

Summary of the NE Organic Programme (Phase 1) September 2004 – September 2006

Over the last two years, there has been an increase in the profile of the organic sector within the North East (and nationally the Soil Association Organic Market Report (2006), reported the organic market reaching £1.6 billion in sales). In the North East this has been partly due to natural progression through the market responding to consumer demand and the introduction of the Organic Entry Level Scheme in March 2005 but also with the sector development work that has been undertaken by the NE Organic Programme. NE Organic Programme (NEOP) was established to support, develop and promote organic production within the North East.

Despite a slow start to the programme, as a result of changes in staffing, the present team, Alex Haywood and Cheryl Thomas have worked hard to ensure that the programme has moved forward and have delivered many benefits to the new and existing organic businesses in the region. In addition they have worked to raise consumer awareness of regional organic produced and have made great progress towards ensuring the NE has a viable organic sector.

Within the last two years the Northumbria Organic Producer Group has increased from 22 members in 2004 to 58 in 2006. Working very closely with group members NEOP has improved distribution of valuable regional and national information, market news, certification issues, provided opportunities for networking and developed an attractive membership package. In return the producer group has provided the team with essential direction, and valuable knowledge which has led to some joint working across the organic sector

Within the remit of the programme NEOP has worked to deliver project targets as agreed between the Soil Association and DEFRA RDS. The targets and project outcomes have been delivered through the team responding to the needs of the programme's clients and working to develop the producer group.

The target of 20 farm visits a year, has been achieved and has also included visits to direct selling businesses, processing businesses and independent retailers. This has been as a result of an increased demand for marketing and business advice from producers who had been considering diversifying their current farm business, therefore requiring specific technical and marketing advice for an organic business. Visits have also taken place with new businesses that have required advice on sourcing organic ingredients and organic processing standards. Producers who are considering entering into OELS, are provided with technical, organic standards and marketing advice.

The development work within the red meat sector supply chain, has been necessary as a result of the lack of processing resources within the region for service killing, meat processing, and the need for an organic licensed abattoir. NEOP has brought together a group of producers, who jointly agreed to pay for an organic licence. This work has resulted in one abattoir with an organic licence, and another in the process of receiving theirs. This has provided organic businesses with the opportunity to expand their market opportunities at local and regional level.

An important element of NEOP's work is the dissemination of information, through newsletters, which include trading pages, features on NE organic producers and regional issues relevant to the organic sector, the newsletters have been well received by the sector. (13 newsletters have been produced to date). The developed of Northumbria Organic Producer group (NOP) website demonstrates NEOP's successful delivery of priorities as identified by the producer group.

Since NEOP gained its base at Newcastle Universities' Nafferton Farm the programme has developed into being recognised as a one stop organic office ensuring a service that has an understanding of what is needed in the region. The team has built up strong connections with producers and has successfully developed farm to farm, and farm to processor trading links.

Over the two years NEOP has built on relationships with key people within the industry such as Dovecote Park, Hexham and Northern Mart, Northumbria Feed Business, OLMC, Soil Association, Organic Farmers & Growers and has assisted in the marketing of organic stock. NEOP has also provided a range of training specific to the needs of organic producers and processors within the North. As a result of the increase of organic converters (26 producers) since March 2005, an organic livestock conversion event has provided producers considering conversion the opportunity to meet livestock buyers, receive technical advice and meet fellow organic producers, and learn more about the benefits of joining a producer group. Events which have also been well attended include the Feed Ration day, and the Arable Production talk at Coastal Grain.

An important area of NEOP's work is to raise consumer awareness and raise the profile of organic production within the North East. This has been achieved with the production of the Local Organic Directory (a 2nd edition has been produced this July of 7,000 publications), in addition the publication of the Organic North magazine which has been produced through a collaboration of resources from all three Northern Organic offices. Organic North provides the public with organic articles, recipes, topical issues, business profiles, and will soon feature business adverts. NEOP has also provided opportunities for the producers to meet the public, this provides them with a clear picture of what the consumer requires from them. This has been achieved through NEOP organising a Slow Food Lunch in Newcastle, farm walks, talks and the development of, and close working with, consumer groups. NEOP has also made a point of attending numerous shows and events, raising the profile of the organic sector within the North East. One of the most beneficial attended was the Glendale Children's Show, Wooler, which provided children from a range of schools to connect with farming and where their food comes from.

With the current high profile of school meals, NEOP has been building connections within the public procurement sector, and are now able to support councils and catering providers involved in public sector catering to source organic produce. At the beginning of the programme we provided a networking platform with our Slow Food Lunch in Newcastle Civic Centre (90 attendees), and we are now in a position to be helping Durham County Council with putting together supplier list of organic producers from the region.

Future Work

Our next 18 months of work will provide us with the opportunity to develop the range of organic produce in the region. Our priorities are:

- Development of Local and Alternative Markets
- Publicity and Promotion of organic produce, production
- Development of the supply chain
- Business support for primary producers
- Strategic Representation at meetings
- Business support for processors and food manufacturers
- Sector development for red meat, pigs, cereals, horticulture, and poultry.