

The Food Chain (North East) CIC

Making fresh, affordable fruit and vegetables accessible to the North East

Established in 2004, the Food Chain North East aims to make low cost fresh fruit and vegetables available to communities of the North East. Using locally sourced produce, the Gateshead based social enterprise sells direct to customers via community food co-ops across the region, encouraging healthy lifestyles and promoting environmental sustainability through the purchase of local, rather than imported food.



The Food Chain's produce

and the Food Chain hopes to encourage fellow social enterprises and voluntary and community organisations to become a part of this campaign also.

The Food Chain provides a range of food products: salads, herbs and spices, fruit, vegetables (ranging from the familiar – apples and potatoes – to the more adventurous – basil, persimmon and chicory), Traidcraft items and pre-prepared vegetables. Over 150 community food projects and co-ops across Tyne and Wear, Northumberland, Durham and Tees Valley, run by a volunteer force of 200, sell the Food Chain's affordable and healthy produce, benefitting 3,500 families across the North East per week.

Through a new campaign, 'Getting Fresh in your workplace', the Food Chain aims to establish food co-ops in local workplaces. By delivering individual food orders direct to both employers and employees in their place of work on a weekly basis, the Food Chain not only saves the customer the time of shopping at a supermarket, but also promotes health and well being in the workplace. Already, a number of local employers have taken up this scheme

The Food Chain has also recently piloted a new scheme in several locations across the region – local weekly markets run by volunteers to compliment the enterprise's existing services. Proving popular within communities that have limited access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables, the enterprise hopes to extend this scheme where demand exists over the coming years.

The enterprise works in partnership with several organisations to extend its aims and purposes throughout the North East, and values these alliances highly. Two notable partnerships include The Good Life CIC, located in North Tyneside, and the Cowpen, Blyth based Briardale Community and Training Centre.

Following the closure of their local greengrocer in Longbenton the Good Life, a group of community activists, were determined to find a way of providing quality, affordable fruit and vegetables to the local community. After transforming an area of derelict land into a community garden the organisation, with the help of the Food Chain's Growing Officer, were able to grow a number of vegetables and salad items for use in the Food Chain's veggie bag scheme. The two organisations have also worked in partnership to establish several venues across North Tyneside through which local communities can purchase produce.

With funding from Comic Relief, Briardale Community and Training Centre have formed a food co-op that provides quality fruit and vegetables to the local community which has limited access to such produce. Dedicated volunteer Janet Ferry provides fresh fruit to a local toddler group that regularly uses the centre, and through the centre's polytunnel and garden growing facilities will grow herbs and other items for the Food Chain.



The Food Chain delivery driver

Making Local Food Work, an initiative funded by the Big Lottery and facilitated by the Plunkett Foundation, which aims to promote local food as an alternative to imported food by community enterprises such as the Food Chain. Through its involvement in this campaign, the enterprise hopes to be able to extend its geographical reach across the region.

As for the future, the Food Chain has several plans in place to improve its services including continuing to develop its new look website which currently features a comprehensive list of all products alongside storage/freezing tips, healthy eating advice and recipe ideas and will soon be complimented by an online ordering facility and developing a consultancy arm to offer advice to like-minded individuals and organizations wishing to establish food projects. The enterprise also hopes to establish more partnership across the region, enabling it to deliver more healthy produce to more communities. Over the coming years, the company strives to reduce dependency on funding. As Chris Byrne, Chair of the Food Chain, states: "One of our long-term aims is to be financially sustainable by strengthening the commercial side of the organization". With its previous track record and growing success, the Food Chain looks set to achieve this goal, while continuing to deliver affordable and nutritious goods to the North East.

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A significant development in the Food Chain's recent history has been the appointment of Bill White as the enterprise's new Community Growing Officer. Bill brings extensive experience to the role, with a background in delivering training, and will work on developing the Food Chain's local growing projects as well as managing the company's training arm, which provides students with Level 1 and 2 Community Market Gardening qualifications accredited by the Open College Network. The Food Chain has also recently started to actively grow produce itself on a plot of land at Blaydon, which will accommodate the training of further students.

The Food Chain is involved in a number of national initiatives promoting the consumption of local, in season food. An active participant in the Eat Seasonably campaign, the Food Chain helps advance the aim of encouraging people to eat fruit and vegetable when it is at its seasonal best. The enterprise is also a partner in