

A Shared Vision for a Local Sustainable Food System in Northumberland County

A community project in partnership with the **Northumberland County Food Policy Council** and the **Loyalist College Centre for Healthy Communities**

Condensed Report



Photo Credit: Foragers Farm

Introduction

On Saturday, November 15th, 2025, the Northumberland County Food Policy Council (NCFPC), hosted a visioning session at the Hastings Public Library, with support from the Loyalist College Centre for Healthy Communities (CFHC).

The purpose of the event was to bring together diverse stakeholders to co-create a shared vision for a local sustainable food system in Northumberland County. Twenty-five participants attended, representing a range of perspectives and roles within the local food landscape. The three-hour session was designed and facilitated by Russ Christianson, Chair of the NCFPC.

This report shares a condensed version of the results of the facilitated visioning process. There is also a *Full Version Report*.

Building on this visioning session, a follow-up roundtable workshop will take place in January 2026 to identify shared priorities, potential leadership roles, and actionable next steps.

Methodology

Participants were invited via email, from a curated list, based on their paid or volunteer roles in the local food community of Northumberland County. Eighty people were invited and twenty-five participated.

The session used a facilitated, open-ended questionnaire completed on paper, prompting participants to reflect, draw, and generate ideas in sequence. This included open-ended meaning questions, vision drawing, emotional reflection, analysis of barriers, and identification of short and long-term goals.

Responses were collected, compiled, and thematically analyzed to identify shared themes and opportunities. A follow up roundtable in January 2026 will allow participants to review findings together and collaboratively begin drafting a Strategic Action Plan.

All data was anonymized, securely stored on the Loyalist College network, and will be retained for seven years. The process emphasized collaboration, participant ownership, and transparency.

Results

1. Meaning Questions

Participants answered five meaning questions about key food system concepts. Despite varied perspectives, clear thematic patterns emerged.

What does local food mean to you?

Two-thirds defined local food geographically (17 mentions or 68%), referring to food grown or processed within a nearby radius, the county, or region. This was linked to trust (“knowing my farmer’s name,” 4 mentions) and economic benefit (4). Other themes included sustainability and seasonality (2), community identity (2), and quality/taste (3). A few referenced affordability (1) or whole-system local production (5).

What does a sustainable local food system mean?

Participants emphasized self-sufficiency and resilience (10), organic and regenerative practices (9), meeting local needs and ensuring food security (5), equitable and socially sustainable systems (3), economic viability (3), and whole-system integration (4). Reduced external inputs and environmental impact (3) also appeared.

What does food security mean?

The dominant theme was universal access to nutritious food (11), followed by affordability (9). Additional themes included reliability of supply (4), culturally appropriate and dignified access (4), local production and self-reliance (4), nutrition and health (5), and security as a human right (3).

What does food sovereignty mean?

Food sovereignty was most often defined as community control and self-determination (9). Other themes included independence from external sources (6), local ownership and non-corporate governance (5), rights and dignity (5), resilience (5), empowerment (2), and Indigenous leadership (1).

What does collaboration mean?

Collaboration was defined as working toward shared goals (12), breaking down silos (6), mutual support (5), shared leadership (5), cross-sector and multi-level collaboration (6), creativity (4), and leveraging collective strength (3).

2. Vision Pictures

Participants drew their 10+ year vision for a local sustainable food system. While individual images varied, three dominant styles emerged:

Literal Landscapes (10 drawings)

Depicted farms, gardens, rivers, pollinators, greenhouses, livestock, and Northumberland's hills. These images reflected themes of local food production, ecological health, and regenerative practices.

Symbolic Drawings (8 drawings)

Used shapes, arrows, circles, and labelled diagrams. A notable example was a plate labelled "filled locally," symbolizing a future where residents can eat entirely from local production. Other images showed compost–soil–food loops, just transitions, and systems of circularity.

Blended Images (7 drawings)

Combined landscapes with symbolic elements, often focused on people and community: shared meals, community gardens, food hubs, collaborative work, and generosity. These reinforced visions of social connection, mutual care, and equitable access.

Common Motifs Across Drawings

- People (16 of 25)
- Farms, gardens, trees, rivers, sunlight
- Shared meals, tables, plates
- Food distribution pathways
- Greenhouses, markets, solar panels, wind turbines

- Cycles, arrows, circular flows

The drawings collectively revealed a vision of a regenerative, community-rooted food system with strong social, ecological, and economic foundations.

3. Impact of Vision

Emotions Evoked (24 responses)

- Hope, optimism, renewal (14)
- Community, connection, belonging (11)
- Security, stability, safety (6)
- Joy, happiness (6)
- Inspiration, creativity (5)
- Resilience, determination (4)
- Smaller clusters: empowerment (2), pride (2), fairness (1), doubt/frustration (3)

What Vision Fulfillment Would Mean (25 responses)

- Hope and optimism for the future (8)
- Belonging, trust, connection (9)
- Access to healthy local food (8)
- Improved health and wellbeing (7)
- Food security and reduced stress (6)
- Climate and economic resilience (5)
- Economic prosperity (5)
- Purpose, pride, collective responsibility (4–5)

Together, the emotional and practical impacts show deep alignment: participants envision a food future rooted in hope, community, health, security, and shared responsibility.

4. Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Participants identified interconnected structural, economic, social, and political barriers:

Key Barriers

- Cost, funding shortages, economic pressures
- Land access, equipment, infrastructure, housing
- Restrictive bylaws, policy stagnation, lack of political will
- Social resistance, apathy, siloed mindsets
- Collaboration challenges and lack of shared vision
- Limited capacity, burnout, lack of time
- Education gaps and misinformation
- Corporate influence and inequitable power structures
- Environmental and health stressors

These barriers interact to create a complex context requiring multi-level solutions.

5. Removing Barriers

Participants offered solutions aligned with the nature of the barriers:

Most Common Strategies

- Policy change and regulatory reform (11)
- Education, awareness, learning (10)
- Funding, grants, financial supports (9)
- Collaboration and partnerships (9)
- Grassroots organizing (6)
- Land access and infrastructure supports (3)
- Representation, inclusion, and rights-based approaches (3)
- Strategic planning and leadership (4)

Strategies focused on reshaping policy and economic conditions, strengthening networks, expanding learning, and building capacity across the system.

6. Chances of Success

Participants rated their perceived likelihood of success on a scale of 1–10:

- **10:** 1 respondent (inevitable)
- **9:** 3 respondents (necessary and unavoidable)
- **8:** 3 respondents (achievable through education, advocacy)
- **7:** 6 respondents (hopeful but realistic)
- **6:** 2 respondents
- **5:** 6 respondents (entrenched power, funding challenges)
- **4:** 2 respondents
- **3:** 2 respondents

Overall, participants balanced optimism with realism, expressing belief in collective capacity alongside recognition of systemic obstacles.

7. Improving Chances of Success

Top Strategies

- Collaboration and cross-sector partnership (11)
- Advocacy and political influence (10)
- Education, public engagement, demonstrations (9)
- Policy and systems alignment (8)
- Grassroots pilots and community-led action (8)
- Values-based leadership and personal action (6)
- Local food systems development (5)
- Network expansion (5)
- Funding and philanthropy (2)

Participants emphasized the need for both bottom-up and top-down efforts.

8. Short-Term Goals

Participants identified a range of immediate priorities needed to advance the shared vision for a sustainable food system. The numbers below reflect total mentions of each thematic area (not the number of respondents), as many participants identified multiple goals.

- Collaboration, networking (27)
- Education, awareness, communication (25)
- Policy, government engagement, land-use reform (17)
- Funding and financial support (15)
- Community organizing and outreach (14)
- Land access and infrastructure (10)
- Local food systems development (9)
- Visioning and governance structures (12)
- Mindset shifts and inspiration (6)
- Data and feasibility work (3)

9. Medium-to-Long Term Goals

- Policy change & political reform (27)
- Land protection & infrastructure (21)
- Education & intergenerational learning (22)
- Collaboration & governance structures (20)
- Food systems development (17)
- Cultural change & values shifts (9)
- Funding and investment (9)
- Monitoring & evaluation (6)

Together, these long-term goals emphasize systemic transformation across policy, land, education, culture, planning, and infrastructure.

Evaluation

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the meeting on a scale of 1 to 10 and to explain the reason behind their rating. The mean rating was a very high 8.6 out of ten, with 24 of 25 respondents scoring the session between 7 and 10, and one person providing a rating of 5. The majority of participants provided ratings in the 9–10 range, most frequently citing strong facilitation, engaging and well-structured activities, the quality of discussion, and the opportunity to connect with a diverse group of peers. Several respondents noted the value of learning about existing initiatives and stepping outside their silos, while those in the 7–8 range generally offered similar positive reflections alongside suggestions for improvement, including more time for open dialogue and clearer scoping of discussion topics.

One participant provided a rating of 5, offering constructive suggestions regarding the need to more directly address root causes, practical constraints, and feasibility in future discussions. Similar concerns appeared across a handful of higher-rated responses, particularly around ensuring broader representation—including conventional farmers, grocers, Indigenous partners, and other key system actors—and sharpening the framing of shared challenges.

Collectively, the responses point to a session that was highly valued and energizing, while also identifying clear opportunities to deepen future engagement through expanded participation, increased dialogue time, and a more explicit grounding in system-level realities.

Synthesis & Conclusion

Across all exercises, participants expressed extraordinary alignment. Their collective vision is of a local, connected, equitable, regenerative food system supported by strong community relationships, land stewardship, diversified local production, and well-resourced governance structures.

Participants also noted who was missing from the conversation — including local grocers, conventional family farms, the Northumberland Federation of Agriculture, and businesses like Burnham’s Market — and stressed the importance of bringing these voices into future planning.

Despite significant barriers, participants expressed hope and a belief in Northumberland's capacity for change. They identified strategies that build on existing strengths: collaboration, education, advocacy, grassroots pilots, land access solutions, and shared governance.

The January 2026 roundtable is a timely opportunity to transform this collective vision into priorities, partnerships, and early action steps.

Implications for the January Strategic Action Plan Roundtable

Suggested areas of focus:

1. Building a Leadership Group
2. Establishing Clear Priorities
3. Expanding Representation and Building Bridges
4. Identifying Immediate Opportunities for Action
5. Mapping Current Assets, Gaps, and Stakeholders
6. Exploring Governance and Network Models
7. Prioritizing Policy and Advocacy Opportunities
8. Developing A Shared Theory Of Change

Conclusion

The findings reveal a community deeply committed to building a resilient, just, and sustainable local food system. This visioning session marks the beginning of a longer-term community process—one rooted in hope, shared purpose, and the belief that Northumberland County can cultivate a food system that nourishes its people, protects its land, and strengthens its future.