

How to stimulate short food supply chains for locally landed seafood: the case of North-East England

The challenge

North Shields Fish Quay, in the north-east of England, is one of the four busiest fishing ports in the UK. However, much of the fish landed here is **sold for export** before it has even reached the shore. For instance, langoustines native to waters around the North East coast rarely make their way into local restaurants with the majority sold to countries such as France and Spain. Although the variety of native fish species caught and brought to shore is extensive, local restaurants and consumers typically cook with only a handful of the most popular fish, i.e., cod, haddock, tuna, salmon, and prawns (the so-called ‘**Big Five**’), placing a massive strain on these stocks.

In this context, three main **barriers to the development of local seafood supply chains** are identified: i) lack of **public awareness** about locally abundant species and key sustainability messages, leading to limited demand for local seafood; ii) poor knowledge and confidence in **seafood cooking skills**, including chefs and other kitchen staff, leading to a tendency to purchase pre-prepared fish fillets in the catering and restaurant trade; iii) and a prevalence of dishes served in restaurants, and at home, using only a handful of **more popular fish species**.

The pilot action

In the framework of the Strength2Food project, innovation actions were implemented by Food Nation (a Social Enterprise with a vision to inspire people about good food) and Newcastle University to strengthen the **development of new quality markets and short food supply chains (SFSCs)** for locally landed seafood in North-East England.

The pilot action involved a **local restaurant**, the **Fish Quay**, and **various stakeholders within the fishing industry** (fishers, fishmongers, chefs, consumers, academics, and other educational professionals).

Demonstration activities included: i) a **training programme for young trainee chefs** to improve their skills and confidence in preparing a wider number of seafood species; ii) **Seafood Supper Clubs** to provide trainees with a platform to create, test and market their recipes, and improve consumer exposure and perceptions towards underutilised species; iii) **online resources for seafood education**, to inform, inspire and engage the general public on purchasing and cooking a wider variety of seafood; and iv) **Home Recipe Kits including Seafood**, to encourage families to cook different seafood dishes, by providing convenient and simple to use meal kits and recipe boxes.

Key recommendations

For sector practitioners:

- Focus on under-utilised, locally abundant, and seasonal fish species and promote their health benefits via social media
- Adopt market strategies to improve public perceptions and overcome consumers’ fear of unfamiliar fish and involve intermediaries like fishmongers and chefs in making seafood more attractive, palatable and convenient
- Upskill young / new entrants in the catering and hospitality industries in cooking confidently and more creatively a wider range of underutilised fish and seafood

For policy makers:

- Increase public awareness of sustainable seafood consumption and seasonality issues, via educational activities and from an early age
- Support the establishment of SFSCs in fisheries and promote cultural heritage of seafood in coastal communities, while investing in infrastructure that support market operations
- Promote codes of practice that support sustainable fishing and retailing and encourage better working practices for seafood businesses and the restaurant/catering sector

Main findings

The pilot action identified strategies to stimulate and support SFSCs for underutilised fish species and locally landed seafood.

We discovered how various fish species and seafood in the UK suffer from **food neophobia**, i.e., consumer reluctance to try and eat foods which are unfamiliar to them. Neophobia toward underutilised fish and seafood does not only affect **consumers**, but also the **catering and restaurant sector**. While there are commercial pressures to offer only meals with a known demand on restaurant menus, the evidence suggests that **skill gaps and confidence** remain big challenges amongst catering and kitchen staff, with emerging upskilling opportunity to shift practices and perceptions away from the “big five” and towards novel species and more adventurous recipes.

We identified several marketing strategies to develop new seafood quality markets and support a more **sustainable transition towards seasonal and more locally abundant species**.

Recommendations for sector practitioners

- **Focus on under-utilised and cheaper fish species**

Initiatives to stimulate SFSCs should focus on under-utilised, seasonal and under exploited fish species and seafood, where there is greater scope to add value, as the financial incentives for fishers, fishmongers and restaurants are more promising compared to more expensive species.

- **Use social media to enhance fish-related communications**

Social media provide a means to share fish preparation skills and creative recipes, reaching a large number of geographically dispersed consumers. Future communication and marketing activities should therefore consider how to increase the virality of fish-related communications on social media.

- **Present unfamiliar fish and seafood in a familiar context to overcome neophobia**

Using unfamiliar food product (e.g. whiting) in the preparation of familiar dishes (e.g. croquettes) is demonstrated to help overcome neophobia towards unknown fish and increase its consumption.

- **Organise Seafood supper clubs**

Seafood supper clubs provide an effective mechanism for reducing neophobia relating to under-utilised fish and seafood. Offering diners a wide range of small plates increases consumer exposure and willingness to try different seafood, reducing the risks associated with committing to a single, never before tasted, main course.

- **Promote Home recipe kits with seafood and tutorials**

Home recipe kits with seafood is another mechanism to overcome neophobia, encouraging families to cook different seafood dishes and increase their confidence in the kitchen, by providing convenient and easy-to-use meal kits and recipe boxes. Through digital recipe tutorials, home cooks can learn new skills without the need to attend a cooking class in person, which is a main advantage in terms of boosting confidence, as many may have social anxiety or fear to perform in front of others.

- **Upskill young trainee chefs on how to cook a wider range of fish and seafood**

Seafood trainee programmes and cookery classes for young trainee chefs are effective tools to improve skills and confidence in the kitchen. They can also boost young people's employability prospects and create a new generation of "fish literate" chefs.

- **Recognise the important role of intermediaries in improving the availability and convenience of seafood**

SFSCs that involve direct face-to-face contact between fishers and consumers are difficult to establish. Intermediaries can play an important role in the establishment of local short supply chains for fish and are often best placed to prepare fish and seafood in ways that make it appealing for individual consumers.

Recommendations for policy makers

- **Increase public awareness on sustainable seafood consumption and seasonality issues**

Digital tools and resources are key instruments to support public awareness initiatives regarding sustainable seafood consumption and seasonality issues.

- **Enhance education on sustainable production and consumption of healthy seasonal (sea)food**

Implement educational initiatives on sustainable production and consumption of healthy seasonal (sea)food from an early age. Food preparation and cooking skills for under-utilised fish and sustainable seafood species should be embedded in the national school curriculum.

- **Promote codes of practice that support sustainable fishing and retailing**

The need to diversify supply and demand requires a joint industry approach to reduce pressure on overfished and endangered species and promote less destructive fishing practices.

- **Encourage better working practices for seafood businesses and the restaurant/catering sector**

Boosting modern apprenticeships and vocational qualifications, with an emphasis on seafood knowledge, sustainability, skills development, marketing and communication strategies, can improve the performance of seafood businesses and upskill employees in the restaurant/catering sector.

- **Invest in infrastructures that facilitate fish SFSCs**

Securing the regeneration of key fish quay sites, market buildings and appropriate infrastructure is a key process to facilitate fisher-to-buyer relations and foster the development of SFSCs for fish.

- **Support the local seafood value chain and celebrate the culture of the fishing industry**

Culinary traditions and cultural heritage can be key assets to attract tourism, generate inward investment and help preserve, and regenerate, coastal communities and their territory.

More info

Tocco B., Lacey J., Whittle K., Freeman R., Gorton M., Hubbard C., Phillipson J., Vittersø G. (2021). Pilot actions to stimulate short food supply chains for locally landed seafood in North-East England. Strength2Food, Deliverable n. 9.4.

<https://www.strength2food.eu/2021/04/26/pilot-actions-to-stimulate-short-food-supply-chains-for-locally-landed-seafood-in-north-east-england/>



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Strength2Food is a five-year, €6.9 million project to improve the effectiveness of EU food quality schemes (FQS), public sector food procurement (PSFP) and to stimulate Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC). Lessons from the research have been applied and verified in 6 pilot initiatives that brought together academic and non-academic partners.



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