

# ‘Innovative Food Business Models for Sustainable and Resilient Economies’



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**Project partners:**



**Project funders:**





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# Background

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In December 2020, Ulster University Business School (UUBS) and Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy, in collaboration with Belfast Food Network (BFN), Food and Drink North East (FADNE), Food Newcastle, and Northern Ireland Retail Consortium (NIRC) secured funding from the Economic and Social Research Council's Accelerating Business Collaboration scheme (ESRC ABC).

The primary aim of this project was to foster

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## 'Innovative Food Business Models for Sustainable and Resilient Economies'

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Intensive workshops were organised to promote knowledge exchange and collaboration, building tripartite partnerships and network opportunities for private sector, academia and local government organisations, to shape area-based food sustainability agendas. Intended outcomes comprised an inclusive and stimulating platform for multi-stakeholder engagement and network opportunities, from creative idea generation to building partnerships, culminating in agreement of signature projects in Belfast and Newcastle upon Tyne. Other benefits included enduring partnerships beyond the project and commercial/societal benefits in strengthening the local sustainable food economy, ensuring access to good food and fostering environmental sustainability.

# Aims of the Project

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The project aimed to sustainability proof the food supply chains in Belfast and Newcastle upon Tyne and surrounding regions, utilising the existing *Sustainable Food Places* networks that operate in both cities. In doing so, the project sought to deepen collaboration and knowledge-exchange between both cities' agri-food networks and existing food stakeholders and partnerships; agree priority projects to sustain the impact of the collaboration; and promote innovative food business models that can foster, and add value to, the sustainability and resilience of regional food economies.

Much is being achieved in Belfast and Newcastle, UK Sustainable Food Places, in addressing some of today's most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges, with significant efforts aimed at stimulating more inclusive, local food systems via innovative business models, promoting a more healthy, sustainable and resilient food economy.

By co-hosting workshops, the project stimulates progression from individuals with an interest in sustainable food into *multi-disciplinary teams* discussing shared values and shaping projects for purposeful funding to support initiatives that can unlock new solutions to change in our local food systems. Additionally, the workshops presented the opportunity to share learnings with respect to what has worked well in other regions, highlighting best practices and opportunities for action, and triggering a future multiplier effect. The workshops provided a platform to develop further the *Sustainable Food Places* approach, providing a space to increase the network, identify key local opportunities and develop targeted initiatives.

The workshops promoted knowledge exchange and encouraged a deeper collaboration between mutually beneficial businesses and organisations. The key output was to identify innovative business models that benefit and promote a more resilient and sustainable local food economy.

# Methodology



In total, two extensive workshops were hosted on 23rd February and 9th March 2021. The invited participants represented stakeholders from across the agri-food chain, including local food producers (esp. SMEs and artisans), trade and sector bodies, local council authorities and governments, consumer body representatives and academia.

Workshop 1 focused on knowledge exchange and sharing best practice from both cities under three main themes: *Decarbonising food supply chains; Social innovation in food supply chains; and Resilience in food supply chains.*

The purpose was to encourage discussion across different cities and stakeholders to promote networking and collaboration on project ideas in advance of Workshop 2. This was facilitated through the exchange of participants' contact details between workshops.

In total, 43 stakeholders attended Workshop 1. Workshop 2 focused on expressions of interests for intended projects, which emerged as an outcome of Workshop 1. In total, 45 stakeholders attended Workshop 2, their cross-sector representation is detailed below.

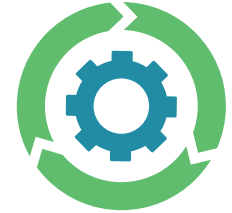
## Workshop 1 participants

Stakeholder group	Number
Farmers and food producers (including SMEs)	14
Community sector / consumer organisations	10
Academics	9
Local government bodies	5
Trade associations and sector bodies	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

## Workshop 2 participants

Stakeholder group	Number
Academics	12
Community sector / consumer organisations	11
Farmers and food producers (including SMEs)	11
Local government bodies	7
Trade associations and sector bodies	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

# Methodology



We planned for the workshops to be iterative and there was good consolidation of the same attendees, or representative from the same organisations, on both days.

Following the discussions of Workshop 1, the attendees were requested to collaborate with other participants to devise and submit project proposals which fill the gaps and/or start to address the challenges identified during Workshop 1. Such proposals should also identify whose help they might need in order to progress the project from idea to reality. In total, ten expressions of interest were put forward and pitched by respective leads at Workshop 2.

Attendees were asked to cast their votes and four project ideas, two from Belfast and two from Newcastle, were progressed to break-out group discussions to discuss further their innovation, collaboration and feasibility potential. Attendees were requested to challenge the business/societal direction of different projects and provide constructive criticism to respective project leads. The flowchart in Figure 1 illustrates the methodology used to shortlist project proposals and decide the final two projects derived from discussion and delegate votes.

Figure 1: Workshop 2 Procedure for shortlisting project proposals



As an outcome of the workshops, delegates were asked to agree and vote on two priority projects, one from Belfast and one from Newcastle, that will strengthen the sustainability and resilience of the local food economy. Each project received seed-funding worth £1,500 to support the kick-start, implementation and progression of their project. Each project leader was encouraged to stay

in touch with the organising partners, for mentor support and further collaboration opportunities, and agreed to promote developments of their respective project, while featuring a brief publication blog showcasing their project idea to its realisation. In this way the collaboration and knowledge exchanges may continue and transcend the ESRC ABC project.

# Workshop 1



Workshop 1 aimed to promote knowledge exchange and stakeholder collaboration to deliver innovative food business models for sustainable and resilient food economies. At the start, participants were asked to identify, in three words, 'what we need to do to build

a more resilient and sustainable food economy?'. The resulting word cloud illustrated the collective sense of the importance of **education**, **community**, **collaboration** and **local** as central tenets, as illustrated below.

Figure 2: Participants' Word Cloud communicating their interpretation of 'sustainable development'



# Showcase Projects

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The Workshop sought to showcase successful ongoing initiatives and share best practice across both *Sustainable Food Places*: Belfast and Newcastle, and identify

innovative solutions, from existing gaps and opportunities for collaboration. The following projects served to illustrate what is currently being achieved in each region.

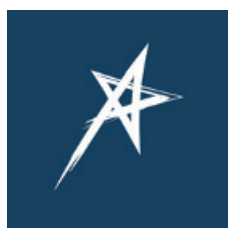


## Belfast Showcase Project: Hearty Growers

*Hearty Growers* is a gourmet edible mushroom urban farm business, which was launched in January 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Led by Terry and Judi Vaz, who spent a considerable amount of time working in organic market gardens, they were inspired to act because many of their neighbours had never seen a tomato plant before.

They soon realised there was niche market for an urban gourmet mushroom farm as there are few specialty mushroom growers in NI. Launched in January 2021, *Hearty Growers* have now tripled their production having been introduced to a whole community of micro food and beverage producers.

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## Newcastle Showcase Project: Big River Bakery

*Big River Bakery* is a small bakery in Newcastle, specialising in slow ferment, handmade breads and baked goods, made with locally sourced products. It was born from the idea: *Keep it Local; Shop Local*. *Big River Bakery* includes a training space, works in deprived communities, and seeks to bridge the gap between universities and communities – they do a lot of education work with children, elderly and employability programmes. The

bakery's founder, Andy Haddon, also runs a social enterprise – *Earth Doctors* – which was established in 2013 to develop a local food hub aimed at addressing the barriers impacting the growth of local food systems. The vision of the *Big River Bakery* and *Earth Doctors* is for the North East to be globally recognised as a leading example of a sustainable and healthy local food system at scale.

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# Thematic Discussions

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Having been inspired by successful projects in both cities, participants were tasked with discussing three overarching environmental, social, and economic themes:

- 
- Decarbonising food supply chains.**
  - Social innovation in food supply chains.**
  - Resilience in food supply chains.**
- 

In small working groups, participants discussed each theme focusing on the sharing of best practices and ongoing activities examples in their respective cities, and on identifying innovative solutions and opportunities for collaboration. A summary of the key outputs from the working group was recorded and is presented below under each of the three overarching themes.

## Decarbonising Food Supply Chains – Environmental Pillar

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### Discussion centred on:

- The importance of the 'last mile': reducing the last mile; backhauling to limit presence of empty vans/lorries; carbon-neutral transportation for 'last mile solutions' (recognising it can be difficult to scale this up).
- Use electric bikes/vehicles to minimise carbon impact
- Value the 'local' agenda in food production – use local producers in our supply chain
- Share best practice re: regenerative farming and using space better (e.g.) access to land in communities where there is deprivation. Consider urban farms to bring quality food to local areas and reconnect consumers with how food is produced
- Value local skills to ensure the availability, accessibility and affordability of local food:
- Education – can we look at some of the older traditions and bring these to the forefront? (e.g.) produce and preserve more food locally
- Education and cooking skills to improve food knowledge and skills to prevent food waste
- Plant versus meat and eating within seasonal capabilities: we need to switch mindsets as well as diets
- Consider cost and quality tensions – impact of 'cheap' imports
- Circular economy: more people working together (e.g.) mushroom production using coffee grounds
- Reduce food waste and single use plastics

# Social Innovation in Food Supply Chains – Social Pillar

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## Discussion centred on:

- A lot of good work is ongoing, but people don't always know about it – Apps (e.g.) *Too Good to Go* are useful but need to ensure people know what to do with food once they've received it to turn it into meals
- Re-discovery not reinvention – don't need to do anything new but need to show people how to minimise waste (e.g.) through using leftovers to make new dishes
- Selling food that would otherwise be wasted to the public (e.g.) Food Waste Cafés
- Need to strive to move away from profit-driven business models. Profit margin from food growing can be small – cooperative marketing may be where the future lies – *retailing our own produce*
- Embed the business in the local community – need long-termism by ensuring the business has as much benefit to the local community as to the business itself. Look at businesses and how they change how they work
- Put a face to businesses to be authentic and engage more with consumers / buyers
- Jobs do not fit the standard training model
- Need to make real, strategic change across local government
- Education is needed on an ongoing basis: Children's education is an important place to try to intervene and schools are excellent connectors
- Explore initiatives that promote eating together through positive food experiences
- The challenge is how to get recurrent funding: recognize the value of storytelling, social volunteers, credible entities to represent businesses and connect to funding opportunities
- Awareness of food history and food tourism as elements that work well together

# Resilience in Food Supply Chains – Economic Pillar



## Discussion centred on:

- What is resilience: extending the growth period? Increased awareness of seasonality? Cooking from scratch skills?
- Local supply chains are still too long – how do we shorten them?
- Fully exploit what we can do locally rather than fixate on what we cannot when we then rely, wrongly, on imports
- Move to more sustainable (and cheaper) energy sources in the food production chain
- Community is the central issue: utilise community feedback to inform and improve future work/ approaches
- How do we use what retailers are doing well, but bring it to the community/co-operative level?
- Need buy-in from customers who support the notion of 'good produce', recognising all the time that not everyone has the same disposable income
- Few people are paid a full, living wage: how can we make hospitality jobs more valued / aspirational so consumers are happy to fund a real living wage for waiters / bar people etc?
- Furlough payments missed out local entrepreneurs – funding needs to be initiated, maintained and reach the full food chain.
- Important to know the farmers and connections with restaurants and local buyers
- Link-up networks: accommodation, transport and food producers – storytelling how they work well together as hubs
- Look at who your preliminary suppliers are and make our local *Food Heroes*' voices heard – both in schools and through local food and folk culture
- Educate children to communicate the messages to family members so that there is a very real prospect of delivering and sustaining habitual behaviours
- Move to 'seasonality at-scale' in the local level; feed the population at the 'right' time of year (i.e.) the *Hunger Gap* – growing food in winter; feed the community not the world!
- Link issues together to solve the original (and other) problem(s)! (e.g.) plant fruit trees in otherwise wasted spaces around cities to contribute to climate mitigation while also giving people access to free food!
- Recognition of merits of bartering / food swapping and cookbooks for food boxes

# Workshop 2



Based on the discussions and content of Workshop 1, participants were asked to submit expressions of interest for project ideas to be discussed in Workshop 2. A total of ten expressions of interest were received. In an opening

plenary, each project sponsor pitched their idea in a bid to be selected as one of the two projects to be shortlisted for each city. Below is a summary of the ten project proposals pitched in Workshop 2.

## Expressions of Interest



### Belfast Expressions of Interest



1. **Digital information hub for small food businesses in Belfast: Hahu Organics**

Hahu Organics aims to create a digital hub where all small-scale local businesses from multiple sectors, their products, availability, and modes of trade are available in one place.



2. **'Plot to Plate' The Scullery O'Tullagh**

The objective of 'Plot to Plate' is to re-connect the local community in South Ballymena with the areas' Community Allotment fruit and vegetables growers. By engaging a local chef to plan nutritious cost-effective meals, the project aims to use as much of the produce from the allotment as possible. These meals will then be available to purchase at a local Club where we hope to agree a SLA to run their Café and Bistro business.

**William Millar:** [williemillar@hotmail.com](mailto:williemillar@hotmail.com)



3. **Local Food Web: L'Arche Belfast**

A concept for a website is to provide a 'local food web' with a search function allowing users to find food which is produced within the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. This will promote the purchase of good quality produce and simultaneously a reduction of air miles required in food provision. Sustainability is a complex issue - if we are to promote sustainable living to a wide audience, it must be accessible and convenient.

**Sean McDermott:** [sean.m@larchebelfast.org.uk](mailto:sean.m@larchebelfast.org.uk)



4. **Training or skills sharing programme: Helen's Bay Organic**

The trend of organic market gardens close to population settings is already happening and offers much to localise some of our food production. The economic viability of these market gardens is well established but does require a high degree of professionalism and know how to make them work. The restriction on growth in this sector is skills shortage.

**John McCormick:** [johneimarmcc@gmail.com](mailto:johneimarmcc@gmail.com)



5. **Replacing beef and dairy: Agri-food and Biosciences Institute**

Northern Ireland has a thriving local export-orientated agri-food sector. Yet, it is dominated by beef and dairy. So, if Northern Ireland is to restructure its economy away from these types of sectors, and, say, import more of its food, what is the economic and environmental implications of doing so? Might tourism provide better paid, quality of life than an agri-food sector?



6. **Seafood, aquaculture, sustainability of fishing practice: Ulster University**

Promoting consumer awareness of seafood supply chains, and locally sourced materials for seafood and aquaculture production – and the blue economy more generally.



Belfast  
City Council

7. **'Did you know' campaign/platform/website: Belfast City Council**

There is a lot going on (e.g.) allotments that are free to local communities and they then sell on the food that they have grown – at a very low price; education with both adults and in schools on how to save food and reduce waste; cooking demonstrations; food / recipe books that use older traditional cooking methods etc – we need to promote it all better – and join up the dots!

## Newcastle Expressions of Interest



8. **North East Sustainable Food Alliance**

We would like to explore new ways to support local food producers to access markets by consulting directly with them to identify challenges and barriers they face to engaging with existing schemes or other ways of selling local food in the North East, and to connect with retailers and the hospitality industry where appropriate to meet demand.

**Joe Dunne:** [joe.dunne@mencity.org.uk](mailto:joe.dunne@mencity.org.uk)



9. **Video storytelling: Big River Bakery**

There is a need to capture and articulate the story of Big River Bakery without a need to keep sharing this story in person i.e., where it came from, the vision and all the strands of activity presented in a coherent manner. This will help share the story, secure support, inspire collaborators and others to action. Film would be embedded in presentations to corporates, other collaborators and on social media as part of a campaign.

**Andy Haddon:** [andy@bigriverbakery.com](mailto:andy@bigriverbakery.com)



10. **Including local producers in our public procurement contracts:**

**North East Procurement Organisation**

We will set up a virtual '*meet the buyer event*' to introduce local suppliers and their products into pre-existing supply chains. Local catering teams will receive a sample box from local producers in a specific pilot produce area initially (e.g., bread/bakery products). The buyers/catering teams will undertake a live tasting of produce followed by a presentation by each of the suppliers/wider supply chain about their business and idea sharing with regards to how these products can be sustainably incorporated into menus (school setting) or at civic centres. We would encourage bakeries to work together as a 'cluster' to be able to deliver the scale of produce required.

**Marie Bartup:** [marie.bartup@nepo.org](mailto:marie.bartup@nepo.org) / [facilities.management@nepo.org](mailto:facilities.management@nepo.org)

# Projects' Potential on Feasibility, Innovation and Collaboration

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A participant vote was taken after the plenary session and the two Belfast projects to progress to dedicated collaborative discussion were *L'Arche* and *Helen's Bay Organic*. The two Newcastle projects that were shortlisted to the next stage were *Big River Bakery* and *North East Procurement Organisation*.

Participants considered each project in turn, irrespective of their domiciliary region. In continuing the themes of

collaboration and participation, colleagues were asked to discuss each project and consider each against the following criteria: *innovation, collaboration and feasibility*. This proved a productive session in deepening understanding of the prospective projects and offering suggestions to improve further their fitness for purpose and intended impact.

## Poll Results and Seed-Funding Winners

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### Belfast Shortlisted Projects

#### L'Arche Belfast Discussion

Sean McDermott

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Participants were keen for *L'Arche* to exploit any pre existing networks and the project sponsor confirmed his willingness to link with all like-minded colleagues. With respect to feasibility, *L'Arche* recognised that the money would serve to fund a baseline study investigating whom to include on the digital platform and respond to both the identified *need* and *want* for this initiative. Delegates were keen, and *L'Arche* acknowledged, the need for the platform to be kept up to date, with initial plans for the website to be maintained by the immediate *L'Arche* team or volunteers. Thereafter, the plan will be for the platform to also be used to educate people on sustainable food choices by uploading educational videos. In the groundswell of collegiality among participants, the project lead confirmed a willingness for all digital platform project sponsors to work together to deliver a comprehensive and connected sustainable food producers' website.

#### Helen's Bay Organic Discussion

John McCormick

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The project sponsor responded to colleagues' feedback by suggesting that his original concept be adapted to support a digital platform that facilitates a '*meet the farmers*' function and indicated his interest to collaborate with *L'Arche* to deliver both projects' ambitions. *Helen's Bay Organic* will seek to work with existing farmers to share experiences and blueprints. The project lead's belief that practitioners need to "*forge our own path and force change from the ground up!*" resonated with participants who agreed that the sustainable food movement must continue its determination to make a difference on its own merits.

## Successful Belfast Project

The successful funded Belfast project, as derived from the ESRC ABC workshop: *L'Arche Belfast*.

### “ Local Food Web: L'Arche Belfast

*I am delighted to have been awarded the Northern Ireland Seed Fund! This has definitely given me the confidence to move forward with my project of creating an online sustainable food network, which is accessible to all. Receiving this funding gives the idea a contagious momentum, as I seek to create even more shared interest and approach the right people to help this project grow. The collaboration across both workshops has already introduced me to likeminded people, with several plans to meet up already in the pipeline.”*

Sean McDermott, L'Arche Belfast

## Newcastle Shortlisted Projects

### Big River Bakery Discussion

Andy Haddon

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Colleagues were interested to understand the main goal from this video storytelling project and the project lead articulated that there is a policy ambition attached to this project whereby the sustainable food story and its beneficiaries can be woven into accessible, audio-visual messages for policymakers. Attendees liked the simplicity of this idea and were keen for the project to adopt a regional approach. The project lead was likewise keen for the project to adopt a true partnership mindset, borne from empathy, in order to optimize his lobbying efforts for the greatest effect.

### North East Procurement Organisation Discussion

Marie Bartup

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Participants were keen to understand the future rollout of this project, if successful. The project sponsor clarified that they are keen to work in clusters to try to remove as many barriers as possible to simplify the self certification process, and potentially support pitching skills to enable impact to begin from the ground up. The intention is for this initiative to be a wide reaching, collaborative opportunity to really encourage the integration of local suppliers into the supply chain. As part of the recovery for local and regional SMEs, NEPO anticipates the seed funding to be used to pilot a small product category (e.g., bread) to understand the capability of suppliers, with initial findings likely to inform a case study.

## Successful Newcastle Project

The successful funded Newcastle project, as derived from the ESRC ABC workshop: *Big River Bakery*.

### “ Video Storytelling: Big River Bakery

*We have set ourselves quite a target with the ambition for 'the North East to be globally recognised as a place where a sustainable and affordable local food system is being developed at scale'. For some time, we have needed to capture the story of Big River Bakery and connect it with this vision. This funding is a fantastic catalyst to do this so that we will be able to share our story much more widely and hopefully inspire others to act ... I found the workshops a creative and innovative approach which was both challenging and friendly. It was a great way to develop our ideas and made me think more widely about who to collaborate with and how to achieve more together.”*

Andy Haddon, Big River Bakery

# Next Steps

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It is the ambition of the Project Team that the collaborations fostered during the workshops endure as meaningful partnerships to progress and realise initiatives



Being a part of the Accelerate Business Collaboration project provided the opportunity for organisations to consider elements of sustainability, and ways to implement them into local projects. For the Food Newcastle Partnership, it was useful to see organisations beginning to form new relationships, and new project ideas. Projects that have developed as a result of these workshops, will be used as evidence to support our application from Bronze to Silver Sustainable Food Places Award.”

**Emma Mould**

Food Newcastle Partnership Co-Ordinator

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Without collaboration, the immediate challenges faced by the food and drink industry seem insurmountable. From local food economy to public health, jobs to sustainability and climate, we need to see greater cohesion and joint working between all stakeholders such as public and private sector as well as academia and trade bodies. As a regional cluster, Food and Drink NE identified the Accelerate Business Collaboration project as a perfect example of seeding such partnership activity and, I hope, the first step in many potential opportunities to knowledge share and enact real change at both a micro and macro level.”

**Chris Jewitt**

CEO, Food and Drink North East

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to completion. The work is significant too as evidence in support of both regions' future Sustainable Food Places certification:



Joining the ABC project enabled people to explore innovative, sustainable food business models in a proactive, supportive environment. Participants were able to make suggestions, develop their ideas and identify opportunities with their peers and inspirational leaders from the sustainable food business sector. The selected projects will help in the pursuit of Sustainable Food Places Awards in Northern Ireland.”

**Kerry Melville**

Coordinator, Belfast Food Network

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## Please get in touch:

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# Participants' Evaluation

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Both workshops garnered lots of enthusiasm and immediately after Workshop 2 there was already evidence of collaboration between participants.

Spontaneous commentary from participants indicated their appreciation, enjoyment, sense of productivity, organisation, idea generation and clarification:



“Thanks for an interesting morning...”

“Thank you again for an interesting session, looking forward to the next...”

“Thank you for the excellent workshop this morning, looking forward to the next.”

“Thank you for the opportunity to be part of such an inspiring conversation yesterday.”

“Thoroughly enjoyed this morning – great level of discussion.”

“Very much enjoyed this morning.”

“That was a really good session this morning, some great ideas came out of the discussions.”

“This morning was fantastic, I had just applied for tickets by chance, but it was great. Helped me make sense of my idea.”

“Super event this morning, really is so much potential to link things together, well done organising this and getting such a diverse group together!”

“It was a great session; it was thoroughly productive and well organised. I have many questions to put to some of the participants, so a shared list is a great idea.”

“The workshop was excellent. Definitely have an idea I'd like to take further.”

“We've already got a meeting in with Belfast Food Network this afternoon and I've been in touch with L'Arche too... you have succeeded!”

An evaluation survey after the second workshops similarly indicated some immediate collaboration benefits as a result of the approach adopted:

“I really enjoyed getting to chat with like-minded people ...”

“Collaborative projects are the key to scale and strategic impact.”

Alternatively, participants praised the workshops for reinforcing their initial concept:

“Not massive changes, but confirmation of the path we are on and ideas for new links.”

Interestingly, some participants commented variously on how the workshops had changed their initial idea:

“My participation within the discussion workshops has changed my attitudes, as I know now where and how different ideas can grow from these groups.”

# Additional Notes

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# Acknowledgments

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The Project Team would like to express their gratitude to the 2020 ESRC ABC for the funding support.

We would also like to thank all delegates involved for their participation, engagement, and collaboration during and beyond the two workshops. The enthusiasm and support have been considerable, and we appreciate greatly the time and enthusiasm to work collegially across this important agenda. Thank you to those project sponsors who submitted expressions of interest and

pitched their ideas to the wider audience. Unfortunately, as part of this small-scale project, we could only provide seed-funding for two projects, but the Team believes it is really important that all projects continue to network and collaborate to develop mutually beneficial partnerships and seek alternative funding opportunities. We very much hope that these collaborations can be long-lasting and inspiring, and we look forward to hearing your successful outcomes as they happen...

## Thank you to our project partners and funders:

### Project partners:



### Project funders:

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Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)  
Accelerating Business Collaboration (ABC) 2020

**'Innovative Food Business Models for  
Sustainable and Resilient Economies'**