

Exploring the potential of Local Food Hubs
to address food poverty in your area:
Core issues for community organisations to consider



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Local Food Hubs in Deprived Areas

Local Food Hubs are networks of organisations and individuals that work together to build an alternative distribution model that aims to shorten the supply chain by connecting producers and consumers as directly as possible. By doing that, they also aim to create a new market for small-scale local farmers, and secure fairer prices for both producers and consumers.

In the UK, there is an increasing number of 'local food hubs', which, despite their possible differences, they all share a vision for creating a market place for locally produced food. Our study has focused on a specific model of food hubs: the Open Food Network Local Food Hubs. A key difference between OFN and other food hubs is the online platform that provides the "on-line" infrastructure for creating the "off-line" local food marketplace. In 2017, OFN Local Food Hubs were piloted in relatively deprived areas of two UK cities, Preston and Newcastle, in collaboration with the Larder and the MeadowWell Community Centre. This was in order to understand and assess how OFN Local Food Hubs could help mitigate and alleviate food poverty in these areas. This Action Pack is addressed to community organisations interested in setting up Local Food Hubs in their areas to address dimensions of food poverty so that they can benefit from the experience of others who took on the same endeavour. Despite the focus of our study on OFN local food hubs, this document is aspired to share experiences that can provide some useful insights for other 'local food hubs' or for other organisations that aspire to build a 'local food hub'. . If you are interested in more details, please also check our Action Pack.



Core Issue for Community Organisations

1. Describe what you aspire to achieve by setting up a Food Hub. Clarify which specific dimensions of food poverty, or other social problem, you aim to address.

Research insight

Food poverty is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. It is linked to a complex array of factors ranging from those at the individual, household and neighbourhood level to those at the national policy level. State in specific terms which aspects of food poverty you aim to intervene in.

Examples of statements of purpose:

- “to increase the accessibility of fresh, locally produced food in a ‘food desert’”;
- “to reduce the cost of fresh, locally-produced food in an area scoring high on the index of multiple deprivation”;
- “to start an ethical, food-retailing enterprise in an area with low levels of economic activity and employment”;
- “to offer an educational, training or employment experience to students or adults outside mainstream education or labour markets”;
- “to support local farmers”;
- “to support your local economy and local businesses”;
- “to introduce food produced in environmentally sensitive ways in an area where it is hard to find it”.

2. Get to know your potential customers/beneficiaries and seek to understand their perspectives and experiences on the issue you have chosen to address.

Research insight

Your customers’ needs will vary depending on the issue you seek to address, the area you seek to operate in and the population groups you wish to involve with your local food hub. Aspects of the customer perspective to explore can be the following:

- Do your potential customers see value for themselves and others in what you propose to offer them? For example, do they value ‘local’, ‘organic’, ‘environment-friendly’, ‘small-scale’ food production? Do they value what you offer to such an extent that they will transfer some of their habitual shopping expenditure to the local food hub?
- Does their household budget allow them to pay a premium over the lower priced alternatives?
- What food items do they wish to purchase? Are the food items you propose to sell familiar to and desirable for your customers?
- In case of online purchase models (such as the OFN food hubs);

- is 'digital exclusion' an issue for them? Do they have easy access to the internet and to electronic payment services?
- even if they are not 'digitally excluded', how do they feel about shopping for food online?

Examples of how pilot hubs in our research responded to these issues:

- Selling 'meal boxes', containing all the ingredients for making a particular dish, along with recipe card for the dish. The recipes selected were of meals thought of as traditional, local staples.
- Printing paper catalogues and enabling customers to make orders without using the internet or making electronic payments.



INGREDIENTS

200g leek, washed and sliced
 400g carrots, peeled and chopped
 1.5ltr veg stock (2 stock cubes* supplied)
 100g lentils
 100g pearl barley
 Salt and pepper (not supplied)
 1 Stattie

METHOD

1. Put all ingredients in a pan
 2. Bring to the boil and simmer for 40 minutes
 3. Add more water if required
 4. Season to taste
 5. Serve with slices of stattie

INGREDIENTS SUPPLIED BY -



*Stock cubes contain celery (allergen)

Image 2: Recipe Card included in North Shields Food Hub Meal Box (Source: North Shields Local Food Hub, December 2017)

3. Get to know your potential suppliers and seek to understand their perspectives and experiences on the issue you have chosen to address.

Research insight

The success of a hub relies on identifying and forming relationships with suppliers who are able to supply the hub with food that is desirable and affordable to your customers. Understanding the suppliers' perspective is crucial. Aspects of the supplier perspective to explore can be the following:

- Does what potential suppliers offer match with what you wish to supply? Are they able to provide produce that your customers would like at the price that they would like and at the portions or quantity that they would like?
- Which times of the year are they able to supply different types of produce?
- Can they deliver food to your Hub?
- Are they willing to support you in your cause in any other way e.g. by offering you a better price or a longer credit period?

Examples of supplier-related difficulties in pilot hubs:

- In the case of one Hub, the supplier met the ethical and quality requirements of the Hub organiser but the prices offered were very high for the Hub's customers.
- In another case, the supplier was not prepared to provide labelling information for the products. As a consequence, these products could not then be resold at the hub without a list of ingredients clearly displayed.

4. Get a sense of what other people or collectivities are doing about the same issue in your chosen area. Explore the potential of partnering with other organisations that may be able to share resources with you e.g. community centres, universities, colleges, churches, charities, food-related social movements.

Research insight

OFN Food Hubs in the UK are linked with a variety of institutional partners, civil society organisations and social movements.

Examples of collaborating organisations related to the pilot hubs in our research included:

- Community centres operated by charitable organisations. Community centres host OFN Hubs offering them premises, storage and access to the users of the centres;
- Church halls used as collection points for food orders;
- Food-related movements such as Transition Towns, Incredible Edible, Sustainable Food Cities. People involved in such initiatives offer their time and effort as volunteers or may be the organisers of the OFN Hub;
- Universities. In one pilot site, a doctoral researcher from a local university has volunteered his time to help set up and run an OFN Hub while also carrying out academic research in relation to the Hub.



Image 3: View of the Garden of the collaborating Community Centre in Preston
(Fieldwork Photograph, July 2017)

5. Identify the resources needed to set up and run a Local Food Hub. Seek to understand the operational reality of setting up and running a Food Hub.

Examples of essential resources for running a hub:

- premises that are accessible by private or public means of transport and are suited to the purpose of the Hub
- labour power for
 - receiving, storing and allocating food items to the individual customer orders
 - maintaining a current online 'shopfront' in terms of the list of produce available and their prices
 - running the collection of individual orders by customers, receiving cash and ensuring that suppliers are paid, and general troubleshooting
 - creating and disseminating promotional materials such as leaflets, posters, newsletters and social media posts; for planning, organising and carrying out promotional events.

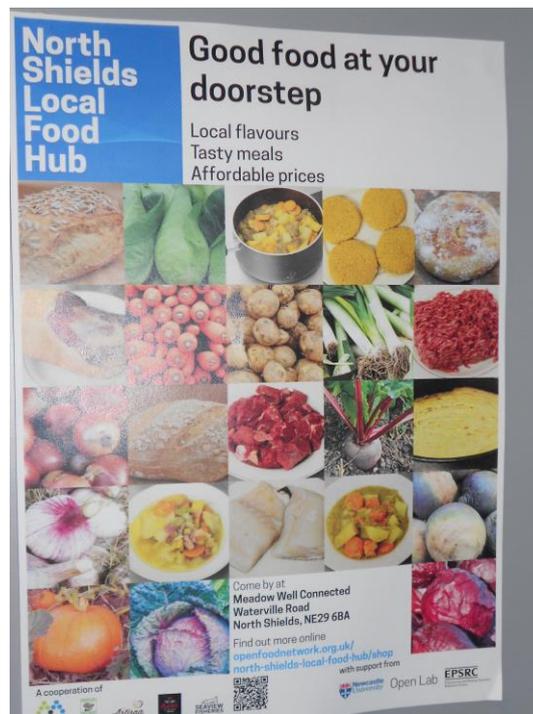


Image 4: Poster used for disseminating purposes by a Community Centre in Newcastle (Fieldwork Photograph, January 2018).

Examples of pilot hubs’ responses to the challenges of finding scarce resources:

- Using the premises of another organisation, such as a community centre, may mean that no rent is charged. It also means however that the OFN Hub order collection times may be restricted to the days and times the community centre is open, e.g. office hours of 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday, when many potential Hub customers would be better suited by collection times in the early evening or on weekends.
- Employing volunteers may save on labour costs and provide much needed skills, initiative and enthusiasm. Volunteers however require that they are inducted to the role, shown what needs doing, support when things go wrong and their work must be taken up by somebody else if they cannot be there to volunteer. As a consequence, there is the danger that the savings of using volunteers may be over-estimated. Some OFN Hubs appoint a volunteer coordinator who is an experienced volunteer who can undertake volunteer management and support.

6. Test your ideas by running a pilot in a way that minimises costs and risks to all stakeholders.

Examples from pilot hubs in our research:

- one pilot hub was run by a single person who sought to gain experience in food marketing and retailing. She started by advertising the Hub to the members of the church she regularly attended and sourced produce from just a single ethical and organic supplier and from members of the church who grew their own produce.

- A second pilot hub was run primarily by a graduate researcher from the premises of a local community centre. Employees of the community centre contributed to the hub as and when they had any spare capacity from their other duties to do so.

7. Evaluate the learning from the pilot and adjust your practices.

These are a few of the 'ideas for the future' that came out of pilot hubs:

- Prepare and cook certain ingredients, e.g. swede, carrots, and sell them frozen for people who may have difficulty with the manual strength and dexterity required to prepare vegetables.
- Liaise with neighbouring supported housing schemes for older adults and deliver produce from the hub to the schemes' residents.
- Offer cooking sessions using the kitchen facilities of the site the Hub is hosted led by older people sharing the favourite, traditional recipes with the younger generation.
- A 'meal-for-a-meal' scheme whereby spending a certain amount of money at the hub pays for a free meal for a person in need.
- Offer cooking sessions at or near the time of order collections as an opportunity of socialisation and of recipe-sharing.



Image 5: Cooking classes is a key 'ingredient' of the food hubs in Preston
(Fieldwork Photograph, May 2017)

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