



Background

The Eat Somerset project started in June 2007 run by Sustain: the alliance for food and farming. The first two years were funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Friends of the Earth. After two years, and some very good progress, it was nonetheless evident this was not long enough for such a new project so we gained support for an additional nine months of funding from the Rural Renaissance Initiative (July 2008–March 2009). This was match-funded by the four local authorities in the West of England area (Bristol City, Bath & North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Councils).

We are pleased to report that the evaluation shows that a large number of producers have benefited from participating in the project including new contacts and networking opportunities as well as new trading arrangements, with one producer estimating £20,000 of new business per annum as a direct result of being involved in the Eat Somerset project.

Taking steps towards sustainable, local food chains in south-west England

Aim

The project aimed to offer local food and drink producers in and around Somerset the opportunity to develop trading links with:

- regional retail groups within membership of the Association of Convenience Stores; and
- new markets in the regional urban centres of Bristol and Bath, including retailers, street markets and public sector food providers.

Activities

The project activities included:

- Identifying food and drink producers who wished to develop their businesses through new trading contracts;
- Providing training and support to those producers to enable them to meet the quality standards and reliability criteria that retail contracts require;

- Facilitating trading links between the producers and the new market outlets in both urban and rural areas;
- Supporting purchasing, distribution and in-store promotion of sustainably produced local food through the convenience store network;
- Evaluating the results of the project to demonstrate both economic gain to the producers and the community, and environmental benefits in the wider region; and
- Promoting the lessons learned from the project through a variety of mechanisms including a national conference, a website, grocery trade media and a multi-stakeholder advisory group.

Events

- Held three 'Meet the Buyers' events for retailers and caterers (Bath, Filton in Bristol; Keynsham)
- Held a Meet the Buyers event for public sector contractors (October 2008)
- Held two sustainable packaging workshops (January 2008 and January 2009)
- Held two marketing workshops (January and April 2009)
- Held a workshop on distribution trying to find solutions to the difficulties a lot of small suppliers have (March 2008)



Distribution mapping – workshop March 2008

One-to-one work

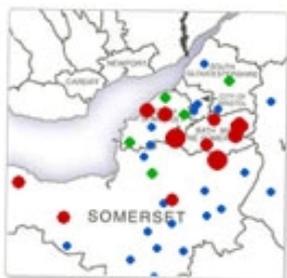
- Worked directly with a number of stores to increase the amount of sustainable local food. This includes four small businesses as well as Booker (national wholesaler) and Radstock Co-operative Society (Radco);
- Radco launched its Eat Somerset range at the beginning of June 2009 in the main Radstock store and eight convenience stores including Chew Magna, Chilcompton and Shepton Mallet – a great success for this project;

- Worked with the newly established River Cottage restaurant in Bath (part of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's group) to help them source local organic produce. Other work with a number of caterers has also taken place on an individual basis.

Support information

We have also been able to provide support information to link suppliers with buyers, using online and other materials. We have:

- Produced an online searchable directory for buyers to source produce;
- Produced a downloadable directory for producers with details of retailers, caterers and others interested in sourcing local food;
- Produced resources on sustainable packaging and other information as necessary;
- Helped make links between producers and retailers.



What has worked well?

We have solicited participant feedback for all of our work, to help us evaluate, develop and refine our work. In summary, what has worked well has been:

- Meet the Buyers events, which have resulted in new trading relationships and excellent feedback from suppliers and buyers. Particularly successful was the one we ran for public sector caterers where we ran an appointment system on behalf of participants (designed in response to previous feedback);
- Networking – we have provided excellent opportunities for producers to meet each other and discuss possible joint projects;
- Building up a thriving network of contacts in the area;
- Direct work with Radstock Co-operative Society;
- Individual work with shops, although this has been time consuming.

What has been more difficult?

There have also been challenges, which we summarise as follows:

- Organising Meet the Buyers is hard work! It takes a long time to get producers to sign up even though they only pay about £20 for a table;
- Getting buyers along is even harder. More than 3,500 letters were sent out inviting people to the most recent event; 60 places were registered, but 15 of these did not turn up on the day;
- The distribution work – the workshop was followed up by a survey which had a low response and no real solutions came out of it. However, the findings can be used in other work Sustain is doing through the national Lottery-funded Making Local Food Work programme;

- The big geographical area covered by the project at the beginning. During the period covered by Rural Renaissance funding, this was narrowed down from the whole of Somerset to targeted work in the West of England area;
- Direct work with shops. Although initially useful, the amount of support they need it very time consuming for limited results;
- Lack of sustained interest from the wholesale sector, and the buying requirements of some of the convenience stores.

What happens next?

The funding ceased at the end of March 2009 but Sustain will continue to support specific areas of activities, such as work with Radco and others until the outcome of a Lottery bid is known, in July/August 2009. The bid is for a project to facilitate an increase in fruit and vegetable growing in the area, for supply to public sector catering outlets and others, and an improvement in trading relationships between local horticultural growers and various outlets.

Evaluation from Eat Somerset will now be used to inform new activities. The evaluation indicates that producers find the following particularly challenging: marketing; finding out information about the state of the market; and financial and time management. We are aware that many producers do not have the time to develop new markets for their produce. There could also be opportunities for online ordering of local supplies for retail outlets and village shops.

Case studies

A series of case studies and reports are available on Sustain's website at: www.sustainweb.org/eatsomerset

Further information

If you would like to find out more please contact Alison Belshaw, Eat Somerset project co-ordinator

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Funded by Rural Renaissance, with additional support from Envolve (July to Sept 2008) and the four councils in the West of England area. *The first stage of the project (to June 2008) was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, with additional support from Friends of the Earth.*

