

## **SFC Conference 2017, Edinburgh**

### **Workshop – Engaging with Business**

#### **Summary notes**

#### **Scope**

Engaging with business - gaining traction by recognising and rewarding action. While many SFC programmes have achieved a great deal across a wide range of issues, effectively engaging with food and other businesses has often proved a harder nut to crack. This workshop examined the experiences of SFC Network members that are effectively engaging with business, and explored how their local award and recognition schemes are motivating businesses to get actively involved in promoting and providing healthy and sustainable food.

#### **Workshop Leaders**

James Cashmore, Director, Food for Life (chair/facilitator)

Lucy Antal, Liverpool Food People

Sam Dyer, Cambridge Sustainable Food

Sarah Watson, Bournemouth and Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership (Sarah was unfortunately unable to attend on the day due to illness)

#### **Workshop Content**

- James introduced the workshop and made 3 opening remarks:
  - The scale of the impact which businesses – large and small, local, national and international – have on city food systems makes business as a sector very difficult for SFC partnerships to ignore. Most food is produced and consumed as a result of private sector ‘business’ supply chains. It would be difficult to imagine a city achieving a significantly more sustainable food system without having engaged the business sector.
  - There is huge diversity in the range of businesses that impact our food system – from food producers, to processors, to retailers and other food outlets, all of different scales and geographical scope. Non-food businesses where food is an important secondary element - including leisure and tourism businesses, and major private sector employers – can all have a significant impact on a city’s food landscape. With limited resources, it is likely to be difficult to engage “all business”

within a city: SFC food partnerships should think consciously about where and how they can make the most difference through engagement.

- It often feels difficult to build “common agendas” with business leaders and managers – finding common ground can be hard. It can pay to think about influencing business by engaging with the key stakeholders that businesses are almost always interested in: their customers, employees, investors, local authorities (e.g. through their powers to set business rates) and, in many cases, the local community. When these stakeholders start to demand that business make changes to support a more sustainable food system, businesses listen. So influencing business indirectly (via their key stakeholder groups) can be as effective as seeking to influence business leaders directly.
- Lucy related her experiences of successfully engaging businesses in Liverpool. Key observations:
  - Building strong personal relationships is important – a simple device like bringing cake to a meeting can really humanize a conversation and break through barriers
  - Willingness to “network like a ninja” is key: getting out there into conversations with businesses, with persistence and optimism, is really important to successful engagement and influence
  - Businesses often respond positively to the idea of ‘keeping things within the local economy’
  - Similarly, playing the role of “critical friend” for a business is often valuable input that progressive businesses, likely to adapt successfully to their changing environments, often appreciate
  - Part of the role we can play is to thank, recognize and reward businesses that are making positive change. Motivating, reminding and rewarding are all part of a successful influence process.
- Sam outlined the Cambridge Sustainable Food Pledge/Award scheme for businesses
  - The scheme is open to all local and independent businesses, City Council funded at present, encompasses all aspects of sustainability (11 objectives, across 7 pillars which are closely aligned with the SFC framework). 23 businesses have signed up to date.
  - The scheme was developed following benchmarking other schemes, and after consultation with the LA and local businesses. There was a pilot scheme ahead of a high profile local launch.
  - The scheme built on the existing Cambridge Sustainable Food ‘Food Charter’, and included other existing schemes (e.g. Healthier Options – Fresh Ideas for Cambridgeshire)
  - The ‘Pledge’ element involves the individual business making a promise to achieve a change on one of the specific sustainability objectives over the next 12 months, describing the actions, and then reporting annually on progress.

- Assessment, evaluation and monitoring involved collecting evidence and then applying an elaborate (but manual) scoring system.
- The final session of the workshop was held as an open discussion with the panel. Key themes explored were:
  - a. The value of a local food award in driving towards the changes that we are looking to see at city level. Participants generally felt that an award structure was a very valuable tool to help motivate and deliver change amongst businesses.
  - b. The level of current interest from cities in developing a local food award for businesses. Three cities – Leeds, Middlesbrough and Wigan – mentioned that it was under active consideration. It would be very useful for the SFC project to lead a network-wide ‘audit’ of local food award schemes, both launched and under consideration.
  - c. The benefits of the SFC project developing a nationally-consistent framework for a food award for businesses, which could then be branded locally (e.g. “the (name of city) Sustainable Food Award”). Sam explained that the development of the Cambridge award framework had been very resource-intensive, and there would be real benefits in the SFC project creating a national framework to be branded locally. This might include flexibility for the standards and priorities within the scheme to be adapted locally to address particular city-level challenges and opportunities.
  - d. The general level of the standards that should be set for businesses within the scheme. There was a general feeling that the standards should be accessible to businesses, rather than setting an unattainable (for most) “gold standard”. There was also a discussion about whether the award should reward achievement or progress, given the likely wide range of different starting points for different businesses.
  - e. The options for the financial sustainability of a local food award for businesses. The Cambridge award has been LA-funded to date, and businesses do not pay to participate. However, it was felt that award holders would derive business benefits from the award, and from utilizing the frameworks to create more viable, sustainable, efficient and attractive businesses.

## **Next steps**

- SFC Project team to develop a plan for consultation with Network members around the idea of a “nationally frameworked” food award for businesses, including consultation around the 5 key areas above: appetite, current activity, consistency vs. flexibility, standard setting incl. progress vs achievement, and options for financial sustainability.