

What Works in the North East?

Citizen Advisory Council Inquiry, North East Combined Authority
2nd - 3rd December 2025

“I grew up in County Durham... So during the miners’ strike, we had soup kitchens where everybody was brought together. It was community. It was helpful. It was being kind to your neighbour, which is what the North East is famous for.”

Penny, CAC Member

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is developing a new food strategy to ensure good food for everyone. The Citizen Advisory Council (CAC) was established in May 2025 to ensure citizen voices are at the heart of this strategy, bringing together 30 people from across the UK with lived experience and diverse perspectives on the food system.

The **What Works Here Inquiries** are a pioneering example of how citizen-led work can inform government policy. Citizens co-designed the inquiries, drawing on their diverse knowledge and experience to investigate what conditions are needed for food system change. This report collates the Citizen Advisory Council’s findings from the inquiry in the North East Combined Authority, offering an analysis and deep understanding of place, as presented to them by local leaders.

Regional development support, investment in local and regional food businesses, and holistic approaches to food insecurity have driven food system change in the North East. Underpinning this are strong regional pride, community resilience, and a commitment to protecting local food identities and provenance. While the inquiry uncovered solutions that could work elsewhere, the findings emphasise the value of regional economic development and supporting regions to build thriving food economies. They found that resilient food systems require diversity: working with farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises, and local and regional partnerships to build on the unique strengths of the area.

National government should invest in the regional food infrastructure, fair producer relationships, and long-term partnership support the North East shows can work. Regulations and procurement systems should be reformed to give SMEs and local producers a fair chance, and regions

should be given the authority and resources to address the specific challenges they face.



¹CAC members Glory and Peter at day one of the inquiry

What's needed to support the North East's food system

“I can see the holistic support. I can see how proactive they are...The togetherness, the connection, the community-oriented way of you know, discharging these services is really unique.”

Glory, CAC Member

Regional expert and farmer Tom Burston helped organise the inquiry and set the scene for the Citizen Advisory Council. Over two days, the citizens met with a wide range of people and organisations with a stake in the North East's food system and spent time visiting projects to see what was working well and what national government and the food strategy could learn from.

Working together, they identified the conditions necessary for the North East's food system to thrive:

- **Building the infrastructure regions need:** investing in processing, storage, and distribution creates the conditions for diverse food businesses to thrive
- **Fair relationships between producers and buyers:** stable and fairly-priced markets through direct sales or cooperatives allow producers to

plan and invest

- **Supporting partnerships over the long term:** sustained support allows food partnerships to build relationships, share knowledge, and coordinate action in the region, linking producers with food banks, schools with farmers, communities with resources
- **Connecting production with food security support:** infrastructure and coordination is needed to help regional farmers supply food banks with fresh, local produce
- **Giving regions the authority to address local realities:** regional leaders understand their communities' challenges but lack the authority and resources to act



2 The Council meeting Ross Lowrie from the North East Combined Authority

Building on what works

The CAC saw numerous examples of how people in the North East are making the food system better every day. And they picked out a number of ways to build on work that is already happening:

<p>Regional development supports producers</p>	<p>Northumberland County Council's food strategy celebrates local food culture. FADNE's 'Beyond the Kitchen Table' programme supports producers to access more retail opportunities, while also planning for a rural regeneration initiative that supports the food and drink sector to build back declining high streets.</p> <p>NECA is investing £2 million over the next two years in food and drink to tackle the challenges of farm profitability and unemployment, and sees establishing provenance in the North East as a means to do this.</p>
<p>Crisis support tackles the root causes of food insecurity</p>	<p>The Pathways model at Newcastle Food Bank tackles the root causes of food insecurity by integrating mental health services, welfare advice, police involvement for domestic violence, and housing escalation. The transition from crisis food parcels to a pantry model preserves dignity whilst creating sustainable income, providing a middle ground for people who have some resources but face affordability pressures.</p>
<p>Community resilience and creativity</p>	<p>The Lighthouse Project in Byker is a multi-use community space that combines youth clubs, Council events, bike workshops, HAF programmes, and food education under one roof.</p> <p>Nourish Food School provides food education that meets people where they are. It runs cooking lessons in local community centres and provides free or low-cost food boxes with ingredients and a QR link for a healthy recipe tutorial.</p>
<p>A skilled and passionate workforce</p>	<p>The Oswin Project prison employment programme achieves a 4% reoffender rate compared to 39% nationally by providing meaningful work, skills training, and post-release employment pathways. Prisoners work in kitchens producing bakery items, staffing a farm shop and operating Newcastle Cathedral café. The project is 63% self-funded, proving financial viability alongside social impact.</p>
<p>Farmers committed to ethical, sustainable production and local food networks</p>	<p>Walter Riddell at Hepple Estate, Duncan Nelless at Thistleyhaugh Farm, and Graham Rutherford at View Law farm spoke passionately about the way they look after the land and their animals but Mac Young of the NFU highlighted the struggles farmers face with increasing uncertainty. Regulatory and economic barriers push toward industrial scale</p> <p>Riley's Fish Shack exemplifies how local networks can transform food systems. Adam Riley buys gin and meat from Walter at Hepple Estate, knows the animals had good lives, and can tell customers the story.</p>



3 Shion Gosrani from Public Health Newcastle

Barriers to change

“The food bank does what it can, but the food it gets from places like FareShare is not always suitable or fresh.”

Penny, CAC Member

“There's no point in shifting food from one side to country and then moving it back again. It should just be sourced and processed and distributed locally.”

Peter, CAC Member

While there has been investment to grow the regional food economy, the benefits of this are not being realised in some of the most deprived areas of the North East of England and people struggle to get good food. Regional brands like Taste of Northumberland bypass local markets where food deserts persist.

Charities and projects have stepped in to support people to get good food but struggle to access fresh local produce, and lack transport and storage capacity. While local and regional farming businesses could supply nutritious food, the distribution networks to reach food banks and community pantries are not strong enough.

CAC representatives heard that short-term funding prevents long-term work. Food partnership coordinators operate on temporary contracts, preventing sustained relationship-building. Nourish Food School's leader spends one day per week unpaid on funding applications, meaning 20% of time on survival rather than impact. Volunteers require coordinators for training and support, and breaking free of annual funding cycles would let organisations focus on scaling up proven approaches.

Abattoirs are closing, forcing farmers like Walter at Hepple Estate to transport carefully raised cattle 50 miles. Without local bottling, canning, packing, and processing capacity, food produced in the North East leaves for processing and returns as finished products, increasing costs and removing economic value from the region.

Citizens observed that inflexible contracts create fragility throughout the supply chain. When chicken feed costs rose significantly, supermarkets refused to adjust prices paid to farmers, leading to 7 million hens taken out of production and subsequent egg shortages. Supermarkets then imported eggs at higher prices.

The North East is one of the coldest regions in England, with the worst housing stock and lowest take-home pay, yet policies for warm homes, food, and energy are designed centrally with minimal regional variation. Citizens observed that while regions understand their specific challenges, the authority and resources to address them sit elsewhere.

Summary

"I think from what we've experienced over the past two days, that's evident that it doesn't necessarily work when something's rolled out nationwide. Often it would be better to be more customized to that specific region, to identify their specific issues and challenges."

Craig, CAC member

"Politicians should be sitting down talking to real people about what the food concerns are."

Peter, CAC member

The CAC members who spent time in the North East came away with a clear sense of a region defined by resilience, pride, and community spirit, alongside a diverse range of urban, rural, and coastal environments. NECA is investing in the regional food economy, FADNE is supporting local food businesses to grow, and organisations like Newcastle Food Bank, the Lighthouse Project, and the Oswin Project show what is possible when communities and institutions work together.

However, people in the North East cannot transform their food system without a clear and consistent policy environment and targeted investment from national government. Many communities suffer a legacy of neglect and high levels of food insecurity, while short-term funding cycles undermine the partnerships and organisations working hardest to address these challenges. Infrastructure gaps force food and value out

of the region, and market structures concentrate risk onto small producers. People are doing a huge amount to help themselves and their communities, but they want national government to level the playing field, invest in regional food infrastructure, and give regions the authority to address the challenges they understand best.

Thank you to the people in the North East who made this work possible

Local farmer and regional expert Tom Burston organised the inquiry and introduced the Council to a range of local actors:

- Susan Justice and Steve Wheaton, [Food and Drink North East](#)
- Walter Riddle, [Hepple Estate](#) and [Hepple Spirits Company](#)
- Adam Riley, [Riley's Fish Shack](#)
- Maria Antoniou, [Northumberland County Council](#)
- Shion Gosrani, [Newcastle City Council](#)
- Carlos Yescas, [Food Newcastle](#)
- Fiona Sample and the [Cafe 16](#) team, the [Oswin Project](#)
- Mac Young, [NFU Northumberland](#)
- Ross Lowrie, [North East Combined Authority](#)
- Carol Rowland and Gemma Whaley, [Newcastle Food Bank](#)
- Joanna Lacey, [Nourish Food School](#)
- Duncan Nelless, Thistleyhaugh Farm and Graham Rutherford, View Law

Who we are

The Citizen Advisory Council is made up of 30 citizens from across the UK, who are part of The Food Foundation Ambassadors programme or participants in Food, Farming and Countryside Commission's The Food Conversation, representing a diverse cross-section of British society. The Council was formed in May 2025 and have been working with Defra to ensure the new food strategy can ensure good food for everyone.

The following Citizen Advisory Council members led the What Works Here Inquiry in the North East Combined Authority:

- Craig, Northumberland
- Glory Omoaka, Glasgow
- Penny Walters, Newcastle
- Peter Gorringe, Northumberland

The Inquiry Process

The What Works Here Inquiries used a participatory research approach, positioning citizens as researchers. Over two days in the North East Combined Authority, Citizen Advisory Council members conducted field research through site visits and dialogue with local stakeholders. Citizens took detailed field notes and then participated in structured reflection sessions. Through this collaborative analysis, citizens synthesised their individual findings into collective insights, distinguishing between what was working well, what barriers prevented progress, and what would support the regional food system.

The Food Conversation

Since 2023, the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission has run the UK's largest-ever public dialogue about food. Through deliberations in 12 parts of the country and over 75 community conversations, citizens explored policy interventions and produced the [Citizen Manifesto to Fix Food](#) in March 2025, a call for joined-up thinking to address food inequalities, poverty and waste.

Food Foundation Food Ambassadors

The [Food Foundation Food Ambassadors](#) are people aged 14 and up with lived experience of food insecurity who contribute to campaigns, research, and events as experts by experience. They've worked on campaigns from school meals to tackling food poverty, including with Marcus Rashford on the #EndChildFoodPoverty campaign.