

Supply, Standards and Strategy; an international conference examining how to make public sector food and its supply systems more sustainable.

15 February 2007. City Hall, London

What follows are the reflections and thoughts of people from Scotland who attended this conference.

Notes from the conference; Antonia Ineson, Senior Health Policy Officer, Lothian NHS Board.

Attending this conference was inspiring; speakers from England, Europe and the US spoke about how the food provided by public bodies – the NHS, schools, prisons – can become more sustainable. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) sponsored the day (with other organisations including AlimenTerra, the Sustainable Food Laboratory and London Food).

It was refreshing to hear speakers link up policy areas – food, sustainability, health, transport, fair trade, employment, training – and to hear about initiatives which are beginning to make a difference.

The Defra Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative was particularly interesting¹. This is supporting the development of local and organic food supply chains, through working with purchasers to develop more sustainable procurement, and with small scale and local farmers and growers so that they develop the capacity to meet the needs of the public sector. Guides to good practice have been produced (the Defra website has links). Sir Donald Curry, Chair of the Sustainable Farming and Food Implementation Group, introduced the initiative, saying that the era of looking at only lowest price in procurement is past, now sustainability and the quality of the food have to be considered. This fits with EU guidance on best value in procurement, which includes quality.

He also spoke about the need to reconnect young people, especially children, with farming and the countryside. A Year of Food and Farming starts in September 2007 (for England).

The other focus was how to make food for people living in large urban areas more sustainable, and Jenny Jones, chair of the London Food Board, spoke about the implementation of the London Food Strategy². This brings together all the policy areas, from farm to consumer and from climate change to employment and training. The budget is £4 million for three years, and is not enough, she said. She referred to the Stern report on climate change, stressing that action on sustainable food is an essential part of action to reduce carbon emissions. Food security of large cities like London is

¹ www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/awareness.htm

² www.londonfoodstrategy.org.uk

precarious; in the fuel crisis two years ago, London was within two days of running out of food. Waste disposal, reduction in packaging, training for catering staff, ensuring that kitchens are included in new hospitals and schools - co-ordinated and effective action is needed in a wide variety of areas.

Examples of sustainable food systems in European countries were impressive. Copenhagen is working towards at least 75% organic food in all food outlets by 2008, including old people's homes, sports centres, schools and hospitals. The cost is not necessarily higher – the food itself costs more, but by looking at the system as a whole it is possible to contain costs, through using food in season, providing more bread and vegetables and less meat, and using cheaper cuts of meat, while improving the quality of the meals and ingredients. Lower meat consumption is seen as more sustainable and also better for health.

In Sweden, there is a target of 25% organic food in all public kitchens by 2010.

A speaker from Italy emphasised the cultural and educational importance of using locally produced food, from the experience at the University of Florence, where over a million meals a year now contain at least 50% organic and local food. The quality and sustainability of the food is considered before price, and there is legal and financial support at regional level.

There was unanimity that the future for public food procurement lies with locally and organically produced food, together with fair trade with producers of some foods which cannot be produced locally. This was mainly on the grounds of sustainability, but there was also an assumption that this food would also be healthier, as it would be fresher, less processed and with fewer additives or chemical residues from pesticide or herbicide use. The striking aspect was the speakers were not from campaigning organisations, but from government departments and large-scale food suppliers.

Questions were raised about whether there is a conflict between the concentration on locally produced food and the needs of farmers in other countries, particularly poorer farmers. There was discussion about whether it is more sustainable for all countries to concentrate on growing for domestic consumption rather than for export, and on the role of the Fair Trade movement in making links between producers and consumers in different countries.

Speakers reported strong and growing public support for organic and local food in all contexts, including schools and hospitals. The Soil Association, Garden Organic and partners are starting a £16.9 million lottery funded project, Food for Life, to improve food and develop school gardens in 180 English schools. The aim is that the food will be 75% unprocessed, 50% local, and 30% organic. The success of the London Hospital Food Project, which was started by Sustain, in reaching targets for local and organic food in four hospitals, has led to it widening to include 20 hospitals and also care homes

and schools in South East England, as the Good Food on the Public Plate project. Speakers from the project said there is nothing difficult about making these changes, although kitchens, trained staff and the development of a local supply chain are all needed.

It seemed that the debate over whether sustainable, local and organic food is important and the way forward is over - the issue is how to make it happen, and whether this can be done effectively enough to make a significant contribution to reducing carbon emissions, and therefore prevent further climate change.

How do the conference themes link with community-led initiatives on food? The focus was on large scale procurement and city-level strategic work, but the London Food Strategy is a good example of how work at city level will support local groups, communities and farmers to contribute to the wider-scale shifts that are needed. This is similar to the approach of the Review of the Scottish Diet Action Plan, in that it is recognised that the small community projects are valuable but that by themselves, they can only have a very limited effect on the population and international arena. The need to address social and health inequalities was part of much of the work discussed. For example, the importance of making organic and local food available to all was referred to by many speakers, and the point made that it is not necessarily more expensive. Direct links between producers and consumers, through farmers markets and vegetable box schemes for example, and eating seasonal produce can make it cheaper.

The conference left me with two questions. First, why was Scotland not represented at a government level? Second, it seems to me that this is a core public health issue, yet I was the only person there from the NHS, apart from speakers from the London Hospital Food Project. Perhaps Scotland needs to hold a similar event, building on local examples where they exist. Other countries are taking the lead through bringing together national policy development and local examples to address food as an aspect of sustainability, climate change and health, and Scotland needs to follow.

Some reflections...

from Anita Aggarwal, Development Officer,
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On 15 February I attended the Supply, Standards, and Strategy conference. It was organised by the Sustainable Food Laboratory and they described the day as 'An international conference examining how to make public sector food and its supply systems more sustainable'.

The reason for going was to bring back lessons on how low-income communities might benefit, in terms of reduction of health inequalities, from more sustainable food supply systems, in the light of the Review of the Scottish Diet Action Plan (SDAP). The review recommends a new 'Sustainable Food and Health' policy, that integrates policy goals of improving Scotland's diet-related ill health and those of social justice, sustainable development and agriculture.

Many of the groups that CFHS works with are ahead of the policy in this regard, being concerned with growing, distributing and cooking and eating food. For example, there are a couple of initiatives that are already sourcing some fruit and vegetables from local and organic farmers for sale at community food co-ops.

However, the aim of attending the conference was to learn about initiatives in other places and bring back a picture of what might happen if such a strategy were developed.

So, what would a 'Sustainable Food and Health' policy look like?

While the conference did give a number of national and city wide initiatives the opportunity to present their work, none had developed a specific Sustainable Food and Health policy, Some, however, came very close.

London Food Strategy

The London Food Strategy aims to make Londoners healthier, happier and greener and specifically includes improving Londoners' health and reducing health inequalities via the food they eat. The strategy was published in May 2006 after a long and inclusive development process. £4 million has now been budgeted for its implementation, and this has been welcomed by local groups, although there are concerns about how and when this money will be spent.

Developing the food infrastructure to provide effective and affordable distribution systems for producers, retailers and caterers is important and a feasibility study for a distribution hub has been commissioned. Will this support local community ventures with health inequalities at their heart? This will depend on how implementation of the strategy, and, importantly, budgets associated with it, filter down to London Boroughs the projects active within them.

Other parts of the strategy deal with delivering healthy schools and with the concurrent development of the Schools Food Trust and implementation of nutritional guidelines for school meals in England, this strategy aim could deliver health and diet improvements for children in London.

Other than these parts of the strategy, health seems to be dealt with through a high profile campaign promoting healthy food and a 'reward card' scheme that will encourage healthy and sustainable food choices.

However, while it could appear that the health agenda has been 'bolted on', the strategy could address the barriers to a healthy diet as identified in the SDAP by making higher quality food more available and affordable, reviving food culture and taking steps to support people to develop skills around food.

It is too early to assess what will happen, let alone what impact it will have, but, certainly it has the potential to be a useful model to learn from.

The Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative

This government sponsored initiative in England is a result of the Curry Report on Food and Farming written in the wake of the Foot and Mouth crisis. The report recommended the development of Sustainable Food and Farming policy for England and public procurement is seen as a catalyst for developing sustainable delivery systems.

The initiative aims to encourage public sector buyers to work with farmers, growers and suppliers to ensure more sustainable food is consumed in hospitals, schools, prisons and canteens. It also includes 'to increase consumption of healthy and nutritious food' as one of its priority objectives.

The initiative has produced a toolkit for buyers to help them source local food. It is working with the Department of Education and Skills to improve schools meals. Don Curry, in his presentation, said 'a meal everyday for the poorest sectors of the community can change eating habits and reduce diet related illness'.

It would appear that this initiative could also help overcome the barriers to a healthy diet by increasing access to healthy food in the public sector, which should also support better access in other places, by allowing infrastructure to be built. This assumes that nutritional guidelines are put in place and that local food, by virtue of being fresher and less processed, is healthier.

Don Curry also reminded the conference that local food is good for local economies, and by extension, local communities, as shown by LM3 studies carried out by the New Economics Foundation.

Marique Vos, Alderwoman of the **City of Amsterdam** told us of the efforts of the city to develop a **food strategy**. Their strategy also includes the aims of improving health and the examples she gave were of the therapeutic benefits of working on the land. Many farmers now work with people with mental

health difficulties. She also told the conference the City is improving the eating habits of young people by putting in place school gardens so all school children now take part in allotment gardening for at least one year.

In **Copenhagen** the **DOGME** project is working to get 75% by weight organic food in all city operated food services by 2008. They have found that this is not necessarily more expensive, if working practices are changed (I assumed this meant by using less processed food and cooking from raw ingredients more). The project also looks to improve nutritional standards.

Tully Wakeman from **East Anglia Food Link** spoke about the practicalities of building supply chains for public procurement. His advice was to start, not at either end of the chain, as might be expected intuitively, but in the middle, with the wholesalers who have the capacity to win contracts and work with a number of suppliers to win a contract on quality. This has proved successful in supplying beef to schools. However, supplying vegetables has proved to be much more difficult due to the polarised nature of the size of production units. Progress is being made with Fyffes who have started buying from local farmers. There will be useful lessons from this work on how to work with business to build successful food supply chains.

This paper could go on and on with examples of how public procurement of food is being developed across the UK, Europe and the world.

If the aim is to bring the healthy eating agenda closer to a sustainable agriculture agenda we need to show the benefits to both of doing so and, in the case of CFHS, that doing this will improve the access to high quality affordable food.

So how can a sustainable food procurement agenda (and a wider sustainable food agenda) support overcoming barriers to a healthy diet?

Availability The development of a distribution infrastructure for fresh fruit and vegetables and other healthy foodstuff in small quantities, that lies outside the dominant global model of food distribution system, will undoubtedly support smaller, more local food outlets, such as community food co-ops and local shops and therefore increase availability. Issues around infrastructure have already been identified for the community food sector and solutions for the sector are being developed. If these resources were being developed in order to support a wider food strategy this would allow community-based organisations to focus their energy on other aspects of their work.

Work around increasing the sustainability of food in public sector canteens will increase the availability of healthy food, if accompanied by nutritional standards. The Food for Life programme is a good example of this work.

Affordability Again, better infrastructure for small food outlets will support lower prices as the transport costs of fresh fruit and vegetables are reduced.

There is an ongoing debate on how to ensure producers are paid a fair price and that consumers can afford their produce. Shortening supply chains, as is being done through many of the procurement initiatives, should allow this to happen as there are fewer 'middlemen' who need to take a cut of the profit. However, this discussion is often polarised towards farmers who generally have a stronger voice than disadvantaged consumers. The solutions to this debate will come when people working with disadvantaged communities are invited to be involved and given an equal voice.

Skills Many of the speakers who spoke about improving meals in the public sector were very clear that improving the cooking skills of the catering staff had been a matter of urgency and resulted in many unexpected benefits. In addition to the staff gaining skills, they also saw improved self esteem and productivity and reduced absenteeism. They spoke about how these skills were being taken home and that the general awareness of food and where it comes from was raised for the staff and their families.

Culture Where food is being successfully procured from more sustainable sources, and this has been accompanied by a package of work on skills, nutritional guidelines and so on, there was a reported shift in attitudes to food. The story of the canteen worker who had spent a long evening in discussions with his son about food after attending training that supported the procurement changes stuck in my memory.

The success stories that we heard all discussed the importance of working with catering staff in particular, but also canteen users to involve them in the change, and this has clearly led to a change in food culture. This supports the approach that CFHS takes to its work.

My questions around culture are about the image of 'sustainable food' and tie in very closely with my questions around affordability. Is organic, local food more expensive or is it perceived and marketed as such? People in community health projects show a real interest in supporting local farmers, eating seasonally and general environmental issues, but also an equally real 'its not for the likes of us' attitude when discussing the purchase of organic food. My feeling is that the good work being done on developing sustainable food systems needs to be better informed by the public health agenda with representatives from the community food and health sector given a voice in discussions.

Conclusion

There are lots of ways in which sustainable food systems would support overcoming barriers to a healthy diet, when health is properly and equally considered as an object of the sustainable agenda. We should continue to watch developments within the community based work in Scotland and look to England to see how the sustainable food and farming agenda is supporting food access work there – particularly in London.