

Hello, my name is Alice and I'm the Project Manager with the Cambridge Sustainable Food Hub.

Our vision is to create an inherently sustainable local food system that seeks to reduce, or eliminate, emissions from food transport, health inequalities from unequal access to food, and the amount of food that does not get eaten or used.

A key part of our idea is to create an 'ecosystem' of individuals and organisations involved in the production, processing and consumption of food. This idea draws on natural ecosystems, where all elements are connected and benefit each other in different ways.

The Food Hub would seek to make more efficient use of the resource of food within a local context, by facilitating better local food chain dynamics and creating favourable conditions in which small local food businesses can operate and trade with one another. What would this mean in practice? One opportunity is the dynamism of small food processors, and their ability to take food that would otherwise become surplus (farmers may not be able to sell these items) and create new products. This has the double benefit of reducing food 'waste' and, with the support of the Food Hub, seeing the growth of new businesses.

The ultimate goal is that all food that is produced by local growers will reach a location where it is valued somewhere in the FH ecosystem.

Such a system will be characterised by low environmental impact (including low food miles and minimal 'waste'), high consumer trust (as people know exactly where their food is coming from), equitable distribution of food (and the associated health benefits), and a vibrant local food economy, with innovative new food businesses being set up.

In the original brochure created for the Cambridge Sustainable Food Hub, we defined a 'Food Hub' as a:

"... community of people and businesses throughout the supply chain: farmers, processors, bakers, chefs, brewers, retailers, distributors... Anyone whose livelihood is food. The members are usually small, independent businesses with shared core values such as environmental sustainability and ethical business practice. The Food Hub facilitates collaboration among its members to bring about greater value for themselves and the wider community."

The second part of the definition explained that:

"The building in which the members of the Food Hub come together is also known as the Food Hub. This building will provide food storage, processing and distribution facilities designed to reduce the carbon emissions usually associated with these activities to the lowest possible levels."

The Food Hub building will be built to high environmental standards.

Our Food Hub will provide incubator (or 'commercial' kitchens) for the use of small and start-up food businesses. These kitchens will provide affordable spaces for these businesses to grow, stimulating the local food economy. A trading platform will allow local food producers and food buyers to link up, creating a greater market for local produce. Our physical infrastructure, which includes the Food Hub building itself and a fleet of electric vans, will enable the collection, collation and distribution of this food.

The wider vision is to use the Food Hub infrastructure to bring further social benefit. For example, using the kitchens for educational purposes, whether this is providing basic cookery classes for children and adults, or more specialist courses for those interested in working in the food industry.

Research is a crucial part of what we want to achieve with the FH. A key question for us is how we can scale a local food distribution model into the wider food industry. We are hoping to work with researchers, potentially from the Centre of Agroecology and Water Resilience, to see what lessons can be learnt from the Food Hub, and to determine whether there is a model that can be replicated elsewhere (of course, with adaptations for the specifics of local contexts).

Our customers/clients would come under several categories. Primarily, we will serve the community of small food businesses who rent out our incubator kitchens. The trading platform will serve food producers and food buyers, who will include shops, restaurants, and institutional caterers. Our vision is to have a food system that connects all people involved in the production, processing and consumption of food, so it makes sense that we seek to serve a range of customers.

We currently have a potential site for the Food Hub – in Northstowe, an NHS Healthy New Town north west of Cambridge. We've gained significant traction with a wide range of institutions and organisations. In the coming weeks, we will begin our pilot phase. This will allow us to get proof of concept and trial operational activities. We have our early adopters who will work with us during this time as we begin to operate our distribution service.

Sustainability is defined by three factors: social, environmental and economic. The Cambridge Sustainable Food Hub will bring considerable social and environmental benefit. The challenge is to create a business model that is economically viable and can attract investment.

This will be a two-way process: we have to ensure that our business model is robust and is capable of weathering the challenges that come with associating with a complex group of businesses, all of which will be dealing with their own set of risks. Whether that is a farmer facing the challenges of an uncertain future post Brexit, or a small food business that, despite the support from the Food Hub, feels they can no longer operate.

However, it is also the case that our economic system has to change. Currently we have a food industry that does not prioritise planetary and human health. Individuals and institutions in the business and investment sector are realising that, for the sake of society and our planet, businesses will increasingly have to operate as social enterprises – i.e., maximising social (or environmental) benefit and not purely return for shareholders.

We want to show that a truly sustainable food system – one that serves society and the environment – is possible. I hope I've given some insight into how we are planning to approach this challenge and welcome any questions or suggestions. Thank you for listening.