

**Growing Food For A
Growing City:
Issues, Challenges &
Opportunities**

Introduction

By 2031 Milton Keynes will be a major city of some 350,000 people. The new town of the 1970s, considered by many to be an iconic example of radical town planning, will become a sustainable city of the future that has “soul, energy and dynamism”.¹

The question of whether Milton Keynes should grow in size at all has been the cause of great debate and controversy amongst current residents and organisations, but since growth became a certainty the arguments have focused more around what is planned and the way in which it is going to happen.

Work is underway on all fronts to plan for the increase in population, whilst maintaining and improving services for existing residents. Primary and acute health services are under review, and major investment is going into Milton Keynes General Hospital. Transport issues within the city are being addressed with extensive work to Central Milton Keynes Station and planning for the Oxford to Cambridge rail link is well underway. Education and training are central to the development of the new city, with a large school building programme and the creation of a University for Milton Keynes seen as a major priority.

All these changes are designed to ensure that the infrastructure to support growth is in place before the people start to arrive, and that ultimately Milton Keynes is a “sustainable, well designed, high quality and attractive place where people will choose to live and work”.²

Sustainable development principles underline much of what is being written and said about the growth of Milton Keynes but, as yet, there appear to be few examples of these principles realising real, practical projects. This has inevitably led to concern from existing residents of Milton Keynes, who see housing development taking place without any real signs of how the environment is being protected, new jobs created or quality of life maintained.

One aspect of sustainable development which has yet to receive much attention is the production of local food. It seems difficult to imagine, but before the development of the new town Milton Keynes was agricultural land. Numerous small, mixed farms peppered the landscape growing cereal crops and grazing sheep and cattle. Evidence of this agricultural heritage remains intact within the new city boundary in village centres such as Simpson and Woughton on the Green. Farm buildings, now mostly converted to housing, and grazing land still exist, and it's not unusual to come across real sheep or cattle whilst on a walk from one grid square to another!

But, beyond a nostalgic interest, why should we be concerned with growing more food in Milton Keynes? What makes it an important issue for those concerned with the growth of the city?

1 Local Strategic Partnership, 2004

2 Government Office for the South East et al, 2005

This paper seeks to address the reasons why, by considering how the development of a local food system supports national, regional and local government policy on sustainable development, land use, health, economic development and community development; in short, how local food is central to the development of a sustainable community.

It will consider what is meant by local food and a local food economy, and briefly look at what is already happening in the sector in Milton Keynes. The challenges and opportunities facing the development of local food production will be considered alongside the wider issues of food security and access, and then attention is given to what might be achieved in the new city.

Finally, we look at the roles that different agencies and organisations will need to play and the key actions that will need to take place in order to realise the vision.

How Did The Project Come About?

The Food MK project took place between May and October 2006, funded by The Countryside Agency and carried out by Food Train.

Food Train, a social enterprise established to run community food projects in and around Milton Keynes, operates the twice monthly farmers market in Wolverton. The Wolverton farmers market, which is the only community operated market in Milton Keynes, was established in 2004, and draws producers who operate within 30 miles of city.

The Food MK project arose as a direct result of the difficulties encountered in finding producers to attend the farmers market. All but two of the eleven producers who currently sell at the market are drawn from outside of the Milton Keynes Borough. The exceptions are G. Adderson Dairy, based in North Crawley near Newport Pagnell and Harvest Bakery based in Astwood.

Food Train is seeking to develop Wolverton farmers market in such a way that local food enterprises are supported, but having carried out some rudimentary research quickly established what appeared to be an absence of local producers in the Milton Keynes Borough.

This led to a number of important questions being raised, which formed the basis of the Food MK project:

- What is being farmed in and around the new city?
- What is the food sector in MK like?
- What are the needs of local food producers in the area?
- Is a farming renaissance in and around Milton Keynes desirable or even possible?
- Could a new sort of 'farming', such as community supported agriculture, happen within the urban area of Milton Keynes?

This section of the report seeks to give an overview of the answers to all these questions, whilst addressing the key question of why local food is an issue of national, regional and local importance.

Food

Food. We all eat it, need it to survive and many of us have a 'love-hate' relationship with certain types of it. Food is part of our cultural identity and is an important aspect of our rituals and celebrations. But how many of us think beyond the supermarket shelves to the producers, manufacturers and distributors that make up our food system?

Increasing numbers of us, if consumer surveys are to be believed. Food From Britain, a development consultancy which aims to increase production and consumption of quality regional food and drink, believe that the percentage of shoppers buying local food increased by 6% in 2005 with almost 65% buying local food and a further 9% expressing an interest in buying if availability was better.¹

This has resulted in an increased interest in local food, a growth in the number of farmers markets and box schemes and a renewed interest in 'growing your own'. Increasing numbers of consumers are recognising that cheap food has costs associated with it, and are beginning to ask themselves questions about the food system that supports our eating habits.

Supermarkets too are getting in on the act. According to the 2002 UK Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food "We expect local food to enter the mainstream in the next few years ... and have heard from several supermarkets that they see local food as the next major development in food retailing".

So what is wrong with the current food system that makes local food such an important development in food retailing?

The food system includes all of the processes involved in feeding us; growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, processing, transporting, marketing, consuming and disposing. As such the potential effects it has on the environment, communities, and the lives of individuals is profound, something recognised in the recent Food Strategy for London which is predicated on one simple observation; "that the food system in the capital is not functioning in a way that is consistent with the ambition that London should be a sustainable city".²

According to Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, "the way most food is produced, distributed and consumed is unsustainable in every sense of the word."³ We've got used to strawberries all year round and asparagus from Peru. However, eating food which is better travelled than we are has huge environmental costs. Food transportation, which comprises 25% of our road traffic, uses fossil fuels and causes pollution, contributing to climate change. Uniformly perfect apples can only be achieved using intensive farming methods, which contribute to environmental pollution and have other adverse health effects.

And as well as the environmental costs, the food system has a huge effect on people. Many workers in both agriculture and the food sector are poorly paid and work in adverse conditions. Inequalities in access to food mirror inequalities found in society and contribute to large disparities in mortality rates and health between

1 Food From Britain, 2005

2 London Development Agency, 2006

3 Sustainable Food Chains Briefing Local Food: Benefits, obstacles and opportunities, Sustain, 2002

the 'haves and the have nots'.

Cookery skills, which were once passed on from generation to generation, are less of a priority now people have access to ready meals, and when the pace of life means that there is less and less time to make meals from raw ingredients. These lifestyle changes are having an increasing impact on our children's diets, and there is grave concern about obesity levels amongst children brought about by poor diets and the availability of 'fast food'.⁴

Globally, the world food supply is vulnerable to a diversity of threats, including climate change, loss of agricultural land to urban development, rising oil prices (these drive up the costs of producing and transporting food), bio-terrorism, the threat of global pandemics, and food safety issues such as food-borne pathogens. In the UK we are importing £20.7 billion pounds worth of food compared to an export value of £9.8 billion, and estimates suggest that we are only 74 % self-sufficient in indigenous food types and 63% for all food.⁵

So what are the alternatives to the global food system? And how can we in Milton Keynes make a difference?

Local Food

Unlike the term organic, 'local' food does not have a legal definition, but the following definition has been developed to describe a sustainable local food economy:

"A system of producing, processing and trading, primarily of organic and sustainable forms of food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas."

Sustain (the alliance for better food and farming) prefer to use the term 'sustainable food' which refers to food which meets a number of different criteria including:

Proximate – originating from the closest practicable source or the minimization of energy use

Healthy – as part of a balanced diet and not containing harmful biological or chemical contaminants

Fairly or Co-operatively traded – between producers, processors, retailers and consumers

Non-exploiting of employees in the food sector in terms of pay and conditions

Environmentally beneficial or benign in its production (e.g. organic)

Accessible both in terms of geographical access and affordability

High animal welfare standards in both production and transport

4 Sustain, 2005

5 DEFRA, 2005

Socially inclusive of all people in society

Encouraging knowledge and understanding of food and culture

So what might a local food economy look like? The Foundation for Local Food Initiatives identifies four areas within the local food sector:

Mainstream food businesses – producers, processors, distributors and retailers who may be buying local products not because of any conscious decision but simply by default

Community food initiatives – including home produce, allotments, community gardens, food co-ops and community cafés

Local food pioneers – including farmers markets, box schemes, farm shops and community supported agriculture schemes (which we look at in more detail in Section 3, **Eat The City**)

Support and development projects – including initiatives in the voluntary, statutory and private sectors such as local food networks, regeneration initiatives and marketing programmes by farmer co-operatives

As part of the Food MK Project an assessment was carried out to consider the nature of the local food economy within Milton Keynes. We considered the whole of the food chain from primary production through to disposal of food waste, and some interesting facts and figures arose.

Mainstream Food Businesses

Primary Production

There are around 60 working farms in the Borough of Milton Keynes; most are arable and livestock and two are dairies – G.Adderson in North Crawley and Hill Farm in Haversham. G. Adderson sells at local farmers markets and a milk round which reaches into the city as far as Newport Pagnell. Hill Farm has a large ASDA contract for milk and is developing an ice cream product which they hope to market locally.

In terms of vegetables there is no significant commercial production apart from asparagus grown at Moulsoe in the east of the city, sold as pick your own and at the farm gate.

Milton Keynes has an award winning beekeeper running 30 hives in various city locations and selling solely at farmers markets. There are a number of other beekeepers – in Simpson, Castlethorpe and Newton Blossomville, which may reflect the growing popularity of beekeeping described in section 3, **Eat The City**.

There is an established apple orchard in the city which was planted by the Development Corporation in 1977 and until recently grapes for winemaking were also produced. There is no organised collection of either the apples or grapes. Local people do come out at harvest time and fill bags, but much is wasted and left to rot.

Processing & Distribution

Milton Keynes has around thirty food processing companies ranging from small artisan processors such as Woburn County Foods to large global multi-nationals such as Esca who make beef patties for McDonalds and Sensient Flavors who make food flavourings and colourings.

These large companies are well serviced by the transport and communication infrastructure in Milton Keynes. However, there are no cold storage facilities for fruit and vegetables in Buckinghamshire which means that any fresh produce will be transported further and more often than necessary.⁶

There is a small general abattoir in Hanslope and a poultry abattoir in Olney. The poultry abattoir is well used and processes locally reared poultry which is sold at a number of local markets and farm shops.

Retail

A broad survey of the food retail sector within the Borough was carried out using existing data and field surveys. Milton Keynes has around forty supermarkets including convenience stores, most of which have been taken over by supermarkets. Tesco has 51% of the grocery share. The combined market share (excluding convenience) of the largest four retailers (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury and Morrisons) rose from 69 per cent in 2004 to 74 per cent in 2005.⁷

There are a small number of traditional and specialist food retailers mainly located in the older towns on the outer edges of the Borough. Woburn Sands boasts the highest number with a good range including a grocers, butchers, and independent bakers. However, Heelands, in the centre of the city has managed to retain an established bakery and greengrocer despite the proximity of a supermarket convenience store. This is a unique situation in Milton Keynes, and investigating why this has happened is vital. A recommendation for further research is included in section 5, the **Food MK Action Plan**.

Bletchley and Wolverton are established centres for ethnic food shops including Asian, African and Eastern European. Elsewhere in the city there are a handful of wholesalers selling Chinese and South African food and the city centre market hosts a number of ethnic food stalls.

There are four traditional street markets in Bletchley, Central Milton Keynes, Wolverton and Stony Stratford and four distinct farmers markets; Stony Stratford, Olney, Woburn and Wolverton. Bletchley, Newport Pagnell and New Bradwell have expressed aspirations to hold farmers markets and are actively pursuing this.

Catering & Food Service

Milton Keynes has many cafés, bars, restaurants and take-aways but perhaps not the diversity one would expect from an established city. Most are located in the city centre area or within the older settlements. According to the Annual Business Inquiry (ABI), 39,297 people in Milton Keynes are employed in the distribution, hotel and food service sector. This is the highest of all the employment categories for Milton Keynes and higher than any other town in the South East region

6 SEEDA, 2001

7 DEFRA, 2005

– Brighton and Hove being second highest with 31,600.⁸ This figure may be artificially high due to the number of distribution businesses based in Milton Keynes, therefore further research is needed to establish the exact nature of this sector, and draw any useful conclusions.

Waste Disposal

Incredibly, 40% of all food purchased in the UK is never eaten.⁹ The levels of waste associated with food are therefore unsurprisingly high. Milton Keynes has a kerbside recycling service for some plastics, glass, paper and card and is achieving a 31% recycling rate compared to St Edmundsbury in Suffolk, which has the highest rate in the UK at 50.64%.¹⁰ It does not currently include kitchen waste though the Council are trialling kitchen waste collection in two locations in the city.¹¹

According to the Council, 28,000 residents take part in their green waste collection. The green waste is composted at a farm in Haversham in the north of the City and used as agricultural fertiliser. Waste Watch estimate up to 30% of our household waste could be composted and WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) has distributed over 500,000 compost bins throughout the country. However, no clear figures exist for how many people are actively composting and anecdotally, the drop out rate is high.¹²

On food packaging and reducing waste at source, The National Federation of Women's Institutes are currently leading a campaign to challenge supermarkets to cut down on packaging or face a boycott, though no specific action has been taken by them in Milton Keynes. WRAP are working with retailers and businesses, such as the Co-op, on initiatives for packaging minimisation. Milton Keynes has a high number of Co-op stores so we would expect to see some evidence of this programme soon.¹³ Anglia Oils operates a waste cooking oil collection scheme that covers Milton Keynes. They currently collect from around 150 food businesses in MK. The waste oil is collected and processed into bio diesel fuel.¹⁴

Community Food Initiatives

There is an emerging community food sector in Milton Keynes which includes a number of community cafés and community gardens. There are many informal co-operative buying clubs but, as yet, no community supported agriculture scheme. (Further information on community supported agriculture can be found in Section 3, **Eat The City**).

There are approximately 2,500 allotment plots in the city but no clear figures for occupancy. Anecdotal evidence shows demand is high with waiting lists in some

8 ABI, 2004

9 Observer, 2005

10 Milton Keynes Council, 2006/Guardian Green Living Guide, 2006

11 Milton Keynes Council, 2006

12 Waste Online, 2006

13 WRAP, 2006

14 Anglia Oils, 2006

areas, whilst in others sites are often derelict.

There is one community run farmers market (Wolverton) in the Borough, and two Country Markets (formerly the WI) that operate (one in Wolverton and the other in Olney) which provide a flexible way for small and hobby producers to realise a small income from their produce. There is no requirement for sellers to specifically use local ingredients, but many do, and they are concerned with encouraging a new generation of young people to get involved in growing, cooking and crafting.

Local Food Pioneers

Three large box schemes operate in the area – River Nene and The Ethical Food Company and Able & Cole. There is one large milk delivery service – Dairy Crest, and an independent milk round in the north east of the city, G. Adderson Dairy.

There are three farm shops in the Borough; Fullers, in Beachampton, selling mainly organic fruit and vegetables grown in Leicestershire and organic meat produced on the adjoining farm, Thrift Farm is a rural training centre for adults with learning difficulties in the South of the city and Hunters Farm shop is situated in Little Brickhill.

Support & Development Projects

The Berks, Bucks & MK and Oxon Food Group (BBO) is the main body providing support and development services for local food producers in the Milton Keynes Borough.

The BBO Food Group was set up in 2004 with the aim of encouraging people in the area to buy their food locally, and to set up links between those wishing to source and serve local food, and those that can provide it. Membership of the group is growing all the time, and represents a wide range of producers, from Slough in the south, to Olney in the north.

The BBO group publishes an annual Food Guide which features local producers in the area. Unfortunately the coverage of MK producers is sparse with only 5 producers in the MK Borough area featured.

It is fair to say that there are issues as to whether the unique character of Milton Keynes and the surrounding rural area are best served by continuing to be part of the BBO group, an issue we will return to in considering the obstacles and challenges to developing the local food economy in MK.

Organisations and services such as Business Link, the Rural Development Service and the Farm Business Advice Service are the second source of help and advice for local food producers in the Milton Keynes area. Our impression is that these more mainstream services provide limited specialist support to local food producers, and that the RDS and Farm Business Advice Service are often targeting larger rural businesses, and advising on farm diversification and habitat creation/biodiversity as part of the wider government agenda around farming and food.

There is no formal organisation in Milton Keynes promoting or supporting community food initiatives and food growing projects run by and for the community. However, as always happens in the community and voluntary sector, there are informal networks of support with projects such as Foundation Food and

Food Train offering informal, consultancy support to a range of organisations who are considering starting or who have already begun working on community food initiatives.

One potential, but as yet undeveloped, source of support for local food producers is the 'Eat Healthy MK Group', a multi-agency group chaired by a member of Milton Keynes Council's Cabinet. The group aims to ensure that residents of Milton Keynes are aware of what comprises a healthy diet and are able to access the healthy foods they require, and is doing good work exchanging information and identifying group and geographical areas which are most in need of input. It is fair to say that they have yet to make the link between local, sustainable food and healthy food. However, there is real potential for the group to begin to support and develop the local food economy, an issue which is picked up as one of the possible actions within the **Food MK Action Plan**.

In conclusion, our audit of the Milton Keynes local food economy revealed that the sector is a small but significant contributor to the general food market in Milton Keynes, offering residents an alternative to the supermarket or corner shop.

Given the right infrastructure and support it could easily flourish, and in doing so could be a real example of 'sustainable development' in action within a growing Milton Keynes.

We will now briefly consider what infrastructure and support is needed locally to support the sector, before moving on to look at how government offers support to local food through national, regional and local policy.

Obstacles & Challenges Facing The Local Food Sector

As well as gathering facts and figures about the food economy in Milton Keynes, we spent some time surveying local food producers about their needs.

This work was only ever meant to give a snap-shot of views, and is not statistically significant in that the numbers surveyed were not high. However, it did give us some clear views from the people 'at the coal face' on the obstacles and challenges they face producing and selling local food in the Milton Keynes Borough.

Mainstream local food businesses identified the following barriers to selling more produce locally:

- Lack of co-ordination of farmers markets
- Lack of proper facilities i.e. covered market places and other appropriate public spaces for holding markets
- Lack of resources and time for promoting their products locally
- Lack of processing facilities such as cold stores and cutting plants

When asked what kinds of local initiatives might support their businesses, producers identified the following:

- A better public understanding of food issues
- A Milton Keynes Local Food Guide
- A local food branding scheme, such as 'Made in MK' – although support for this was not universal

- More co-ordinated support from statutory organisations – small or emerging processors reported little dedicated business advice and concerns about complicated legislation
- Availability of suitable land and premises for production and processing
- Access to new markets – few producers were making any inroads into supplying mainstream food businesses, and co-ordinated support is needed if this is to ‘get off the ground’

Community food initiatives face very different issues in seeking to develop their projects. Barriers to development which were cited by them included:

- An understanding of the nature and scope of their projects, especially with regard to accessing set-up grant funding
- Acquiring greater skills in food growing
- Access to land
- Access to tools and equipment
- Support in business planning to ensure sustainability

The issues raised by local food producers and community food projects, together with information gathered by the Foodcheck process, interviews with key organisations and observations from good practice elsewhere in the country have led us to conclude that there are a number of key obstacles and challenges affecting the development of the local food economy in Milton Keynes.

These obstacles and challenges can be grouped under the following themes:

- Local governance
- Research and policy work
- Education, promotion and marketing of local food
- Development of the local food economy

Local Governance

Key organisations in Milton Keynes such as Milton Keynes Council and Milton Keynes Partnership Committee do not have a policy for establishing and developing a local food economy. The value of local food production to the green, social and community infrastructure of the growing city needs to be recognised and a commitment made to support development work.

There is a vacuum in Milton Keynes when it comes to co-ordination of and support for the local food sector. Our membership of the Bucks & MK, Berkshire and Oxon Food Group (which was presumably based upon MK’s location within Buckinghamshire) is not providing the right sort of assistance to MK local food producers, for instance meetings are normally held too far away for MK producers to easily attend them.

There is no explicit Council or other resources going into support the local food sector, with Parish and Town Councils taking the lead on coordinating and supporting farmers markets.

The role that allotments currently play within Milton Keynes, and the role they could potentially play within the growing city, appears to have received little attention, apart from an acknowledgement that allotments need to be provided

in the new expansion areas. With the transfer of allotment land from Milton Keynes Council to all the Parish and Town Councils, there is a real opportunity for a re-assessment of the over-arching Allotment Strategy and re-evaluation on an individual parish level of the role that allotments could play in developing community, supporting local food production and promoting health.

In the short-term Milton Keynes needs an informal network that can link together local producers, community food projects and community growing initiatives, so that better ways of working and growing can be shared, and training and other support offered.

In the longer-term Milton Keynes needs an infrastructure organisation that can support and develop local food businesses, community growing projects and allotments, as well as doing educational and awareness raising work which can begin to develop a local food culture in the new city. This body could be structured along the lines of a 'Food Links' organisation, of which there are several good examples across the UK. For instance, Food Links in Brighton & Hove is a not-for-profit limited company with over 150 members who are individuals and organisations working within or interested in the city's food system. The organisation has developed a local food strategy –'Spade to Spoon' – which has a range of practical projects and policy work designed to bring more locally produced food into Brighton & Hove.

As a precursor to the development of a Milton Keynes version of this organisation, we are recommending the establishment of a Food MK Group which would take forward further research work and a number of practical projects to support local producers which are mentioned in detail in the Food MK Action Plan. The Food MK Group could also work towards the development of Food Links MK, preparing a development plan and accessing funding for the establishment of the organisation.

Research & Policy

If development of the local food economy is to happen in the way we are recommending, further information needs to be gathered on the current position of local food in Milton Keynes. The Food MK database, created as part of this report, needs further work to ensure it is as accurate and comprehensive as possible. Background research is needed for work on people's attitudes to food and local food as well as basic information about land and retail opportunities that might exist in the city to support local food production.

In addition to research work, the policy vacuum that currently exists needs to be filled. Key organisations like Milton Keynes Council, the Primary Care Trust and Parish councils need to develop policy and practice that, coupled with the right level of support, might gradually begin to support existing local producers and community food initiatives.

In the simplest terms, if you are going to grow food you need land to do it on and if land within the city boundary and the new expansion areas is to be identified for food production, then the local authority and Milton Keynes Partnership need to commit to the concept through their planning and land use strategies. By 'land for food production', we are thinking beyond statutory allotment provision, to land within each grid square, which might be 'set aside' for community orchards or

urban market gardens. (see Section 3 **Eat The City** for more on the methods of urban agriculture)

The introduction of the new planning system provides ample opportunity to enshrine a commitment to land for local food production within a policy framework. Local food needs to appear as an issue within the local authority's core strategy, and Area Action Plans, and any future master planning work needs to ensure that land for food production is considered along with other social and community infrastructure.

The argument as to why local food production should be given such a high priority is developed in the next section of this report, which is then followed by a 'who needs to do what list' to make it happen.

Education, Promotion & Marketing Of Local Food

There is a lack of awareness amongst many consumers and businesses in Milton Keynes that a local food sector exists and that there are options in terms of food purchasing. On a broader level, there is a need to educate young and old about the value of eating local food and how, on an individual level, people can get involved in growing their own.

Whilst development of a wider local food culture in Milton Keynes is key to the longer term success of the local food sector, in the short-term, basic promotional information and marketing support for individual producers is vital to business survival.

We are suggesting the production of a Food MK Guide, which could include details of local food businesses, farmers markets, community food growing projects and restaurants/food retailers who use or stock local food. This could be produced annually in print form, and published electronically on MK web and other local websites.

On an individual producer level, we have established a real need for practical assistance in producing marketing material and information, something which we hope the Food MK Group might begin to consider as part of its short-term action plan.

On a cross-Borough area level, we believe that local food needs to be promoted as an important issue by key organisations within Milton Keynes. This would mean, for instance, that the local authority and others could make a public commitment to source local food, and to consider wider procurement policies.

Development Work

Developing the local food economy involves putting in place a range of support structures for local producers, voluntary organisations, community groups and individuals who might want to take the plunge and begin to grow their own!

Whilst generalist business development advice is available, the kind of issues facing potential local food enterprises often require very specific input of a 'structural nature', for instance, how much marketing individual producers might do. A 'local food culture' needs to be present in an area, and the development of this culture is beyond the influence of any one individual producer. Business advice targeted at the traditional 'rural' sector (such as that offered by the Rural

Development Service) is often focused on diversifying away from food production rather than towards it, and within the Borough of Milton Keynes it also fails to pick up 'urban-based' food and farming businesses who don't fit the traditional rural criteria.

The newly established Enterprise Gateway may offer some support to potential producers in specific areas of Milton Keynes, and in Wolverton there is some specific support for social enterprises via community organisation Wolverton Unlimited. However, organised training and social enterprise advice for community food growers is not available other than through informal connections between individuals and organisations. Food Train is seeking to plug this gap through the establishment of The Urb Farmers Network, which would provide formal support, training and advice to fledgling community food projects. Further detail about the network is in section 4, **An Urban Farm For Milton Keynes**.

Allotments, and their continued existence in the growing city, are a crucial area of development work. The value of food growing to the health of individuals and the contribution these green spaces make to the green infrastructure and biodiversity of Milton Keynes requires proper resourcing and support.

All four of the themes which we have just investigated re-appear within the **Food MK Action Plan** and at the end of this report in the recommended actions for individual organisations.

But we will now turn our attention to the national policy framework, and investigate how the development of a local food sector in Milton Keynes can contribute to the realisation of national government strategies and targets.

Policy Framework

Food is a cross-cutting issue affecting the environment, individual and community health, the economy and community cohesion. This section of the report concentrates on national, regional and local policy which would support the development of the local food economy in Milton Keynes.

In recognising the need to put local food within such a context, we are seeking to be clear about the outcomes that could be achieved before we move on later in the report to consider the inputs that would be required.

The following should be read with reference to Table 1 below which gives an overview of how the development of a local food economy within Milton Keynes is supported (or where there is a policy gap) in national, regional and local government policy.

Table 1

National, Regional & Milton Keynes Policies Supporting The Development Of A Local Food Sector

Theme	Sustainable Development	Farming & food	Communities & Spatial Planning	Health
National Policy	UK Sustainable Development Strategy	National Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food	Sustainable Communities Plan	Choosing Health
Regional Policy	South East Sustainable Development Framework	South East Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food	The South East Plan Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub-Regional Strategy	Eating for Health - The South East Health and Food Action Plan
Local Policy	Milton Keynes Local Agenda 21 Strategy	No explicit MK policy on farming and food and the development of an MK local food sector	Milton Keynes Local Plan 2001-2011 Adopted December 2005	No explicit MK policy on health and local food

The UK Sustainable Development Strategy is the over-arching policy document within which the local food agenda sits. Sustainable consumption and production

is one of the agreed priorities of the strategy, and the production, distribution and consumption of food gets considerable attention. The strategy advocates action by manufacturers and retailers which supports more sustainable choices by individual consumers. It calls upon the need to “*address how consumption patterns link to environmental impacts across the whole life cycle of food products*”, and highlights sustainable procurement – “*embedding sustainable development considerations into spending and investment decisions by the public sector*” – as a major way in which sustainable production can be supported. This is all good news for the local food system, which has the potential to substantially contribute to the delivery of not only sustainable consumption and production but to all the other three agreed priorities within the strategy: climate change, natural resource protection and sustainable communities. We will look at how this contribution is made in the next section of the report.

The South East Regional Sustainable Development Framework¹ was put together in 2000 and designed to be a practical document which sets a number of objectives and targets for achieving sustainable development in the South East region. It has a number of underlying principles which link with the development of a local food economy in Milton Keynes including:

- Adopting an integrated approach which links social, economic and environmental needs – local food production has a positive impact on the local environment, people (in terms of community engagement in growing and support for local producers) and the economy, keeping money within an area -
- Being proactive to meet the challenges and avoiding problems rather than dealing with the consequences of unsustainable development – the new models of urban food production covered in section 3, **Eat The City** are innovative and proactively meet the environmental challenges we are currently facing
- Meeting local needs locally, thereby reducing environmental damage through travel, benefiting local economies and saving time – local food consumption can help alleviate the damage caused by distribution of food which has a hugely damaging effect on CO2 emissions and consequently climate change

The LA21 Strategy for Milton Keynes² was Milton Keynes’s response to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro which set an international plan of action on the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment, growing poverty and social inequalities. The international action plan was called Agenda 21 and had at its heart the concept of sustainable development. The local Agenda 21 has the following broad aim: “*To promote the sustainable social, economic and environmental well being of the people of Milton Keynes*”. The strategy is about to begin a process of review, and we expect the commitment to the local food agenda to be strengthened during this process. As it stands the strategy currently highlights the following areas of work which directly or indirectly link to local food:

- Help people understand their relationship to life systems – local food can help people understand the links between food, the environment and health

1 SEERA et al, 2001

2 Milton Keynes Council & MK21, 2002

- Educate people to understand the economic and social significance of their consumer choices – local food farmers markets can help consumers meet producers and understand how and where the products are made
- Increase community involvement in local allotments – allotments are a key element of local food production, and different models of management and development will hopefully mean that they will make more of a contribution to the food system in the future
- Encourage householders, organisations, businesses to use their land to improve biodiversity – improvements in biodiversity can be an outcome of local food production
- Encourage local businesses to use local suppliers, and communities to support businesses in their own area to double the amount of locally purchased goods – local food producers are best placed to do business with local business, the public service and the voluntary and community sector, but a change of attitude within these organisations towards procurement is often needed
- Aim to sustain a more balanced local economy, and to encourage small & medium-sized businesses & new sustainable technology – most local food producers are SMEs, or self employed individuals who make a positive contribution to the mix of business in Milton Keynes
- Efficient resource use – evidence suggests that local food producers are more likely to be involved in waste reduction practices and generally to use resources more efficiently
- Provision of clear environmental information for process & product – evidence suggests that most local food producers provide information and advice about cooking their products!

The Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food³ is the central policy document that supports the development of local food. It came about as a result of The Curry Commission which was established to reassess the place of farming and the food industry in rural society and economy following the Foot and Mouth crisis of 2001. The Curry Commission's main conclusion was that the whole of the food chain has to reconnect with its customers, the world economy, the countryside and the environment. The National Strategy has a regional delivery plan, Farming and Food: Our Healthy Future⁴ which has a number of areas for action and priority tasks including:

- Reconnection along the food chain
- Strategic development of local food
- Identification of opportunities to link local suppliers into public procurement

On reconnection along the food chain, the strategy calls for local authorities to support, promote and develop farmers markets in their area, as well as mapping significant food chain customers and suppliers within a region as a resource for future work. On the strategic development of local food a number of significant actions are called for including:

- Identifying the critical success factors from farmers markets and

3 DEFRA, 2002

4 Government Office for the South East & SEEDA, 2003

encouraging new formats such as farmers supermarkets and in-town farm shops

- Developing Local Food Works networks throughout the region
- Linking PCT initiatives on healthy eating with the local food agenda
- Educating consumers in the benefits of seasonal and local food
- Developing a tool-kit to help local producers understand consumer motivations and consider how their product can meet them

Finally, on public procurement, a regional study is recommended to identify the largest public procurement agencies, examine their sourcing and explore the scope for regionalised/local sourcing.

Much of the work outlined in Farming and Food: Our Healthy Future is now included within the South East Food and Health Action Plan and is being led by the South East Food Policy Forum. However, as yet, little of the national and regional work on food and farming appears to have been taken forward within Milton Keynes. The limited action being taken is being led by the Eat Healthy MK Group, which has been running for about a year involving representatives from Milton Keynes Council and the Primary Care Trust. The group is at the early stages of identifying areas for action and, as already mentioned, has yet to plug into the wider agenda of sustainable food.

“Communities rather than housing estates” – this is the concept behind the Sustainable Communities Plan⁵. The plan introduced the idea of Growth Areas in the South East designed to meet housing need for the future. It also made a commitment to regenerate deprived areas and deliver improvements to the countryside and environment in all regions. Two key themes underline the plan; that *“communities are more than just housing”* and that *“the way communities develop must respect the needs of future generations as well as succeeding now”*.⁶

Both these themes have resonance with the local food agenda. Growing local food is a key way in which people can make connections with others and ultimately with ‘their place’, and the production and consumption of local food is in itself a ‘sustainable act’, reinvigorating land for future use, as well as supporting individual health and the health of the local economy.

The Sustainable Communities Plan led to the development of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub Regional Strategy⁷. This strategy is intended to provide strategic guidance on the scale, location and timing of development in the MKSM growth area up to 2021, and consider the long-term spatial vision for the region up to 2031. The MKSM SRS gives more detail on the features of a sustainable community, and this further detail is useful in considering how local food production can support the realisation of the strategy. According to the strategy, key requirements of a sustainable community include:

- Safe, healthy local environment
- Urban areas that relate well to the landscape and enhance environmental

5 ODP, 2003

6 Ibid.

7 Government Office of the South East et al, 2005

assets

- A diverse, vibrant and creative local culture encouraging pride and community cohesion
- Engagement of the community in the planning, design and long-term stewardship of their community

All of these key requirements could be met by the establishment and development of a local food economy. Local food production within the urban area of Milton Keynes is likely to enhance the green infrastructure by enabling pockets of underused land or neglected land to have a specific purpose. Local food initiatives are community driven and supported and, as we demonstrate in section 3, **Eat The City**, can really engage people and create a sense of place.

The South East Plan⁸ is a new type of planning document. It sets out a vision for the future of the South East region to 2026, outlining how the region can respond to the challenges such as the need for more housing, a strong economy, transport and protecting the environment. The aim of the plan is to ensure that the South East remains economically successful and an attractive place to live for future generations.

The Plan has a number of cross-cutting themes including climate change, resource use and quality of life, which link with the local food agenda. The prudent use of natural resources, such as water, energy and minerals, and a reduction in waste generated, is a key area in which a vibrant local food economy can make a real difference. Similarly, the local food economy can make a real contribution to reducing CO2 emissions and hence alleviating the effects of climate change, and provides a practical example of a measure which can assist individuals to make a difference. A high quality of life will be achieved by *“the creation and conservation of high quality environments, both natural and man made, which reflect local character and distinctiveness and promote high quality design and innovation to create a sense of place.”*⁹ Local food production has the potential to enhance the local environment, improve biodiversity and give an area a real character!

The Milton Keynes Local Plan¹⁰ and Adopted Draft¹¹ sets out how Milton Keynes will be developed in the future. It includes details such as the amount and location of housing, employment, shopping and community facilities required. Although the development of local food production is not explicitly mentioned, the vision for the local plan includes some important statements about encouraging sustainable lifestyles, clean, green environments and stimulating diversity and innovation, all of which link with local food.

The most significant and recent planning document covering the development of Milton Keynes is The New Plan for Milton Keynes – A Strategy for Growth to 2031¹². The links between this document and the development of the local food economy are looked at in detail in the next section of this report.

8 SEERA 2006

9 Ibid.

10 Milton Keynes Council, 2002

11 Milton Keynes Council, 2005

12 Milton Keynes Partnership, 2006

The Public Health White Paper: Choosing Health, Making Healthier Choices Easier¹³ sets out the Government's strategy for improving the public's health through measures aimed at preventing illness. There are a number of priorities for achieving better health including a priority to tackle obesity and reduce health inequalities. To help deliver on the commitments made in the Public Health White Paper to improve diet and nutrition the Government produced Choosing a Better Diet: A Food and Health Action Plan (FAHAP). The national FAHAP includes a number of actions which link to the local food agenda including:

- Healthier eating in a consumer society – development of a local food economy gives consumers additional choice to eat food which is good for the environment and good for them
- Encouraging healthy eating behaviours in children and young people – anecdotal evidence suggests that if children and young people can see, and be part of, local food production, they are more likely to eat healthily
- Promoting opportunities for healthy eating in communities – the experience from the Wolverton farmers markets shows that links can be made between local producers and local retailers, businesses and community organisations thereby increasing the opportunities for eating local food in an area
- Promoting opportunities for healthy eating in the workplace and ensuring that the public sector leads by example – procurement of local food supports the local economy whilst improving the environment and the health of workers

Eating for Health: The South East Food and Health Action Plan (SE FAHAP) is a regional strategy supporting the implementation of the national FAHAP. It seeks to co-ordinate and develop regional activity to improve food related health for all in the region, but especially those who are less likely to eat healthily either due to access, availability, affordability or lack of awareness. The aim of SE FAHAP is to protect and improve the health of the people of the South East. The objectives include supporting the regional food economy in contributing to a healthier diet and sustainable economic and environmental development, and increasing the purchase and consumption of locally, regionally and sustainably produced food. Both of these objectives provide a policy basis from which to support local food production in Milton Keynes.

The final policy area which supports the development of a local food system is the National Healthy Schools Programme¹⁴ which requires schools to meet minimum standards regarding healthy eating. The NHSP requires a “*whole school food policy*” and the involvement of parents and pupils in the “guiding food policy and practice in their school”. Whilst there is no explicit mention of local food, the emphasis on healthy food and community involvement in developing policy enables schools, parents and pupils committed to sustainability to support local food production. From ensuring that pupils have an understanding of where food comes from through to the use of local food within the school kitchen there are many ways in which this area of government policy can support the development of local food.

13 Department of Health, 2004

14 Department of Health & Department of Education and Skills, 2005

As well as the NHSP a new government programme called Food in Schools¹⁵ is developing a whole range of nutrition-related activities and projects in schools. The programme does specifically mention sustainable food and the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) which aims to support the procurement of food in a manner that promotes sustainable development and removes barriers to small and local suppliers.

Growth & Sustainable Development

Milton Keynes is, once again, on the brink of a period of major change and redevelopment. As part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Growth Area the new town is set to accommodate 71,000 new homes between 2001 and 2031. This means that by 2031 Milton Keynes will be a centre of major regional importance with a population of over 300,000 and with some 290,000 jobs.

In order to guide this growth, a 30 year sustainable growth plan The New Plan for Milton Keynes – A Strategy for Growth to 2031 has been prepared and is currently out to consultation. The Strategy for Growth draws upon a number of key documents mentioned in the previous section including the Sustainable Communities Plan, the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub Regional Strategy and the Milton Keynes Adopted Local Plan 2005. As well as being an important local document that will shape growth within Milton Keynes, the Strategy for Growth also forms part of Milton Keynes' submission to the consultation on the South East Plan.

In terms of the local food agenda, all these planning documents are key in setting the principles upon which population growth will take place. And they all share the same commitment to sustainable growth. Central Government have recognised that major growth does not come without major improvements to infrastructure, and plans for improvements to roads, health, education and social and cultural facilities are underway to ensure, as far as possible, that services are delivered in advance of new residents moving in. But despite this infrastructure development, the biggest challenge facing Milton Keynes, and the rest of the South Midlands area, is how to grow and develop in a way that "*meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*".¹

So how can the production and consumption of local food contribute to sustainable development?

The Strategy for Growth has adopted a number of core sustainability principles, which are:

- Moving to a low carbon economy
- Increasing resource efficiency
- Enhancing environmental assets
- Enhancing quality of life
- Ensuring economic sustainability

We will look at each principle in turn and consider how local food can support the achievement of sustainability in a growing city.

Reduction of carbon dioxide emissions is essential if we are to have any hope of halting or reversing climate change. Production, transportation and packaging of food are all major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. For example, 7% of the UK's CO₂ emissions are produced by road haulage, and 30% of all road haulage is made up of agricultural and food freight.²

Research supported by The Countryside Agency and the World Wide Fund for

1 Bruntland Commission 1987

2 Desai & Riddlestone, 2002

Nature assessed the possible benefits of local food networks when it considered the case of a highly successful strawberry co-operative called Kentish Gardens (KG). Although originating in Kent, KG had grown to over 50 producers across the UK, supplying 40% of the UK strawberry market. The research traced KG strawberries from farm to supermarket outlets, via the supermarket distribution centres, and estimated the CO₂ released. The results were striking. When KG strawberries are delivered from Kent to a Sainsbury's supermarket in London, each tonne of strawberries releases 17kg of CO₂. When strawberries are delivered from Kent to Scotland, 145kg of CO₂ is released. And, under pressure to supply strawberries all year round, KG also airfreight strawberries in from Israel, producing 4.6 tonnes of CO₂!

In a separate piece of research carried out by the Foundation for Local Food Initiatives (f3), survey results showed that 75% of local food enterprises used local suppliers, compared with about half of non-local food businesses. So local food *production* is also generating lower 'food miles', and fewer CO₂ emissions.

Using resources more efficiently and producing less waste is the second major challenge to be faced if sustainable development is to be achieved in Milton Keynes. The f3 research revealed that over a quarter (29%) of local food enterprises are involved in waste reduction practices, over twice as many compared to enterprises outside of the local food sector. These practices included conservation of resources such as air, soil and water as well as reducing levels of pollution and waste.

According to Desai and Riddlestone, "*creating a local food cycle can ...allow us to return organic wastes – composted green waste and sewerage – back to the land, building soils and fertility and supporting organic cultivation.*" A good example of this is a scheme run by Wyecycle in Kent, where organic waste is collected from homes and taken for composting on local farms. Wyecycle also delivers local fresh food and vegetables to people's homes via a box scheme.³

The concept of enhancing environmental assets derives from work in environmental economics which suggests that in addition to manufactured assets there are four other forms of capital asset required for sustainable development: human capital (skills and knowledge), social capital (interactions and cohesiveness of communities), natural capital (goods and services provided by nature like water, land, minerals) and environmental assets or capital including other living organisms and the ecosystems into which they are organised. The Strategy for Growth focuses on the following environmental assets:

- *Biodiversity and habitats*
- *Green infrastructure*
- *Air quality*
- *Water quality*
- *Landscapes*
- *Built environment*
- *Heritage assets*

In terms of *biodiversity*, production of local food has the potential to create a range

of different green spaces – from formal allotments/urban market gardens through to edible hedgerows and fruit orchards – all of which will create new habitats for plants and wildlife. This is particularly significant in light of the recent Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill which extends to all public authorities the duty to “*have regard to biodiversity as far as is consistent with the proper exercise of their functions*”.⁴ This means that planning authorities now have further powers to ensure that biodiversity is maintained and enhanced as part of any development. It could therefore be argued that if urban food production is one way in which to enhance this biodiversity, then more regard should be taken to ‘designing in’ areas for food production as part of any new housing development.

The incorporation of food production into the green infrastructure of the ‘new city’ would provide a useful way in which to create the ‘hierarchy of open space’ envisaged by The Strategy for Growth. For example, landscaping between housing developments might become ‘edible landscaping’ with hedgerows of blackberries linking two communities together. Well cared for and well managed allotments can be interesting and beautiful green spaces, which provide a break from endless housing development and can help reinforce a sense of place and identity for local people. Urban market gardens, community orchards and other community growing projects have the potential to enhance the ‘green’ character of Milton Keynes providing “*an important focus for community activity and ... assist[ing] in defining a neighbourhoods interface with its surroundings*.”⁵

On air and water quality, local food producers are significantly more likely to be certified organic, and thereby adopting more environmentally friendly production systems, than non-local food producers.⁶

The balancing lakes and rivers constructed in the 1970’s when the new town was in the first stages of development not only have an amenity and aesthetic value, but are also potentially a source of food; anecdotal evidence from The Parks Trust indicates that some sections of the community are already using the lakes to fish for food as opposed to leisure.

Landscape character is not just created or maintained by people, and the deterioration of landscape is not just an issue to do with insensitive development. The CPRE point out that “*River valley meadows, marshes, heaths and pastures all need to be grazed, not just to maintain their attractive appearance but also to sustain wildlife interest If land goes ungrazed much of the landscape could be lost as well*”.⁷ If the ‘new’ Milton Keynes wants to enhance the value of the landscape, then the production of food within the city boundary as well as beyond, into the rural hinterland, needs to be a priority.

The question of what makes a successful urban landscape is central to much of the debate about how Milton Keynes can grow and develop in a sustainable way. A mix of uses within an urban setting – with a diversity of buildings, public open space, and green infrastructure and heritage assets – is considered key to good urban design. Local food production has the potential to increase the diversity

4 DEFRA, 2006

5 Milton Keynes Partnership, 2006

6 f3, 2002

7 Cranbrook & CPRE, 2006

of land use within an urban setting, with allotments, roof-top gardens and edible landscaping just some of many examples of the way in which food growing can contribute to a vibrant and interesting built environment.

Enhancing the quality of life of new and existing citizens of Milton Keynes is the fourth sustainability principle, and perhaps the most difficult for any spatial planning system to address, since it involves a sensitive interplay between the “*physical, psychological and social well being of a population collectively and individually.*”⁸ The Strategy for Growth highlights four areas which need addressing if quality of life issues are to be tackled. These four areas are health, housing, education and culture, recreation and leisure, and we will now consider how the production and consumption of local food can support each of these priorities.

On health, Sustain (the alliance for better farming and food) believe that sustainable local food economies can “*increase the availability, diversity and affordability of good food that is fresh, less processed and likely to have improved nutrient levels due to a reduction in transport and storage time.*”⁹ Local food production also has a role to play in promoting healthy eating amongst “*nutritionally at risk groups*”, with projects such as the Salop Drive Market Garden in Sandwell supplying a vegetable box to an area which would otherwise have little access to fresh produce.¹⁰ (see section 3, **Eat The City** for more detail)

The “*common experience of growing, cooking and enjoying sustainable food can break down barriers across age, ethnicity, class and gender and stimulate a sense of pride and ownership in the local environment.*”¹¹ In this way, local food production can positively contribute to a sense of physical and psychological health, increasing social contact between people and developing connections between groups within communities.

The supply of affordable, decent housing is clearly fundamental to achieving and maintaining a quality of life, and increasing the supply of such housing is one of the reasons cited for the growth of Milton Keynes and the South Midlands area.

However, as has been recognised by The Strategy for Growth a “*decent home does not stop at the front door*” and the “*environment outside the home is a fundamental determinant of how good a place to live that home can be.*”¹² Land for food production has a clear role to play in creating “*quality open spaces of different sizes, character and function ... where people can sit, meet and socialise and children can play.*”¹³

Access to a good range of healthy and affordable food is also crucial, and providing premises for community food initiatives as well as neighbourhood food retailing is key to promoting sustainable communities and fostering well-being.

The Strategy for Growth envisages a “*local shop*” at local level (400-600m),

8 Milton Keynes Partnership, 2006

9 Sustain, 2002

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 London Housing Board, 2005

13 Milton Keynes Partnership, 2006

a broader retail offer at a neighbourhood level (1600m) and a large scale supermarket at district/town level (between 1-2 miles), but there is no explicit mention of food shops (although this is implicit). Unfortunately there is no specific mention of street and covered markets, despite evidence that they help to foster new start-up businesses, attract footfall to an area and provide healthy affordable food that matches the expectations of diverse ethnic communities.¹⁴

A measure of the distance considered to be reasonable to access basic services such as food provision is generally between 400- 500m, therefore although the strategy is on target in terms provision of a local shop, the type of goods on sale in what is most likely to be a convenience-type store is a potential cause for concern¹⁵. There is a real opportunity for local shops to positively contribute to quality of life on an individual and community level, if the food on offer is healthy, affordable and sustainable. Evidence from the f3 research suggests that nationally over half of local food sales are made through existing local shops and markets, so there is big potential for the network of local and neighbourhood centres in the new Milton Keynes to positively support local food producers.¹⁶

Access to high quality, life long educational opportunities is key to individual life chances. Some schools are already incorporating sustainable food activities into core curriculum teaching, supported by the Healthy Schools Programme, and learning about food not only gives students an important life skill, but enables them to learn about “*local landscapes, traditional production methods, rural lifestyles, the importance of good diet and people’s lives elsewhere in the world*”.¹⁷ In terms of lifelong learning, local food enterprises are already fulfilling a broad educational function by providing information about their products and the health benefits of eating fresh food.¹⁸ This practice supports an increased understanding of the links between food, environment and health – education in the widest sense.

As the Strategy rightly acknowledges, quality of life is not just about the fundamentals of health, housing and education. Psychological and social well-being is also affected by access to cultural, recreational and leisure opportunities. Once again, local food production can and should play a part in enhancing such opportunities. Sharing food has always been one way in which communities meet and develop a deeper understanding of one another’s culture. Local food has the added benefit of promoting a sense of belonging to an area, crucial for a growing place such as Milton Keynes which is often seen as lacking in community cohesiveness and a sense of place. ‘Growing your own’ is increasingly becoming a recreational/leisure activity, as consumers get interested in where their food comes from and seek to make their own connections between the environment, health and food.

Ensuring economic sustainability is the final core sustainability principle which development of a local food economy has the potential to support. Economic

14 Sustain, 2005

15 Ibid.

16 Foundation for Local Food Initiatives, 2003

17 Sustain, 2002

18 Foundation for Local Food Initiatives, 2003

sustainability is about maintaining economic value whilst also maintaining productivity, in other words being a thriving business as opposed to one which is making a financial loss or failing to adapt to changing circumstances.

The evidence available shows that local food enterprises have big potential to contribute positively to the local economy. 24% of local food enterprises created jobs during the last year as opposed to 1% of non local food businesses. In addition, the number of full time equivalent employees is greater in local food enterprises compared to non-local food enterprises.¹⁹ Those involved in local food production are nearly twice as likely to have received training compared to non-local food enterprises, and many local food producers are involved in supply chains with one another or collaborative purchasing, thereby keeping money within a local economy.

The best research case in the UK comes from Devon, where tourism has helped to promote a vibrant regional food sector. There are 900 food businesses in Devon, including processors, wholesalers, retailers and caterers. About 550 of these are now involved in the local food sector (half have joined in past five years). Devon Food Links project has set up 15 farmers markets, 18 box schemes, made 19 links with local shops, helped 150 ha of land be converted to organic production, with the result of a net increase of 113 jobs. There have also been job increases on farms, with each producer involved in the local food economy employing on average 3.4 FTEs (full time equivalent), compared with a regional average of 2.34 per farm. Some 38% of producers have created new jobs – at an average of 0.5 per farm, resulting in a further 171 new jobs.²⁰

Another study of the jobs dividend through localised food was conducted by the New Economics Foundation. This found that £10 spent on a local organic box scheme in Cornwall generated £25 for the local economy (a radius of 24 km from the farm), compared with £14 if spent in a supermarket. The research suggested that if every person, tourist and business switched only 1% of their current spending to local goods and services, an additional £52 million would be put into the local economy annually.²¹

19 Foundation for Local Food Initiatives, 2003

20 Pretty, 2001

21 Ibid.

Growing Food For A Growing City – The Vision

This report has so far considered:

- the nature of the local food economy in Milton Keynes including the needs of local producers and community growing projects
- the policy context within which a local food economy might be developed, and
- the way in which local food production can support the sustainable development of Milton Keynes

In doing so, this report has presented a sound argument for the development of a local food economy in Milton Keynes. But what exactly would it look like?

The Vision

A food producing city would enable all of its citizens to ‘grow their own’. All new housing in MK provides outside space for food growing, or other space, such as roof gardens and balconies, that could be used for food growing purposes. Informal and formal training in sustainable food growing is widespread and popular, and real and on-line networks will link together a new generation of gardeners.

There is a **renewed commitment at all levels of local government to allotments** and openness to trying out new ways of managing allotment sites which might enable their food producing potential to be exploited. Allotment provision in the expansion areas is over and above that required by statute, and where allotments are situated within the new communities is carefully designed to ensure good promotion and access.

There are **numerous community growing projects** throughout the city, providing their local communities with a fresh, local source of MK grown fruit, vegetables and added-value products. The projects are supported by a **vibrant network** which strengthens the collective voice of food growers and develops better ways of working and growing.

The **parks of Milton Keynes** are **vibrant, food producing spaces** and The Parks have developed a **brand of food** raised and grown in Milton Keynes, successfully linking food with our city’s distinctive landscape.

Many **schools in MK have their own food growing projects**, enabling children and young people to make the link between their individual health, the environment and the food they eat. The food grown at schools is also eaten there, with any surplus sold at the farmers markets in the city.

The **number of farmers markets in the city has increased**, and the markets are now supplied by a number of **Urban Market Gardens**, which means that food can be dug up in the morning, sold at market and eaten for dinner later on that day! These urban market gardens are operated by the community for the community – community supported agriculture in action!

There is an **Urban Farm Shop in Central Milton Keynes**, and local shops throughout the city stock locally produced food. Local and neighbourhood centres have **mini-local food markets** extending the range of outlets to local producers and adding to the vibrancy of these important community meeting places.

The citizens of MK are **well-connected with local farms and local food producers**, with stock being provided to most local independent shops through a scheme supported by the Council as well as through stalls at the numerous farmers markets and mini-markets throughout the city. **Farm visits and other programmes of community support** are well established, ensuring that everyone in the growing city understand the link between the environment, health and the food that they eat.

This vision is intended to sit alongside those developed for Milton Keynes by the Local Strategic Partnership and Milton Keynes Partnership Committee, the key difference being that it offers a way to realise the aspirations contained in these important documents; to create an innovative and dynamic city which is an exemplar of what it means to be sustainable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Food MK work has enabled us to reach some important conclusions about the current position of local food in Milton Keynes and the potential that exists to develop the sector.

We can say with confidence that:

- The local food sector in the Milton Keynes Borough area is underdeveloped and poorly supported
- There are a number of exciting community food initiatives which have the potential to contribute to the local food system but which are currently unsupported and working in isolation from one another
- There is a lack of real connection between farms in the Milton Keynes Borough area and the community of Milton Keynes
- Milton Keynes lacks a food culture which might offer one way of linking different cultures, generations and new and existing communities
- Allotments, and the potential they have to positively contribute to local food production, have received little attention to-date, and with the transfer of allotment land to Parish and Town councils there is a danger that any strategic focus on their contribution to the food system will be lost
- Food production, distribution, consumption and disposal in Milton Keynes is harming the environment and significantly contributing to CO₂ emissions which are affecting climate change

But it doesn't have to be this way! If a commitment is made to support and develop a local food sector economy we can and will make a difference to our local environment, quality of life, economy (in terms of job creation and skills development) and community cohesion.

Environment

Milton Keynes “*has a unique and distinctive network of landscape and open space*” that would be the envy of many towns and cities in the UK (if only they knew about it!).¹ The planned growth of the new town over the next 30 years has raised many issues of concern and controversy, but the potential loss of green space is one of the few issues that unites existing residents.

The development of local food production within the urban area of the city would enable green space to be retained, whilst putting it to productive use. It could positively contribute to providing the hierarchy of green space that is envisaged in The Strategy for Growth, whilst introducing a greater variety of landscape character. Using land to produce food is a way to engage the existing and new communities of Milton Keynes in caring for their green space and most fundamentally, food production within Milton Keynes would be one way in which to encourage behavioural change and more sustainable lifestyles, positively enhancing the environmental assets of the city.

1 Milton Keynes Partnership, 2006

Quality Of Life

Realising substantial growth within Milton Keynes whilst maintaining a high quality of life for existing and new residents must be the biggest overall challenge facing those organisations charged with growing our city, not least because ‘quality of life’ can be so difficult to quantify in real terms.

From work carried out in developing countries, we know that quality of life can be assessed by fundamental issues like whether you have access to decent housing health care through to more unquantifiable but still important issues like whether you know your neighbour and feel a sense of belonging. And we all know from personal experience that food has a huge influence on every aspect of our lives.

Local food production can contribute to quality of life issues in a range of ways from giving people access to sustainable local food (thereby improving their health and well-being) through to enabling them to participate in the day-to-day production of local food (thereby helping them to feel part of a project and a local community).

Local food can enable important connections to take place – between consumers and producers, the community and the environment and food choices and personal health, and all of these connections can help enhance the quality of life experienced by individuals and the community.

Economy

If Milton Keynes is to achieve employment led growth and “*address issues of undesirable out commuting*”, entrepreneurship and job creation by the existing community needs to be positively nurtured and encouraged.²

Food enterprises can and do create jobs within the city and, as we saw earlier in the report, improve the skill base of employees. Food production can also be a way in which people who are not economically active can enter employment and as such has the potential to address issues of economic exclusion faced by some sections of the Milton Keynes community.

Community Cohesion

If holistic growth is to be achieved and the two speed city avoided, projects need to be supported which have equal chance of success in the areas of change and the existing urban area.

Community-growing projects have the advantage over other sorts of community infrastructure in that they have a very physical representation – you can literally see a community orchard or urban market garden developing in your back yard! As such, these projects have real potential to engage their local communities in positively changing or influencing their local environment. They also have a key advantage of producing something that everyone needs – food!

The development of a food culture in Milton Keynes – and celebration of an MK brand of food grown or produced in the city – could unite new and existing communities, and provide a real sense of identity and place to the citizens of MK.

The city that thinks differently could become a trailblazer for urban agriculture in

2 Ibid.

the UK, setting an example to others of how to do it!

Rather than paying lip-service to Government policy we could really create a sustainable community. What are we waiting for?

Recommendations For Action

This section of the report summarises the overall approach and specific actions that some of the key organisations in Milton Keynes need to take in order to promote the development of a local food system. Some of the recommendations are drawn from a report published by Sustain called “City Harvest” published in 1999, although they have been brought up-to-date and a necessary MK angle has been applied. All these actions are also summarised in the **Food MK Action Plan** found at the end of the whole report, but for ease of reference have been extracted and grouped organisation-by-organisation.

The recommendation of this report is that **Milton Keynes Council** promote and develop food growing activities as part of its duty to promote sustainable development, improve the environment, promote biodiversity, manage the waste and transport system and promote the health of citizens in Milton Keynes. In seeking to do so, specific departments should consider the following actions.

It is recommended that the **Growth and Corporate Policy teams**:

- Ensure that the review of the Local Agenda 21 Policy includes practical targets for supporting and promoting the local food system, such as a loyalty/bonus card for people who purchase local food with financial incentives such as a reduction in council tax
- Commit resources and staff time to support the development of the Food Links MK, as the overarching partnership organisation committed to supporting and developing a local food system in the MK Borough
- Carry out further work to assess consumer attitudes to food and local food in particular
- Work with Food Links MK to look at incentives for local shops to stock local food, i.e. reduction on business rates
- Ensure that the Eat Healthy MK group begins to make links between healthy and sustainable food

It is recommended that the **Landscape and Countryside Management Department**:

- Incorporate urban agriculture for food production in the Council’s Open Space and Countryside Management strategies
- Encourage Parish level support for allotments as part of the local food system, including supporting the development of parish allotment strategies
- Work with Parish and Town Councils to promote allotments in appropriate ways to different interest groups including the unemployed, low waged, the elderly, families and people of ethnic minority origin
- Promote biodiversity by planting heritage varieties of fruit trees and edible plants in parks and streets
- Support the creation of an urban agriculture demonstration site in Wolverton

It is recommended that the **Land Use and Planning Department**:

- Specify the value of urban food growing in their Core Strategy and Area Action Plans
- Continue to maintain allotments even in areas where there is no present demand and examine alternative uses for vacant plots, including community gardens and orchards and wildlife areas
- Consider using surplus land surrounding municipal buildings and housing estates for food growing
- Consider using neglected and underused pockets of land in parks for food growing
- Provide guarantees of land tenure for established community growing schemes
- Support the creation of an urban agriculture demonstration site in Wolverton

It is recommended that the **Economic Development and Regeneration teams:**

- Examine ways of stimulating and supporting local food enterprises, for instance, by working with other departments/agencies to produce a guide for local producers and people considering starting local food enterprises
- Work with partners to support the development of new markets for local produce, both street, community and farmers markets
- Incorporate local food growing activities as a means of linking jobs, environmental improvements and health promotion into the delivery plans for regeneration initiatives, provided that local communities support and participate in managing such projects
- Support survey work to assess the urban land capacity for growing food
- Work with partners to assess the contribution that street and covered markets can make to the vibrancy of neighbourhood centres and local food supply
- Contribute to the production of an MK Food Guide, to include a listing of local producers, community food enterprises, food pioneers
- Support the creation of an urban agriculture demonstration site in Wolverton

It is recommended that the **Learning and Development department:**

- Fund informal and certified courses in sustainable food growing in adult education centres and community venues
- Promote food growing activities in first, primary, secondary and special schools and further education colleges
- Work with health authorities and others to develop food growing activities as part of Healthy Schools Initiatives and in out-of-school activities such as after-school clubs
- Acknowledge, promote and support the educational work of any urban farming projects, community gardens and other relevant voluntary groups
- Consider funding a 'grower in the community' educational outreach worker post, to stimulate and support education related food activity

The recommendation of this report is that **Parish and Town Councils** across Milton Keynes support local producers within their area, seek to develop community food growing initiatives and safeguard and develop allotments as essential assets which have a significant contribution to make to local food production. Specifically, it is recommended that Parish and Town councils:

- Support survey work to assess the urban land capacity for growing food
- Develop parish allotment strategies and seek to develop allotments as part of local food systems
- Work with partners to assess the contribution that street and covered markets can make to the vibrancy of neighbourhood centres and local food supply
- Work with partners to support the development of new markets for local produce, both street, community and farmers markets

The recommendation of this report is that **The Parks Trust** should act as a champion for local food production as an essential element of the green infrastructure of Milton Keynes. This will involve the Trust in:

- Implementing the commitment to food production outlined in their 2006 Strategy, as a way to secure green infrastructure and support community involvement in the running of the Parks
- Supporting survey work to assess the urban land capacity for growing food
- Committing resources and staff time to support the development of Food Links MK, as the overarching partnership organisation committed to supporting and developing a local food system in the MK Borough
- Being a partner in the creation of an urban agriculture demonstration site in Wolverton
- Working with Food Train and CVO to develop a community enterprise around Woughton Orchard & Vineyard to ensure long-term sustainability
- Supporting the development of an edible landscaping demonstration project which can be used to promote the use of productive landscaping to planners and developers
- Supporting a network for community food initiatives and food growing projects based in the community in order to learn lessons and share good practice
- Working with small retailers and local shops to encourage stocking of local food and carrying out further work to consider the role that local and neighbourhood centres could play in supporting local food sales
- Work with local authority and Food Links MK to look at incentives for local shops to stock local food, i.e. reduction on business rates
- Work with partners to assess the contribution that street and covered markets can make to the vibrancy of neighbourhood centres and local food supply

The recommendation of this report is that **Milton Keynes Partnership Committee**

sign-up to the principle of local food production being an important issue within the growth of Milton Keynes. We expect this to involve the Committee in:

- Supporting the development of the FoodLinks MK, as the overarching partnership organisation committed to supporting and developing a local food system in the MK Borough
- Asking the Joint Community Infrastructure Delivery Team to develop the business case for the development of a local food system as part of the tariff arrangements

The recommendation of this report is that **Milton Keynes Primary Care Trust** sign up to the potential that a vibrant local food system has to contribute positively to the public health agenda in Milton Keynes. We expect this to involve the PCT in:

- Developing comprehensive food access mapping work with a focus on how local centres could support access to local food
- Considering whether any land owned by the PCT could be used for local food production, or whether land could be leased for a partnership project with Food Train and the local community
- Committing resources and staff time to support the development of the Food Links MK, as the overarching partnership organisation committed to supporting and developing a local food system in the MK Borough
- Carrying out further work to assess consumer attitudes to food and local food in particular
- Through the Healthy Schools Programme, encouraging the development of school based growing projects, including working with a Wolverton based middle school to pilot an approach to school based food production which can be replicated across Milton Keynes
- Working with area based regeneration programmes to develop food growing projects as a means of linking health, jobs and environmental benefits
- Evaluating the mental and physical health benefits of food growing schemes and build upon their experience

The recommendation of this report is that **Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce** seek to support and develop a vibrant local food economy as part of the overall mix of business within a growing city. This might involve any or all of the following activities:

- Undertaking research into the potential for developing local food related businesses, from production through to processing, marketing and waste management
- Carrying out further work to assess infrastructure and other needs of local food producers e.g. cold storage
- Working with the local authority and Food Train to produce a guide to support services for local food producers and people considering starting local food enterprises

- Working with partners, local food producers and community food projects to look at the feasibility of a 'Made in MK' brand
- Working with partners toward the production of an MK Food Guide, to include a listing of local producers, community food enterprises, food pioneers
- Working with the Food Links MK and Parks Trust to encourage local shops to stock local food as well as considering the role that local and neighbourhood centres could play in supporting local food sales
- Promoting employee involvement in community food growing activities as part of employer supported volunteering schemes
- Supporting local community food-related projects with, among other things, funding, employee involvement, business advice and coverage and publicity
- Promoting the sourcing of local food to Chamber members and business generally in the Milton Keynes Borough
- Considering ways of using green space, rooftops and other areas on, in and around business premises for food growing
- Promoting and supporting food related educational activities through COUNTEC, the Education Business Partnership for Milton Keynes

The recommendation of this report is that **Milton Keynes Council for Voluntary Organisations** seek to develop local food production in the voluntary and community sector as part of the social and community infrastructure of a growing Milton Keynes. We hope that CVO will do this by:

- Committing resources and staff time to support the development of the Food Links MK, as the overarching partnership organisation committed to supporting and developing a local food system in the MK Borough
- Together with Food Train develop links with academic institutions to explore governance issues related to food
- Promoting local food growing to existing voluntary organisations in Milton Keynes as a way of achieving their organisational aims and objectives
- Supporting the development of accredited training opportunities for volunteers on food growing projects
- Working with existing food growing projects to broaden the range of people engaged in them
- Work with Food Train to develop a network between local food growers and community food projects in order to strengthen the collective voice of food growers and develop better ways of working and growing
- Work with partners to assess the contribution that street and covered markets can make to the vibrancy of neighbourhood centres and local food supply

Prior to the establishment of a Food Links group, **Food Train** is well positioned to carry out a number of specific tasks which will keep local food on the agenda and ensure that the necessary background work has been done. Once Food Links MK is established we see Food Train taking on a support role with many of the tasks in

the action plan. Food Train's work programme will therefore include:

- Carrying out further work to refine the Food MK database, including looking at the catering and food service sector in more detail
- Carrying out further work to assess consumer attitudes to food and local food in particular
- Carrying out further work to assess infrastructure and other needs of local food producers e.g. cold storage
- Ensure that local producers identified in the Foodcheck are included in the next issue of the BBO Local Food Guide 2007
- Establishing a network of support for community food initiatives and food growing projects based in the community
- Developing links with schools through the Healthy Schools Programme to encourage the development of school based growing projects
- Encouraging parish level support for allotments as part of the local food system, including support for development of parish allotment strategies and explore alternative management strategies such as The Parks Trust
- Contributing section on Urban Agriculture to MKC Open Space strategy and support MKC with LA21 Strategy revision and environmental footprinting work
- Working with the Eat Healthy MK group to begin to make links between healthy and sustainable food and support their given targets around school food, local centre fruit and veg. schemes and breastfeeding programme
- Developing links with academic institutions to explore governance issues related to food
- Working towards the development of a business plan for Food Links MK, a delivery organisation to take forward the Food MK Action Plan. Food Links MK would be a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee charged with developing and implementing a Food Strategy for Milton Keynes and overseeing practical and policy work designed to support the local food economy
- Supporting survey work to assess the urban land capacity for growing food
- Supporting the development of comprehensive food access mapping work with a focus on how local centres could support access to local food
- Investigating setting up a local food marketing service for producers and retailers
- Working with the local Authority to include support for local food systems within the new planning framework
- Working with the local authority to produce a guide to Council and other services such as Environmental Health and Trading Standards for practical use by local food producers and people considering starting local food enterprises
- Linking urban agriculture projects to educators working on sustainability education
- Linking young people with older people to collect local recipes and reminiscences and produce a recipe book

- Creating an urban agriculture demonstration project in Wolverton
- Working with MK Christian Foundation to explore the feasibility of mentoring potential local food enterprises, including offering practical equipment and facilities for food production
- Working with Wolverton-based middle school to pilot an approach to school based food production which can be replicated across Milton Keynes

Once established we hope **Food Links MK** will take the lead on the following tasks:

- Working towards the production of an MK Food Guide, to include a listing of local producers, community food enterprises, food pioneers
- Carrying out a survey to assess the urban land capacity for growing food
- Developing comprehensive food access mapping work with a focus on how local centres could support access to local food
- Carrying out further work to assess infrastructure and other needs of local food producers e.g. cold storage
- Identifying critical success factors from existing farmers markets and encourage new formats such as farmers supermarkets and in-town farm shops
- Working with partners to assess the contribution that street and covered markets can make to the vibrancy of neighbourhood centres and local food supply
- Working with the local Authority to include support for local food systems within the new planning framework
- Supporting the development of a network for community food initiatives and food growing projects based in the community established by Food Train
- Working with small retailers and local shops to encourage stocking of local food and carry out further work to consider the role that local and neighbourhood centres could play in supporting local food sales
- Encouraging parish level support for allotments as part of local food system, including support for development of parish allotment strategies and explore alternative management strategies
- Carrying out mapping work to identify significant food chain customers and suppliers as a resource for future work
- Identifying the largest public procurement agencies and examine their sourcing and explore local sourcing
- Working with the local authority to investigate the idea of a loyalty/bonus card for people who purchase local food and the possible incentives to support such as scheme, i.e. a reduction in council tax
- Working with the Eat Healthy MK group to begin to make links between healthy and sustainable food and support their given targets around school food, local centre fruit and vegetable schemes and breastfeeding programme.

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