

LOCAL FOOD SOLUTIONS THINK TANK

Final Report

September, 2024

*Prepared by Amanda Solmes, Research Associate, Centre for Healthy Communities,
Applied Research and Innovation Office, Loyalist College*

INTRODUCTION

The Local Food Solutions Think Tank was hosted by IncrEdible Trent Hills (ITH) on Saturday April 20, 2024 at the Hastings Civic Centre and attended by 65 enthusiastic community members from across Northumberland County and just beyond. This report provides some background about IncrEdible Trent Hills and the purpose of the Think Tank. It summarizes the keynote presentations, the messages of the panelists, and the commentary provided in the breakout tables. It also offers conclusions and recommendations about next steps.

About IncrEdible Trent Hills

IncrEdible Trent Hills is a not-for-profit organization that aims to unite and nourish the communities of Trent Hills and beyond by supporting and strengthening the local food system (IncrEdible Trent Hills, 2024). Growing from the “Campbellford Incredible Edibles Festival”, this organization operates year-round to offer events, programs, and outreach activities that encourage collaboration, creativity, awareness, and support for local food and those who produce it (2024). As stated on their website, “we aim to inspire a love of local and grow a community that cares, through the universal language of food” (2024).

Inspired by Incredible Edible Todmorden in 2013, and incorporated in 2014, IncrEdible Trent Hills is part of a growing global movement to strengthen community resiliency by bringing people together around food.

The organization supports three community events: the IncrEdible Spring Gala, the IncrEdible Edible Festival, and the IncrEdible Farm Tour; and two community programs: the Campbellford Community Gardens and the IncrEdible School Nutrition Program. All of these events and programs aim to support local farmers and food producers as much as possible, and build collaboration with community partners, businesses, and organizations. Reaching over 100,000 people, IncrEdible Trent Hills has a strong social media presence, where they promote and support farm and food activities in Trent Hills, Northumberland County, and beyond.

About the Local Food Solutions Think Tank

The purpose of the Local Food Solutions Think Tank was to bring together all major food stakeholders in Northumberland County and beyond, to support relationship building and collaboration, and to inspire conversation about a more resilient local/regional food system. It covered topics from food access and community resilience to sustainable production, distribution, and tourism – going deep on local food systems, and solutions for building them to be stronger.

This was the first event of its kind and the first time that cross-sectoral food system stakeholders from Northumberland County were in a room together. It was funded primarily by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and supplemented by local partner, Innresponse, with in-kind contributions from the Trent Hills Public Library, Northumberland County Food Policy Council, and the UNESCO Chair on Food, Biodiversity and Sustainability Studies/Wilfrid Laurier University. The event was co-designed by Amanda Solmes, Executive Director, IncrEdible Trent Hills, and Heidi Schaeffer, Founder, ACT Consulting Inc.

This report was prepared by the Centre for Healthy Communities (CFHC) at Loyalist College, that had staff present and participating at the event.

BACKGROUND

Becoming “IncrEdible Trent Hills”: A Visioning Story

In 2019, new leadership began re-envisioning IncrEdible Trent Hills beyond its original role as a festival-based organization. While the Campbellford Incredible Edibles Festival had successfully built strong relationships across the local food community, a new board saw an opportunity to extend this momentum into year-round initiatives that could strengthen food literacy, local production, and community connection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization began expanding into practical, community-based programming, including stewardship of local community gardens and the launch of a school-based food literacy pilot. These initiatives marked a shift toward a broader mandate focused on food access, education, and resilience.

By Fall 2023, following an internal visioning session with emerging community leaders, it became clear that defining the organization’s long-term role required broader input from

the community. To ensure that future directions reflected community priorities and addressed system-wide challenges, IncrEdible Trent Hills initiated the Local Food Solutions Think Tank, as a structured opportunity for cross-sector dialogue and collaboration.

Think Tank Design & Development

IncrEdible Trent Hills received funding through the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Resilient Communities Fund in 2023 to support community consultation as the organization broadened its scope. While the original plan included a survey and a series of smaller "conversation cafés," it became clear that a different approach would be more effective given community engagement fatigue and organizational capacity constraints.

In collaboration with consultant Heidi Schaeffer (Advancing Change Together), the organization shifted toward a single, structured one-day convening designed to bring diverse food system actors together for education, dialogue, and collective problem-solving.

The event was intentionally framed around a persistent tension within the local food system: how to improve food access and affordability while also supporting viable farm livelihoods, ecological production, and regional distribution. These issues are often addressed separately, yet they are fundamentally interdependent.

To encourage a whole-systems perspective, the day included keynote presentations, cross-sector panels, and facilitated breakout discussions that spanned production, distribution, access, policy, and community development. Invitations were extended across Northumberland County and neighbouring regions to reflect the broader food shed in which the local system operates. A full agenda of the days events and speakers can be found in **Appendix A**.

While structured as a one-day event, the Think Tank represented the culmination of several years of ongoing community conversations about strengthening the regional food system.

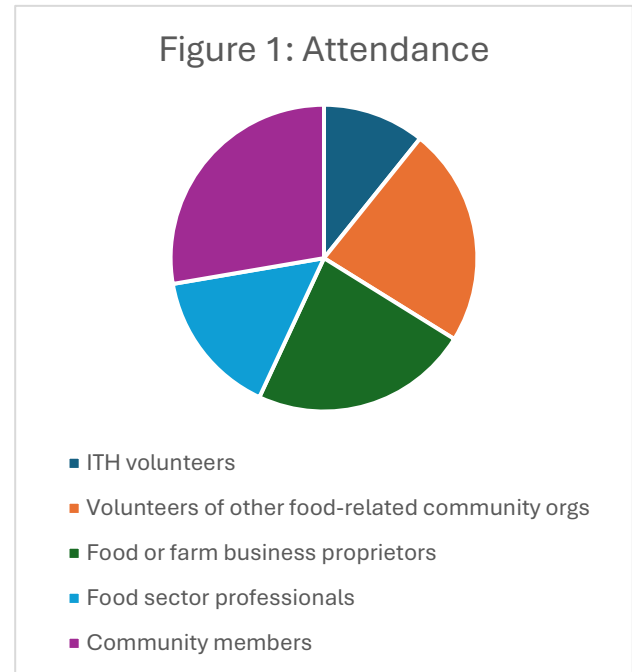
THINK TANK ATTENDANCE, DATA & RESULTS

Recruitment & Attendance

The event was advertised via social media, the ITH and Public Library websites, and through various email lists – both of IncrEdible Trent Hills and community partners. 73 registered, and 65 guests attended. Attendees were asked to self-identify with one of the groups listed in **Figure 1**.

Workbooks and Data Collection

Data was collected through facilitated breakout discussions and optional written submissions. Participants were invited to record reflections, questions, and additional ideas in event workbooks, including contributions they may not have felt comfortable sharing aloud. Discussions were supported by designated facilitators and notetakers, and all collected materials were reviewed and synthesized for thematic analysis. (See **Appendix 3** for workbook prompts.)



Keynote Presentations

The Think Tank opened with keynote presentations from Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer, UNESCO Chair on Food, Biodiversity, and Sustainability Studies, and Russ Christianson, Chair of the Northumberland County Food Policy Council. Together, they framed the event within both global and local food system contexts.

Dr. Blay-Palmer challenged common assumptions about the global food system, highlighting issues such as food waste, corporate concentration, and the need to strengthen small- and medium-scale regional production. She emphasized the importance of ecologically grown food, regional processing and distribution, and policy tools that support resilient local food economies. Drawing from the Food Learning and Growing (FLOW) initiative, she underscored the value of collaborative, indicator-driven approaches to building and measuring regional food system resilience.

Russ Christianson, Chair of the Northumberland County Food Policy Council (NCFPC) grounded these themes locally, outlining how policy, sustainable farming practices, food

hubs, markets, culinary education, and circular economy strategies are already shaping Northumberland's food landscape. He emphasized that food system resilience requires coordinated action across production, policy, community engagement, and cultural change.

Together, the keynotes reinforced a central message of the day: strengthening the regional food system requires moving beyond siloed approaches and toward integrated, whole-systems collaboration.

Panel Discussions

The Think Tank featured two cross-sector panels exploring complementary dimensions of the regional food system: (1) Food Insecurity, Health, and Community Resilience, and (2) Sustainable Food Production, Distribution, and Tourism. Together, these discussions provided grounded local insight into community assets, system gaps, and opportunities for greater alignment across the food system.

Panel One: Food Insecurity, Health, and Community Resilience

Panel One brought together leaders from public health, food banks, school nutrition, community outreach, local food initiatives, and the Vital Signs report to explore the relationship between food access, health, equity, and community wellbeing. Panelists shared perspectives during the session and provided additional notes following the event, which were incorporated into this synthesis. The following key insights were reflected in the discussion.

1. Food as Health, Dignity, and Belonging

Panelists emphasized that food access is not only a matter of calories, but of dignity, connection, and long-term health. Food literacy, cooking skills, community meals, school-based programs, and volunteer opportunities were described as pathways to belonging, leadership development, and improved self-esteem. Nutrition was framed as foundational to preventing chronic disease and strengthening overall community resilience.

2. A Fragmented Local Food System

While Northumberland has strong producers and committed organizations, panelists noted that while Northumberland County and area has pieces of a local food system, it is not a fully connected one. Improving coordination between growers, food access

programs, public institutions, and retailers was seen as critical to strengthening both affordability and farm viability.

3. What Is Working

Panelists identified significant community assets, including:

- Active farmers' markets and locally committed producers
- Strong volunteer culture and grassroots generosity
- School nutrition and garden programs
- Food bank networks increasingly sourcing local and fresh food
- Community meals and outreach programs expanding into rural areas
- The Northumberland Food Policy Council as a convening body

Overall, the region was described as having strong social capital and authentic community care.

4. Persistent Gaps and Structural Barriers

The most consistent theme across the discussion was the lack of infrastructure and coordinated capacity to align existing efforts. Organizations are often operating in isolation due to limited staff time and funding. Panelists called for:

- Backbone coordination to improve collaboration
- Food aggregation and distribution infrastructure
- Institutional procurement policies supporting local food
- Agricultural land protection and regenerative farming supports
- Sustainable funding for food access programs
- Systems-level approaches addressing poverty, wages, and cost of living

A recurring sentiment was that food insecurity is fundamentally tied to broader economic inequities. Participants emphasized that long-term solutions require policy change alongside community-driven innovation.

Panel Two: Sustainable Food Production, Distribution, and Tourism

Panel Two brought together farmers, value-added producers, food hub representatives, tourism leaders, and sector advocates to examine the production and distribution side of

the regional food system. Panelists discussed the assets supporting local agriculture, as well as the structural barriers limiting scalability and resilience. The following key insights were reflected in the discussion.

1. Strong Production Assets and Entrepreneurial Culture

Northumberland benefits from a network of committed small- and mid-scale producers, farmers' markets, supportive retailers and restaurants, sector advocacy organizations, and infrastructure such as the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre. Community members actively purchase local products, and there is growing interest in regenerative practices and agri-tourism. A collaborative entrepreneurial culture was described as a significant regional strength.

2. Infrastructure Gaps in Processing and Distribution

Panelists consistently identified weaknesses in mid-level infrastructure. Challenges include limited access to quality meat processing facilities, declining numbers of skilled butchers, and insufficient aggregation and distribution systems capable of competing with industrial supply chains. Many small-scale producers struggle to access markets efficiently while maintaining their values and earning viable wages.

3. Market Integrity and Education

Concerns were raised about food fraud and misleading “local” claims in roadside and retail markets, which undermine trust and disadvantage authentic producers. Panelists emphasized the need for clearer verification mechanisms and broader public education about regenerative agriculture, seasonal food systems, and the true costs of production.

4. Land, Labour, and Economic Viability

Access to land, agricultural labour supports, and wage sustainability were identified as ongoing barriers. Producers expressed interest in models that would enable collective marketing, shared distribution, and regional aggregation — including the potential for food hub development — provided such initiatives are professionally managed and financially viable.

5. Tourism and Value-Added Opportunity

Agri-tourism and local food branding were seen as under-leveraged opportunities to strengthen regional economic resilience while deepening consumer connection to producers.

Breakout Discussions

Following the panel sessions, participants self-selected into one of eight breakout groups to explore specific areas of interest in greater depth:

1. Reimagining Emergency Food
2. Growing Food Together
3. Supporting Farmers as Land Stewards
4. Local Food Distribution Models
5. Chefs and Secondary Producers
6. Marketing and Tourism
7. Stakeholders and Institutions
8. Funding Your Initiative

Each group discussed assets, gaps, opportunities, and potential next steps within its topic area. The following summarizes key points raised.

1. Supporting Farmers as Land Stewards

Gaps Identified

- Limited communication and information-sharing between farmers and conservation groups
- Difficulty accessing concise, practical education on stewardship practices
- Grant programs perceived as complex and time-intensive
- Barriers for new farmers accessing land and capital

Ideas and Opportunities

- Recognizing farmers as land managers and environmental stewards
- Developing stronger alliances between conservation and agriculture
- Exploring compensation models for stewardship activities
- Improving information distribution and accessibility

2. Reimagining Emergency Food

Challenges Identified

- Reliance on donations rather than stable purchasing power
- Difficulty balancing food quality, nutrition, and available donations
- Limited equipment and kitchen capacity among clients
- Operating budgets often limited to staffing, not food procurement

Ideas and Opportunities

- Shifting from food donation models toward monetary support for local purchasing
- Linking local growers to food access programs through structured logistics
- Expanding “Grow a Row” and community garden contributions
- Investing in food literacy, cooking skills, and skill-building
- Exploring food hub models to support distribution and coordination
- Joint advocacy and collaborative grant applications

3. Growing Food Together (Community Gardens)

Challenges Identified

- Sustainable funding models
- Volunteer retention throughout the growing season
- Ensuring consistent participation and shared responsibility

Ideas and Opportunities

- Community-based fundraising strategies
- Education workshops and healing-focused garden programming
- Linking gardens to food banks
- Composting initiatives and waste reduction
- Processing and packaging produce to improve accessibility

4. Local Food Distribution Models

Key Questions

- What is the most effective distribution model for small-scale growers?
- How can aggregation serve both farmers and food access organizations?

Gaps Identified

- Lack of professionally managed aggregation systems
- Limited shared refrigerated transport and processing capacity
- Farmers' market models may not be efficient for all producers
- Farmers lack time to manage distribution independently

Ideas and Opportunities

- Cooperative or food hub models
- Integration of existing infrastructure (e.g., warehouse space)
- Online platforms such as Open Food Network
- Shared logistics and municipal support
- Paid coordination roles

5. Chefs and Secondary Producers

Challenges Identified

- Defining and verifying “local”
- Grading and processing requirements limiting direct farm-to-restaurant purchasing
- Tight restaurant margins and labour pressures
- Inconsistent supply from small producers

Ideas and Opportunities

- Education for chefs and consumers on seasonal sourcing
- Repurposing food nearing end-of-shelf-life
- Centralized marketplace or hub connecting producers and buyers

- Leveraging local branding and menu features

6. Stakeholders and Institutions

Key Discussion Points

- Increased visibility and activation of the Northumberland Food Charter
- Translating policy documents into everyday practice
- Need for broader engagement across municipalities
- Measuring progress over time
- Clarifying regional food shed boundaries and vision
- Strengthening networked approaches and regular review of shared goals

7. Funding Your Initiative

Common Themes

- Interest in collaborative grant applications
- Shared sponsorship models
- Joint advocacy to reduce competition among organizations
- Exploring sustainable funding beyond short-term project grants

8. Marketing and Tourism

(Themes intersected with multiple groups)

- Increasing awareness of local producers
- Strengthening agri-tourism opportunities
- Clearer communication about local food value
- Leveraging regional branding to support economic viability

General Observations Across Breakouts

Across breakout discussions, participants expressed strong interest in collaboration but identified capacity and coordination limitations. Many groups referenced the need for:

- Improved networking and communication
- Sustainable funding mechanisms
- Reduced duplication of effort
- Dedicated coordination roles

Questions of burnout and organizational capacity were raised, particularly within a largely volunteer-driven ecosystem.

CONCLUSIONS

The Local Food Solutions Think Tank demonstrated that Northumberland County has strong foundational assets across its food system: committed producers, active food access organizations, engaged volunteers, supportive institutions, and a growing local food culture. Participants expressed pride in the region's generosity, entrepreneurial spirit, and grassroots leadership.

At the same time, discussions revealed persistent structural gaps. While many initiatives exist, they often operate independently due to limited capacity, infrastructure, and coordination. Participants consistently identified challenges related to mid-level distribution infrastructure, economic viability for producers and food workers, sustainable funding for food access programs, and the need for clearer policy alignment.

There was a clear appetite for continued collaboration. However, burnout and limited organizational capacity were also acknowledged as real constraints. Strengthening the regional food system will require investment not only in programs, but in the connective structures that allow existing efforts to align and scale.

Overall, the Think Tank marked an important step in building shared understanding. It confirmed that while the region has strong individual actors, long-term resilience will depend on deeper coordination, infrastructure development, and sustained cross-sector partnership.

Considerations for Next Steps

Based on the conversations held throughout the day, potential next steps may include:

- Exploring models for ongoing convening and backbone coordination across the food system
- Assessing feasibility of strengthened aggregation and distribution infrastructure
- Identifying collaborative funding opportunities to reduce duplication and competition
- Increasing visibility and activation of shared frameworks such as the Northumberland Food Charter
- Continuing dialogue around economic viability, institutional procurement, and policy alignment

IncrEdible Trent Hills and its partners will continue conversations with interested stakeholders to determine how best to support coordinated action moving forward.

Appendix A: Think Tank Agenda

10:30 AM – Registration

11:00 – **Welcome** – Amanda Solmes

11:10 – **Keynote** – Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer,
UNESCO Chair on Food, Biodiversity, and
Sustainability, Wilfrid Laurier University

11:30 – **Environmental Scan** – Russ Christianson,
Northumberland County Food Policy Council

11:50 – **Q&A**

12:10 – Local lunch by Persnickety Pantry

12:30 – **InnResponse & Grant Connect**

12:35 – **Panel One: Food Insecurity, Health, and
Community Resilience**

Moderator: Heather Thoma, Student Nutrition
Ontario Central East Region / Farms at Work /
National Farmers' Union / Loon Song Farm

Panelists:

- Heidi Schaeffer, *Consultant, Northumberland Vital Signs Tool for Community Resilience*
- Aisha Malik, *Food Systems Lead, HKPR Health Unit*
- Adam Hudson, *Community Dietician, Community Health Centres of Northumberland / Co-Chair, Northumberland Food Bank Network*
- Nicole Beatty, *Local Food for Local Good Northumberland / other*
- Kim Davidson, *School Nutrition Program Coordinator, IncrEdible Trent Hills*
- David Sheffield, *Executive Director, Greenwood Coalition*

1:15– **Panel Two: Sustainable Food Production, Distribution, and Tourism**

Moderator: Russ Christianson, Chair,
Northumberland County Food Policy Council

Panelists:

- Joshua Noiseux, *Evermeadow Farms / ALUS member*
- Jenny Cook, *Knuckle Down Farm / National Farmer's Union / Harvest Hastings*
- David Kranenburg, *Kendal Hills Farm / Graze & Gather / National Farmer's Union*
- Paul Burnham, *Burnham Family Farm*
- Trissia Mellor, *Manager, Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre*
- Diane Murenbeeld, *Tourism Development Manager, Northumberland Tourism*

1:55 – Bio & Refreshments Break

2:15 – **Solution Tables**

1. Reimagining Emergency Food
2. Growing Food Together
3. Supporting Farmers as Land Stewards
4. Local Food Distribution Models
5. Chefs and Secondary Producers
6. Marketing and Tourism
7. Stakeholders and Institutions
8. Funding Your Initiative

2:50 PM – Wrap-Up & Close

CONTACT: outreach@incredibletrenthills.ca

APPENDIX B: WORKBOOK QUESTIONS

The following content was posed in a 7-page workbook, that offered significant space between questions to answer.

What comments, questions, and ideas come to mind as you listen to these speakers?

Keynote: Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer

Environmental Scan: Russ Christianson

Panel One: Food Security, Health, and Community Resilience

Panel Two: Sustainable Food Production, Distribution, and Tourism

Solution Table Topic: _____

What are your burning questions?

What people or groups do we know already working within this space? Do we know of any potential activities on the horizon?

What are the gaps? Who and what is missing? What don't we know?

What solutions are you interested in or excited by?

What do you see as some possible next steps?

How do we help Northumberland County feed Northumberland County?

Other ideas, comments, or questions:

Needs and Offerings

If you are seeking support or have resources to offer to the greater food community, please list below and provide your contact information.

We will amalgamate and send this list to all attendees after the event.

If you would like to, please provide your preferred contact details:

Name:

Email:

Phone: