

Food webs

A report on local food networks in East Suffolk which demonstrates the importance of local shops and services to rural communities.

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Introduction

This report reveals the importance of shops and services to rural communities and demonstrates how local action can help safeguard the vitality and visibility of rural areas. It has been prepared for CPRE by Caroline Cranbrook as part of CPRE's work on rural services.

Caroline's concerns about the potential impact of a proposed supermarket development on local jobs and services provoked her to undertake a detailed study of the likely effects. The survey method used has now been repeated in different parts of the country and is available as a free-standing *Food Webs* survey pack – *Mapping local food webs: food webs methodology and survey form*. Copies are available from CPRE Publications.

Caroline Cranbrook, with her campaign file, in the Suffolk village of Westleton. She is a CPRE local volunteer who lives near the small town of Saxmundham.



The survey reveals important linkages in rural areas between local food shops, their suppliers and the local communities they serve (Cranbrook, 1997). The main objective is to show how the findings of simple but rigorous research can provide a powerful tool for both local and national campaigns to safeguard the rural environment. The report falls into three main sections. Section one sets out the background of the survey. Section two focuses on the core findings, using case studies to explore issues relating to:

- sustaining the local food industry;
- sustaining rural communities; and
- sustaining the rural environment.

The report ends with section three examining what the impact of supermarkets is likely to be on the food economy in this part of rural East Suffolk.

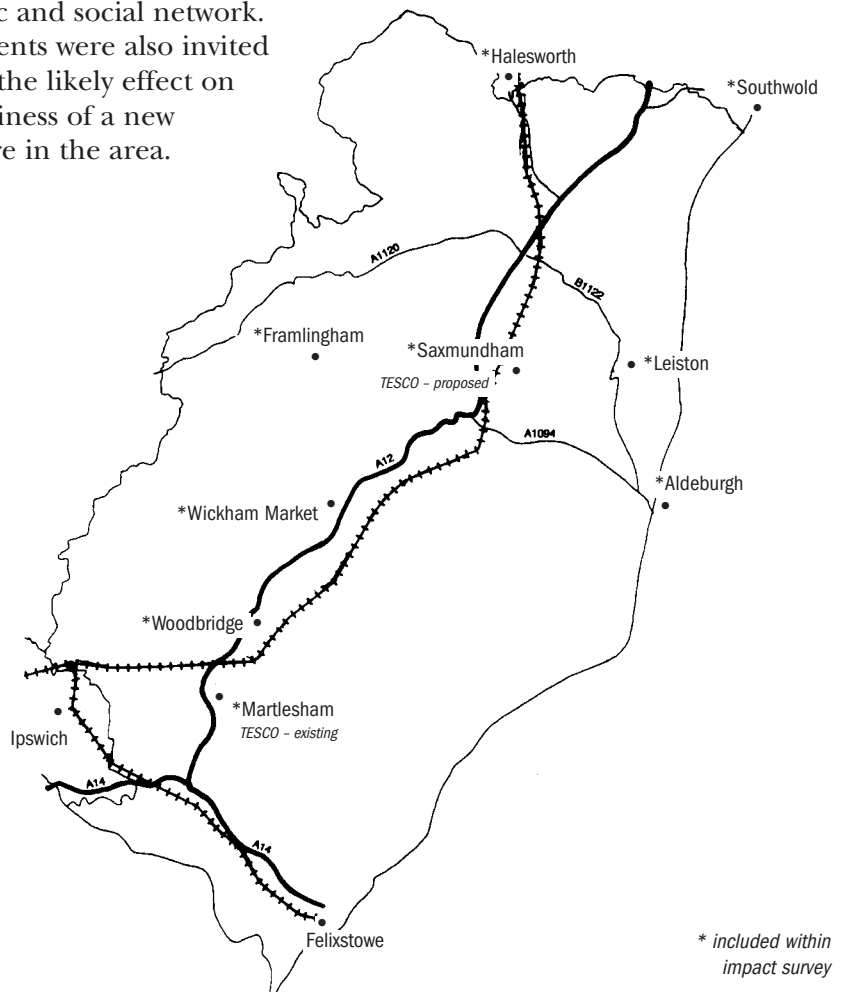
Background

The survey began when Tesco applied for planning permission to build an edge-of-town superstore, near the small market town of Saxmundham, in the middle of a rural area rich in high street shops, village stores and local food producers. There were two main concerns. The first was that if the superstore opened, small shops would close, involving a loss of local employment and social amenities. The second was that these closures could have a significant impact on the viability of local food producers and the wholesalers who relied upon these smaller shops for their outlets.

The aim was to design and carry out a detailed survey of shops selling food within Tesco's claimed impact area identified in Figure 1 below. This area is already well-served by superstores: all the small towns have one or more supermarkets and there are many large superstores within easy driving distance. A simple questionnaire was designed, which has since been developed to form a free-standing survey method.

A total of 81 shops were surveyed in the seven market towns and 19 surrounding villages. The main focus of the questionnaire was on employment and the sourcing of local food products. The survey revealed that these local shops play an unexpectedly large role as the mainstay of a highly intricate economic and social network. Respondents were also invited to assess the likely effect on their business of a new superstore in the area.

Figure 1:
East Suffolk
survey area



Survey Findings

The statistics produced by the survey and the discussions with local traders yielded a rich harvest of information. The number of local food products being sourced was surprisingly high, both of raw materials (such as honey, fruit, eggs, meat and vegetables) as well as secondary products (such as bread, jams, drinks, sauces, cakes and cooked meat). Altogether, the 81 food shops were sourcing food from 195 named local and regional producers and 100 unnamed ones. In many cases, high quality food products were being made and sold within a few miles from the source of the original ingredients. It became clear that these trading links were complex.

As one example, a wholesale family butcher (two brothers) bought livestock from about 30 local farmers. These animals went to a local slaughterhouse, and the carcasses returned to the premises. This wholesale business produced fresh meat, cured and smoked bacon, sausages and cooked meats, and provided freezer packs. These products were supplied to 21 small shops. In addition, the family was running two butchers shops, which were also sourcing other foods such as eggs, vegetables, fruit juices, cakes and preserves, from 24 local producers.

This is but one of many examples revealed by the survey of a lively local economy comprising a dense network of inter-dependent producers, wholesalers, and retailers.

When asked what is the threat posed by superstores locating in the middle of this local economy, out of the 81 shops interviewed, 67 judged that the profitability of their businesses would be threatened or destroyed in the short or long term: 7 thought they might be affected negatively: 5 felt they would probably not be affected: and 2 were unconcerned. Some thought the effect on their shops would be immediate and they would close within weeks. Others believed that it would be a gradual but inevitable process: customers would increasingly be attracted to the superstore and do all their shopping there, so that the small shops would have to make economies (shorter opening hours, fewer staff, more limited range of goods for sale). They would lose further customers, making them even less profitable: a downward spiral.

It was also significant that local wholesalers, on whom small shops depend for fresh produce, believed they too would go out of business. Some small and medium-sized livestock, fruit and vegetable producers would then be deprived of their means of distribution, and find it very difficult to sell their produce elsewhere. The few remaining shops would lose their main sources of fresh foods – often a main attraction – and yet more would close.

The survey thus helped gain a general understanding of how the local food industry operated within this rural area, and gave an insight into the apprehensions of business owners about a new superstore. Once the survey was completed, it was then possible to look in more detail at the information that had been gathered. This process of analysis helped identify three areas of interest and concern.

Sustaining the local food industry

The survey revealed that retail shops depend on local producers and wholesalers in turn depend on their rural outlets in the market towns and villages. One of the most important findings was the extent to which local shops sell locally produced food. Furthermore, nearly all food producers surveyed had started on a small-scale and could not have done so without the outlets the small shops provided. Many continue to depend on local shops to sell their produce – a relationship which allows them to gain the business expertise needed to develop new products and expand into wider markets.

Case study 1: Brundish pig farmer



A couple who had a small pig farm and other part-time jobs, decided to try to strengthen their business by making a value-added product. With assistance from the regional food group, Tastes of Anglia, and European Structural Fund grants, Ian and Sue Whitehead were able to build up a business which now supports them full-time, together with two full-time and two part-time employees. The pig herd has been enlarged.

Initially, the new business sold high-quality hams, bacon and other products to a couple of nearby village shops. They have now increased the number of local outlets to 35 and also sell outside the region.

In an interview, they said that it would not have been possible to start and sustain their business if there had been no village shops.

Left: Lane Farm Country Foods, run by Ian and Sue Whitehead

The implications for the local food industry of a superstore locating in the area are very negative. The first implication is that many local shops would close – a great loss in itself. In addition, the viability of numerous local food businesses and of future start-ups would be seriously undermined. Superstores are increasingly obtaining food from very large farmers, importers, wholesalers and packing stations. They are unlikely to be able to source food from the number of producers the local area

supports. Some do sell a small amount of local produce, while others fund village stores.

However, these are isolated incidences and cannot replace the complex interdependent web of food production and retailing that fuels the local food industry.

The local wholesalers are also vulnerable. As large wholesalers take over the distribution of fresh food, the small wholesaler is forced out of business so that the small local food producer with no local retail outlet and no local wholesaler has nowhere to sell his or her produce. Some, it is true, are large enough to deal direct with superstores and the large packing stations, but they are few and not all are able to do so.

Sustaining rural communities

It is widely recognised that, for some groups of people in rural areas, economic and social problems are increasing. The superstores' own organisation – the National Retail Planning Forum – in 1998 published a survey of 93 out-of-centre food stores and concluded that, in each case, within a 10 mile radius there was a net average loss in retailing of 270 local jobs, and that this may well be a minimum figure (Porter & Raistrick, 1998).

Furthermore, as the CPRE report, *Rural Roulette*, argued, many recent initiatives designed to promote new businesses in rural areas offer few jobs for local people. In this context, local shops and their suppliers provide much-needed jobs. The 81 shops surveyed were employing 548 people, 317 working part-time. In addition to the obvious value of providing jobs, the survey revealed many other related benefits. The shops are very flexible and can fit in odd hours at odd times for their staff. Almost all employees either walk to work or travel short distances by car or by bicycle. Another important point was that the majority of employees are women, often with family commitments and young children. They would otherwise find it near impossible to secure paid work in the area.

It is also important to note that these networks of food producers, wholesalers and retailers help sustain many other jobs in the community. For example, they provide work for tradespeople such as electricians, builders and plumbers. Others, working in banking, accountancy, legal advice, insurance and so on, who provide the infrastructure which underpins the viability of market towns, also gain trade from this existing local food industry.

Sustaining rural communities is not only about jobs. The survey showed that the shops perform many additional social functions for local people and passers by. These included: supplying post office services; delivery of goods (often for free), milk and newspapers; provision of fax and photocopying facilities, notice boards for local advertisements, bus timetables and other useful information; providing a National Lottery terminal; acting as a collecting point for laundry, dry cleaning and shoe repairs; hiring videos and so forth.

What is also of utmost importance is to recognise and value the less tangible benefits which small food stores provide. From the survey, it is clear that in many places the local shop is the focal centre for the community, the traders keeping in close contact with the elderly and infirm and provide shopping outlets for those who cannot afford or are no longer able to drive. Indeed, many people living in the countryside are socially isolated, so that meeting people working and shopping in small stores provides precious human contact.

Case study 2: Campsea Ashe Village Stores

This small village store and post office was renovated by the owners in 1996. The work included carpentry, sign writing, rewiring, plumbing, shop front redesign, interior refurbishing and the instalment of new freezer cabinets.

To carry out the work they employed 8 local craftspeople, each with a different skill, of whom 5 were unemployed at the time. Of those who were unemployed and were given an opportunity to re-enter work, none have since been out of work.

As argued above, the location of a superstore in this rural area would inevitably result in the closure of a significant number of established food businesses. An immediate impact would therefore be the loss of perhaps several hundred jobs. In addition, there would be a decline in non-food retailing employment, for instance in newsagents, florists and hardware stores. There would also be a potentially devastating loss of secondary jobs amongst tradespeople and other service providers who rely on food businesses for work. Lost too would be all the intangible social functions which help to sustain local rural communities.

The scope for replacing these employment and social benefits is often limited. As also argued above, evidence suggests that in many cases efforts to create new businesses in rural areas have had little success in providing jobs for indigenous populations. Whiles superstores do provide a small number of jobs for local people, those that become available are often not in areas where employment is most needed such as in remote villages. Furthermore, whiles superstores may provide part-time work, they do not have the flexibility that small shops can offer their employees.

Sustaining the local environment

There are important environmental benefits to be gained from supporting the diverse and in many ways self-sustaining economy that currently exists in this area of East Suffolk. The short distances between farm, abattoir and point of sale not only reduce stress for the animals but also minimise mileage, making the whole chain of production more environmentally sustainable. The same principle applies to other local food produce such as eggs, cake, vegetables and fruit. It is important also to note that the local delivery vehicles are much smaller and are therefore more appropriate for country roads than the articulated lorries

which service the large-scale production and packing units used by superstores.

A second and closely connected issue is that this geographically dense network of local producers, wholesalers and retailers helps maintain a rich rural landscape. Shops are buying produce from small and medium sized farmers, who are thus able to maintain a diversity of arable and livestock farming. It is this range of farming activities that creates the unique but varied landscape of the English countryside.

From the survey, it also became clear that many small shops are keen to sell the full range of seasonal fruits and vegetables, thus providing a market for produce which is of a high quality but which may not meet the strict aesthetic and size criteria that superstores insist upon. This reduces waste.

Case study 3: A sandwich from Aldeburgh

An Aldeburgh baker sells sandwiches. The lettuce in it comes from the neighbouring greengrocer who is supplied by a local wholesaler. This wholesaler buys much of his fruit and vegetables from local farmers. Meats used come from 3 different butchers, including the last pork butcher in Suffolk (Leiston). These butchers in turn buy their meat from at least five different local farmers and wholesalers (also sourcing local meat). And so it goes on!

There are recent case studies available which examine the environmental impact of superstore food production, processing and retailing (SAFE Alliance, 1997). The East Suffolk survey has made it clear that the environmental costs of a superstore locating in the area could well be high. Some of the potential problems have been touched upon above. They include, firstly, the longer transportation distances associated with the provisioning of superstores. At the same time, the use of articulated vehicles by all the main superstore chains enables them to provide fresh and standardised products in their outlets. However, this system comes at a price, which is that it depends upon daily collection and delivery using large vehicles ill-suited to country roads.

A second issue relates to the changing patterns of farming brought about by demands from superstores for standardised products. As argued above, superstores often source their food from very large farmers, processors and wholesalers. Smaller farms cannot afford to meet these rigid standards. If they go out of business, the diversity of land-use becomes increasingly under threat.

A third consideration is that of food wastage. In seeking to stock standardised food products, superstores invariably reject a significant percentage of farmers' yields on the grounds of appearance. Although the full implications of this trend have yet to be assessed, research carried out so far suggests that it is far from environmentally sustainable (Mitchell, 1998; Pretty, 1998).

Taking Stock

What this simple survey revealed was that in this area of East Suffolk there is a lively and diverse local economy, providing a large number and variety of much-needed jobs. It is well integrated in an economic and energy-efficient system offering good value for money. What is also clear is that small shops play an invaluable social role in sustaining communities both in market towns and in the villages. Indeed, the living landscape of East Suffolk relies in fundamental ways upon the intricate webs of connections that comprise this local food industry.

The survey also shows the vulnerability of the local economy. The rise of superstores has brought increasingly high standards of choice, availability and hygiene, as well as new technologies for food production. However, it is crucial to recognise that these changes come at a considerable cost to people living and working in rural areas. Only by valuing what currently exists and by critically assessing the wider impact of superstores on rural life, will it be possible to develop policies which will enable the global economy of the superstore and the smaller self-sustaining local economy to co-exist.

A final point to note is the value of rigorous local research. Clearly there are many other types of retailers operating in market towns and villages whose role in the local economy needs to be evaluated. Issues are also likely to vary between different geographical regions. However, only through this kind of 'field work' can the larger picture ever be understood and informed decisions be made.

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