

Sustainable Food and Farming Conference Prospectus – proposed structure and contents

Sustainable Food Somerset are working in partnership with Somerset Council to organise a Sustainable Food and Farming Conference with the aim to accelerate the transformation of the food and farming system across Somerset.

A wide range of topics are being considered and a programme created to:

- Attract an audience of people with diverse interests from across the food and farming system
- Achieve a significant scale of participation in each of the topics.

It is considered there is a high level of demand for such an event, evidenced by:

- A growing movement in support of sustainable food and farming across Somerset, as evidenced by the level of involvement in the annual Somerset food Trail Festival; (circa 10,000+ attendees across the Trail in 2022)
- Increasing interest in exploring opportunities for catalysing systemic change, both in Somerset and county by county across the UK (See Appendix A below for Context)

A Planning Group is currently assessing the financial viability of the event and the aim of this document and survey will help to determine this.

Purpose and Aim of the Conference

To strengthen the movement around regenerative food production by connecting stakeholders from across the sector to lead demand led change and create advocates and ambassadors.

To focus on demand-led growth by making the case for and showcasing ways to increase the demand for regeneratively grown food.

Desired Outcomes of the conference

Bring together stakeholders from across the food system to help build connections, create business opportunities

Demonstrate the benefits of regeneratively grown food to local communities and how to get involved.

Understand the most up to date thinking on regenerative agriculture and the benefit this brings to the whole food system.

Understand how to increase the demand for locally sustainable grown food across Somerset

Target Audiences

At the core of the sustainable food and farming movement are practitioners, consumers and influencers who are already on the journey. These will be the primary advocates and ambassadors in a process of ever widening the circles of engagement. These comprise:

- Land managers / regenerative farmers and growers
- Regenerative land and business investors and banks
- Food business owners, food buyers and institutional procurement managers
- Hospitality sector, chefs, hoteliers, restaurateurs
- Schools, teachers and education providers
- Food, farming and natural environment academics and researchers
- Policy influencers and decision-makers
- Leaders of Somerset-wide and UK organisations

Proposed Programme

The proposed programme has been created to form a coherent whole for those delegates who can attend over two days, as well as one day only; allowing sufficient time for meaningful networking as well as offering delegates sustainably grown food and drink from Somerset and the surrounding counties. The location is likely to be in the Taunton area. (See Appendix B below for further detail on a suggested Programme)

DAY 1: Regenerating the land, regenerating Somerset

Focus - Sustainable food, farming and nature restoration.

Key participants - investors, farmers, growers, businesses across the food supply chain

DAY 2: Healthy food, healthy communities

Focus - community engagement, food supplies

Key participants - community organisations, consumers and influencers

Dates and cost are yet to be finalised but expected to take place over a Friday & Saturday during school holidays i.e., Easter 2024, July 2024 or Autumn half term 2024

Appendix A Context

The conference comes at a time of unprecedented change in agriculture and food production. The abundance promised by the 'green revolution' of the early 1970s has failed to materialise. Higher yields have come at the cost of food insecurity, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution, climate breakdown and food degradation. There's now mounting evidence that at a time of growing populations and climate extremes, ecological agriculture – or agroecology - is the only approach that will provide food security and a genuinely sustainable production system.

Regenerative farming – a form of agroecology epitomised by organic agriculture – is being adopted by a growing number of farmers as a way to improve the life and fertility of their soils, so making their farms more profitable. Scaling up this transition, in Somerset as elsewhere, will require the support and commitment of the whole community – farmers and land managers, consumers, the business sector, charities and NGOs, the public sector and local government.

Somerset will play a major role in the national transformation of our countryside. Farming has been important to the life and economy of the county for centuries. With a range of landscape types – from the low-lying moorlands of the Levels to the uplands of Mendip and Exmoor, and the fertile plain of Taunton Vale – Somerset has traditionally supported a range of farming types including arable cropping, mixed farming and pasture-based livestock production. The county was particularly known for the quality of its milk and dairy products. Following World War Two these traditional systems have given way to an industrial model characterised by mechanisation, specialisation and a reliance on purchased inputs, particularly chemical fertilisers, pesticides and animal feeds. In the new reality of climate breakdown there's an urgent need to increase the adoption of farming systems closer to the sustainable, mixed farming models of the past, with their varied, carbon-rich landscapes and biodiversity.

The aim of the conference is to bring together all interested groups to help chart a new course for food and farming in the county. Regenerative agriculture offers an unprecedented opportunity to raise the productivity and profitability of Somerset farms, while increasing biodiversity and helping to counter climate breakdown through carbon sequestration. Through the development of new, local markets for foods from regenerative farms, there's also a chance to raise nutritional standards in the county and improve health outcomes. There'll be new jobs and business opportunities as the rural transformation gathers momentum. Nature-friendly, regenerative agriculture, and the nutrient-dense foods flowing from it, will bring benefits for the county's economy as a whole. It's why the new farming could lead to a Somerset renaissance.

Appendix B Proposed Programme

DAY 1 Plenary: Regenerating the land, regenerating Somerset

Focus - Sustainable food, farming and nature restoration.

Key participants - investors, farmers, growers, businesses across the food supply chain

This opening session looks at how the life and fertility of our soil is the starting point for healthy people and communities, prosperous farms, flourishing wildlife populations, thriving businesses and a secure food supply. Plus, resilience against climate extremes like drought and flooding. That few inches of fertile soil is, quite simply, the bedrock of civilisation, a fact we've paid too little attention to during the era of chemical agriculture

This session explores the benefits of regenerative agriculture for the people, communities and countryside of Somerset. We'll see it, not as a retreat to localism and the past, but as part of a vibrant, forward-looking movement bringing nature-recovery, health and well-being to people and communities across the world.

Day 1 Breakouts

From commodity agriculture to real food farming.

Industrial agriculture is the consequence of allowing private corporations, accountable only to their shareholders, to take over our food system. They have appropriated functions that traditionally have been the business of farmers, making them dependent on inputs that are not only unnecessary, but often damaging. Switching to a low or zero input system will be a big cultural shift for many Somerset farmers and will need community engagement. This county with its rich and fertile farmlands is well placed to provide healthy, nutrient-dense food for all.

Forever Farming: Building climate resilience and long-term prosperity through soil management

Covering the latest science on the role of carbon in maintaining soil fertility and health in sustainable food systems. The practical application of the new science in the everyday management of Somerset soils.

Building successful food businesses around regenerative farms

A close look at two successful regenerative farm business that, against the odds, have built profitable enterprises by selling direct from the farm. What are the key elements that have brought them success? The farmers tell their stories, plus there's an objective analysis from a business expert on what has made these enterprises profitable.

Public procurement: Is this the key to scaling up production of locally produced, nutrient-dense food?

Session looks at dynamic procurement of locally produced foods from regenerative farms. The aggregation of product from smaller producers into a larger supply to win bigger public procurement contracts. Examples include Somerset Larder supplying Hinckley Point; Bath micro-project supplying schools; South-west procurement working with Crown Commercial Services.

Animals and biodiversity in regenerative farming

Grazing animals and pastured poultry have an important part to play in sustainable farming systems and the maintenance wildlife-rich landscapes. While there are sound arguments for cutting our average meat consumption, the choice of meats we buy plays a key role in the countryside and landscapes we create. This session looks at how the humane management of livestock and poultry, far from hastening climate breakdown, can play a key role in the building and maintenance of carbon-rich landscapes and the sequestration of soil carbon.

Hospitality and local, nutrient-dense foods: A perfect partnership?

How Somerset's hotels, restaurants, cafes and clubs can build their own business success around the foods of regenerative agriculture. The role of food service companies and the tourism sector. How Somerset can become the leading county for food tourism. The role of business in regenerating Somerset. The role of green investment.

DAY 2 Plenary: Healthy food, healthy communities

Focus - community engagement, food supplies

Key participants - community organisations, consumers and influencers

Good food is the foundation of good health. And good, nutrient-dense foods come only from fertile farms where soils are biologically healthy and have the right structures for crop growth. The present farming system, based on damaged soils and high chemical inputs, produces cheap commodities, many of which are further degraded by processing. Yet from food insecurity to chronic disease and pollution, our food system is failing us, undermining the health of communities and their environments.

This session looks at how Somerset's proud tradition of producing healthy, nutrient-dense foods has been lost. Why has competition in the mainstream food system led to a fall in nutritional standards rather than a rise? Instead, competition in the food market has led to a race to the bottom. Can a local food system offer greater transparency, giving consumers a better knowledge of how their food is produced? How do we put the pride back at the heart of our farming and food systems? And how do we make the foods from regenerative agriculture affordable for everyone?

Day 2 Breakouts

Scaling up community food networks

Community Supported Agriculture in Somerset. Examples from the Welsh Community Food Strategy – Food Cardiff, Cae Tan CSA; integrated local delivery framework for multi-objective environmental delivery

Healthy food for all: Making healthy food universal

Income is a major determinant of longevity and health outcomes. Poor diet plays a key role in the process. For many people in Somerset healthy diets are simply not affordable. This session looks at public health and the role of food banks, food co-ops and community organisations in making the foods of regenerative farms and smallholdings available to everyone.

Engaging the young in our real food adventure

How do we engage our young people in the reform of our food system? Should we put story-telling and music at its heart? This session explores new ways of bringing young people onto regenerative farms; expanding music/food events like Valley Fest and Glastonbury. Using social media to tell food stories. Getting regenerative food and farming on schools' curriculum.

New Life in the High Street

With the rise of online buying our town centres are struggling. Can the rise of locally produced food bring life and fertility back to our High Streets? This session looks at the role of pop-up shops, urban farm shops and local food markets in bringing life and vitality back to our struggling town centres. Includes examples from across Somerset.

New farms for new farmers

Regenerative agriculture requires an enhanced level of management skill than modern industrial agriculture, which increasingly relies on contractors while expecting managers to run ever larger units. The more diverse farms and landscapes required for regenerative farming need more skilled people on the land. How will these land managers of the future be trained and how will we create the new farms for them to run?

Reclaiming our food culture

The current industrial farming model has survived, in part because it's subsidised by taxpayers, but also because its proponents have controlled the food narrative. They have perpetuated the myth that only high-input agriculture can feed the world. At the same time, they have obscured and sidelined the scientific evidence that doesn't fit their view. To reclaim healthy food and restore diverse and wildlife-rich Somerset landscape, we have first to take back the narrative of food and farming. We have the best stories. How do we get them to the wider public?