the proportion of children who would have been eligible under that old system is still used as a measure of local prosperity.

3. Why a Local Food Strategy?

The Council has been developing an approach to local and community growing, procurement of food and working with local suppliers. Every primary school has a kitchen where freshly cooked and nutrition-rich meals are produced five days a week. Like most other councils in Wales, we also support a county-wide Food Partnership. These initiatives are appreciated and do show impact. But we can do more to enable a whole-authority approach that is systems-based and focused on sustaining the impacts of our interventions, the long-term sustainability of our land and nature, and the health and well-being of our communities.

We want a strategy that:

- a) **is evidence-based** – driven by evidence which enables us to target areas and populations of need;
- b) **positions us to maximise resources and inward investments** – identifying potential areas of development and pathways to capitalise on development opportunities through attracting more strategic funding and investments;
- c) **aligns our work on the local food system with our Community and Corporate Plan objectives and sector policies** – optimising the impact of food- and farming-based interventions through how we procure, manage our assets, support our local economy, encourage learning and skills acquisition and protect our environment;
- d) **is focused on long-term change** – helping us achieve short-term impacts that set the foundation for achieving long-term goals.

4. Our Purpose

Our Local Food Strategy will set out our direction of travel towards our **long-term goal of fairer, greener, healthier food and farming in a flourishing economy that benefits all our residents.**

We will achieve this through actions that enable, influence and advocate for a local food system that:

- ensures everyone is well nourished,
- supports sustainable food and farming businesses to prosper, and
- allows nature and food production to thrive side by side.

5. Our Approach

Our approach is founded on: **collaborative working** – we will always work in partnership where appropriate; **adaptive and opportunistic approaches** – we will adapt to the changing dynamics in food and farming policy and practice, taking advantage of opportunities arising (e.g. for new partners or funding); while always being focused on **impact and outcomes.**

As well as setting out our objectives and ambitions, the completed Local Food Strategy will include:

- a statement of scope and alignment with other Council strategies;
- a delivery plan detailing the actions we will take on our own and in partnership, along with timelines, funding sources (where known) and responsible officers;
- explanation of how we will define success and track benefits;
- reporting and monitoring framework.

Guiding Principles

Our local food strategy is based on three interlinked principles fundamental to how we will work and the decisions we will make about where to seek investment and/or focus our own resources. These guiding principles are: **tackling inequality, addressing the nature and climate crises, and supporting sustainable and innovative food and farming practices**, as outlined in Table One.

Table One: Guiding Principles Applied to the Food System

Tackling inequality	Addressing the nature and climate crises	Supporting sustainable and innovative food and farming practices
Access to food and land	Agricultural and land management practices	Alternative enterprise models and social enterprise
The socio-economic distribution of dietary ill health and obesity	Food waste and recycling	Collaboration and clustering
The ethics of global and local supply chains	Diversity and resilience in the local food system	Infrastructure and investment
Tackle the root causes of inequality	Visibility of food production and consumers' connection to it	Higher education, technology, R&D

Partnership

To date we have identified the following types of partnership:

- **Strategic partners:** Welsh Government, Marches Forward Partnership, Cardiff Capital Region, Natural Resources Wales, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Gwent Public Health Team, Gwent Public Services Board, Food Farming and Countryside Commission, Food Partnerships, our community voices;
- **Partners in tackling inequality:** Registered Social Landlords, Citizens' Advice Bureau, Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations, Social Farms and Gardens, Trussell Trust, our community voices;
- **Partners in addressing climate and nature crises:** Farming Connect, Gwent Wildlife Trust, Wye and Usk Foundation, Land Workers Alliance, farming unions, farmers and food businesses, our community voices;
- **Critical friends:** An external reference group of 'critical friends' – people with the knowledge, experience, networks and willingness to join us as we finalise and implement the strategy.

Questions

- Do you support the proposed guiding principles? Are they the right ones? Is there an obvious one missing?
- Are we missing key partnerships or partners?

6. Potential Core Themes

Our initial analysis and scoping have identified three interlinked core themes which we believe, based on current evidence, are likely to drive system change. These are:

- Improving local and ethical supply chains,
- Developing food as an economic sector, and
- Community food: access, education, participation.

Table Two below outlines developing actions under each of the proposed themes.

Table Two: Proposed Themes and Developing Actions

Improving local and ethical supply chains	Developing food as an economic sector	Community food: access, education, participation
Increasing the use of local produce in schools (primary and where possible secondary) and care homes.	Showcasing local food and drink producers and promoting Monmouthshire as a food and drink destination.	Providing and promoting access to land through allotments and community gardens for growing food.
Working across the supply chain (incl. suppliers, processors and logistics) to support the development of the local food economy in private and public sectors and reduce our reliance on imported food.	Support entrepreneurs, start-ups, and established food and drink businesses to be environmentally, socially, and financially sustainable – encourage innovation and clustering.	Working in schools to increase ‘food literacy’ from soil to plate and encourage a positive food culture.
Working with procurement colleagues to maximise the social value and minimise the environmental impact of public-sector food contracts (e.g. using Fairtrade and Deforestation Free options where possible, minimising packaging and waste).	Promoting learning pathways to develop skills and career opportunities in food, farming, and associated industries.	Supporting accessible food projects in community settings (e.g. community fridges, lunch clubs, ‘Cookalongs’, etc.)
Promoting regenerative agriculture, nature-friendly farming and horticulture on the MCC farm estate and beyond.	Exploring options for investment in infrastructure (e.g. food park, logistics hub, development kitchen).	Supporting Monmouthshire Food Partnership as a driver of food citizenship.

7. Timeframe

We have deliberately not fixed the strategy within the timeframe of the Community and Corporate Plan. This is because taking a holistic whole-system approach to food and farming will take longer than four to five years. The strategy will, however, align with the Community and Corporate Plan and key enabling strategies, for example the Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy and key Welsh and UK Government policy. We also recognise that we will need to identify phases and milestones to show progression towards our strategic goal. We will do so in the delivery plans and monitoring frameworks which will accompany the strategy.

Questions

- Do you feel any key areas of activity are missing?
- Which activities are the most important to you and why? How will an emphasis on your activity help us achieve our long-term goal? How should we phase these projects?
- Are we doing too much? If so, what should we focus on?
- What can we do now to advance the different themes?

8. Strategic Alignment

Local	National and Regional
<p>The Community and Corporate Plan and enabling strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy • Asset Management Strategy • Economy, Employment and Skills Strategy • Climate & Nature Emergency Strategy and Action Plans • Replacement Local Development Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food and Drink Wales Vision and Strategy • Welsh Government Sustainable Farming Scheme • Welsh Government Community Food Strategy • Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, ‘Cymru Can’ • ‘National Food Strategy’ (Dimpleby Report) • Sustainable Food Places Framework • Natural Resources Wales South-East Area Statement • Gwent Public Services Board Wellbeing Assessment & Plan • ‘Dyfodol Y Bannau The Future’ (Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Management Plan, 2023–28)

Question

- Is there any other evidence or strategy of which we should be aware?