



Alston Moor Greenprint Feasibility Study

Community Food Growing & Local Food Enterprise

June 2019

1. Introduction

Context

Alston Moor is a small rural community in Cumbria with a population of 2,090 across 995 households. It shares the title of the 'highest market town in England', at about 1,000 feet above sea level, with Buxton in Derbyshire and derives a strong identity from its relative isolation and its heritage in mining and farming. The nearest town, to which there is very limited public transport, is more than twenty miles away; in winter, bad weather often means that the community is cut off for days sometimes weeks at a time. Over the years, many key services across Alston Moor have been cut and, because of its small population and isolation, businesses struggle to survive. This context has stimulated a strong sense of self help, mutual co-operation and entrepreneurship in the local community going back nearly forty years. Consequently Alston was the first place to be awarded the UK status of 'Social Enterprise Town' in 2013. In looking to the future, and as an integral part of [Alston Moor Community Plan](#) (2019), the town and its outlying villages are now seeking to add another building block to their long-term sustainability by planning for locally-based food production.

The [Alston Moor Greenprint Project](#) (November 2016-October 2019), funded by the [Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#), was commissioned to develop a long-term, low-carbon pathway for the rurally isolated communities living on Alston Moor. The Greenprint Project and the Community Plan together evidence a need and desire for local food-growing opportunities for both individuals personally and as a commercial proposition. In response, this Community Food Growing and Food Enterprise Feasibility Study was commissioned by [Cumbria Action for Sustainability](#) to explore what options are available to the local community for (1) community food growing and (2) establishing a viable food enterprise.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in preparation of this Feasibility Study was to:-

- Visit various parcels of land belonging to Cumbria County Council, Eden District Council, Alston Parish Council, Alston Fairhill Charity, Samuel King's School, South Tynedale Railway Preservation Society and various other private plots to assess their suitability for growing fruit & vegetables
- Invite key stakeholders to visit a few examples of community food-growing in other places as a way of helping them think about what might be possible in Alston
- Invite local farmers to consider diversification into crop production & processing
- Talk to key contacts previously identified by the Alston Moor Greenprint Project as having expressed an interest in community food growing & food enterprise
- Canvass local food businesses & food providers to see if they would buy food produced 'on the Moor' in preference to sourcing it elsewhere



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- Carry out relevant background reading & research, ie, Alston Moor Community Plan 2019, North Pennines AONB Management Plan 2019-2024, The Parish of Alston Moor, Cumbria, Historic Area Assessment (English Heritage), etc
- Take soil samples & assess site conditions, drainage, access, etc of potential sites to inform technical feasibility
- Host a public consultation day to gather feedback, further ideas, concerns and comments

grow
YOUR OWN FRUITS & VEGETABLES

The **Alston Moor Greenprint Project** is proposing some exciting ideas for community food growing & food enterprise across Alston Moor

Come along on **Thursday 18th April 2019** to find out more and to share your own thoughts about food growing with us

Drop in to Alston Town Hall anytime between 2pm and 6pm

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

For more information contact 07584 251352 or lynn@vistaveg.co.uk

- Set out a series of options with recommendations
- Explore the economic viability of each option
- Consider the management & delivery options for each proposal



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In helping to formulate ideas of how community food growing could be organised on Alston Moor we visited: (1) Gibside Community Farm, a 14 acre site at Burnopfield, near Gateshead where thirty people have come together as a co-operative to grow vegetables for themselves and to sell surpluses via farmer's markets; (2) Ravensworth Nurseries near Scotch Corner to see how they are using a bio-mass boiler to heat their glasshouses year-round in a cost-neutral and renewable way using waste wood from shipping pallets; (3) Growing Well at Low Sizergh Farm, Kendal to look at a well-established vegetable growing project & crop share scheme which supports people recovering from mental illness (using a referral scheme) and also delivers accredited horticultural training, educational visits for schools/community groups & cookery courses; (4) Ford Park, Ulverston where a group of local people formed a charity to take over the management of the Park from South Lakeland District Council, including a café and a kitchen garden which grows food for the café; and (5) Grange Community Orchard in Grange-over-Sands which was planted in 1998 by Grange Civic Society assisted by local school children on land left to the people of Grange by a local estate owner. The aim of the orchard was to create a collection of different varieties of fruit trees, including some of local origin, for the people of Grange to pick and use freely. Further information about these visits can be found here:- <https://cafs.org.uk/our-projects/alston-moor-greenprint/alston-moor-food-growing/>.

We followed on from these visits with a public consultation day on 18th April 2019 and subsequently with a presentation & feedback session at the Alston Moor Community Plan Launch on 8th May 2019. These events attracted keen interest from nearly forty people. It should be noted that the aspirations for community food growing outlined in this Feasibility Study are firmly embedded in the Community Plan, with the intention of being delivered as part of it. <https://alstonmoorpartnership.co.uk/ampcomplan/>.

Our research and conversations in Alston clearly indicate a strong enthusiasm for community food growing, from which could ultimately emerge a link to tourism and to commerce. Alston Moor could potentially feed itself, create training and jobs within the sector, grow or process a product that could be exported off the Moor and create a reason for people to visit the town.

2. Feasibility Findings & Options

There are several ways in which food-growing could be nurtured and developed on Alston Moor:-

1. Plant a community orchard
2. Encourage food/catering businesses to grow their own produce (ie, The Crossing Café at South Tynedale Railway)
3. Commission a food grower's website as a virtual hub for local food growing activities
4. Offer training & skills-sharing opportunities
5. Make land-share or companion-gardening possible



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6. Establish a tools & equipment library
7. Broker easy routes-to-market for surplus fruit and vegetables
8. Create a 'Grown on the Moor' brand to accompany all crops produced in Alston
9. Grow ingredients specifically for local 'tasting' menus
10. Form a small Community Supported Agriculture scheme (ie, crop-share for members)
11. Erect polytunnels to extend the growing season and variety of crops available
12. Use community-based growing as the platform from which to develop a commercial food-growing proposition

In thinking about these propositions we have reflected on different models of community food growing; from traditional allotments where everyone grows independently for their own families, to community supported agriculture schemes where a group of people come together to 'farm' a particular area of land and share the crop between themselves. We have thought about ways of selling surpluses as a means of generating a small income via pick-your-own, farmgate-style honesty boxes or pop-up shops, farmer's markets, vegetable box delivery schemes or direct to local shops/wholesale for a slightly lesser return. We have considered ideas of commercial and semi-commercial growing with the aid of polytunnels to ensure a more varied crop range and a longer season, possibly even a continuous season if a renewable energy source heated the polytunnels year-round and/or a hydroponic system of growing was used. We can see the potential that a flourishing food production enterprise could have locally in terms of employment and training for young people. Additionally, production horticulture has proved elsewhere to be a non-threatening work environment for people recovering from mental health problems, allowing them the time and space to recover whilst learning new skills and re-gaining confidence.

We have discovered that there are many people and families across Alston Moor who already grow fruit and vegetables for themselves; there are also several people who would like to grow but don't have land, and some who have land and are happy for it to be used productively by others. There appears to be a strong desire for training, skills sharing, a tool & seed bank and the opportunity to work together on growing food as a companionable and sociable activity rather than in isolation.

Whilst the research for this Feasibility Study has uncovered many new ideas and a healthy number of amateur enthusiasts interested in fruit & vegetable growing, there is ultimately a lack of horticultural expertise available on Alston Moor to take forward the range & scope of ideas outlined in this feasibility report. It is therefore a key recommendation of this report that a part-time Community Food Growing Co-ordinator post is created over a period of five years to work across the Alston Moor communities to meet their needs & facilitate the projects outlined below. It would be the intention to apply for grant funding for this post, using earned income (ie, from crop sales, sponsorship) as local leverage. It would be a fixed term role, the principle aim of which would be to build enough capacity and expertise within the community to enable the continued delivery of the programme beyond the lifetime of the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator post. A Job Description for a Community Growing Co-ordinator is at *Appendix 1*.



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Alongside consultation with the community we have also identified four possible areas of land in Alston as potential sites for fruit and vegetable-growing. These sites feature in several of the recommendations below.

2.1 Community Orchard at Fairhill (Alston Recreation Ground Trust)

Fairhill recreation ground is a community-run park in the heart of Alston located behind Fairhill View and along the Nenthead Road. It currently offers a zip wire, football pitch, basketball court, several children's rides, roundabouts, swings, slides and a dedicated play area for smaller children. There are two ponds with a variety of wildlife, herb beds, picnic seating and the park is also home to Alston Bowling Club. The land was gifted to the people of Alston in 1899 for leisure and recreation purposes and is owned and managed by Alston Recreation Ground Trust, a registered charity. To comply with the Trust's constitution it is essential that access to and activities within the park must be for everyone.

<http://www.fairhill.org.uk/>

Within the Fairhill site there is currently a rough, unused area immediately behind Ropery House which extends to approximately a third of an acre (45m x 25m). It has easy public access by a footpath from the B6277 and there is a car park on site with entry from the A689. The site has close proximity to the old Primary School which would enable a convenient synergy if the old Primary School site was to be developed for community use in the future.

A **Community Orchard** could feasibly occupy this area of rough land at Fairhill. An orchard for public benefit would sit comfortably within Alston Recreation Ground Trust's priorities as guardian of the park, would add value to the park's existing attractions; indeed it would likely encourage a new user-group to the park. Importantly, an orchard would be something that generations of Alston residents could enjoy and take harvests from long into the future.

The site could accommodate a bed of 20 blackcurrants, redcurrants & gooseberries, an area of 224 raspberry canes, a patch of 10 rhubarb crowns, ten plum/pear/greengage/damson trees, and a 40 metre cordon boundary alongside the path of up to 45 apple trees. The existing shed on site could accommodate the few gardening tools & equipment needed to manage the orchard. The grass beneath the fruit trees would need to be mowed or an annual community scything day introduced. Some groundwork to level the site would be required; a few existing bushes on the bank near Ropery House would need to be removed and the over-hanging trees on the south-west perimeter would need to be lopped sensitively to enable light to reach the newly planted fruit trees. There is no need for a water supply on site following initial planting, as everything should establish well with normal rainfall to sustain them, making an orchard a very low-maintenance option for this public space.

The soil testing of this site produced a pH level of 6; most fruit trees like a soil pH between 6.0 and 6.5 so this area would be ideally used for fruit production in its current state.

Creating a Community Orchard at Fairhill, with the fruit trees and bushes described above, would cost around £6,762 - see budget at *Appendix 2**. This is a generous budget which allows for the acquisition of additional associated items such as an apple press and an interpretation/information panel about the orchard.

How could it happen?

- 1) The Alston Recreation Ground Trust would need to approve and agree the creation of an orchard as part of its future programme of work
- 2) The Alston Recreation Ground Trust would need to seek pre-application advice from the Planning & Development department at Eden District Council. Fees are exempt for applications submitted by registered charities and Town Councils and Parish Council applications and the District Council.
- 3) The Alston Recreation Ground Trust would need to raise funds for the project (see budget at *Appendix 2** and page 18)
- 4) Friends of Fairhill and members of the local community would need to give time to help create the orchard - practical jobs like planting trees & bushes, spreading mulch around the currants & berries, setting out the supports for the raspberry canes & cordons – under the guidance of specialist contractors or the Community Growing Co-ordinator.

Funds to create the orchard could be raised by a 'sponsor-a-tree' campaign which in turn could be used as a 'match' for a grant application to Eden Community Fund. Large trees will cost around £40, cordons £25, rhubarb crowns £10, raspberry canes £4 and gooseberry/blackcurrant bushes £10 each, so there's something that everyone can contribute to, from children giving their pocket money to sponsor a raspberry cane to local businesses or organisations sponsoring one (or more!) trees.



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Alston Moor Federation could get involved with planting the trees; this is exactly how Grange Community Orchard was established in 1998, with the primary school planting the trees. Now they are twenty year old mature trees, fabulously productive, and available for the whole community to pick the crop!

It would be wise to allow two to three years for the trees and bushes to fully establish themselves but thereafter there should be a harvest of rhubarb from late May onwards throughout the summer, gooseberries, blackcurrants & redcurrants in July, plums, gages & damsons in August, apples from late August through to October and raspberries throughout



September & October. These fruits would be freely available to the local community to pick. It would be important give clear picking advice for every variety on a label to avoid damage to plants and premature harvesting. Apples that were unpicked by a certain date (usually around mid-October) could be gathered for juicing; the community apple press could be put to good use and an Apple Day celebration could become part of the annual Fairhill events calendar.

The Alston Recreation Ground Trust and/or Alston WI could lead jam-making, fruit preserving & cordial-making workshops - perhaps even a cider-making club! A fruity recipe book or a community meal, comprising the best fruit-based recipes ... plum & almond tart, lamb & rhubarb tagine, raspberry ripple ice-cream, elderflower champagne ... could be produced/organised as a fundraiser to help subsidise ongoing pruning costs. Keen gardeners in the community could take hardwood cuttings & grafts from the bushes & trees in the orchard for plant sales which could again generate more income, as would the sale of surplus apple juice or crops through local outlets such as Alston Wholefoods and The Nook Café & Farm Shop at Epiacum or even a simple honesty box on site. Fruit from the orchard could also augment Alston Food Bank parcels.



The trees would need to be pruned (ideally in winter for shape and in summer for fruit), particularly the apple cordons whilst they are establishing. The Alston Recreation Ground Trust could pay an annual £10 subscription to North Cumbria Orchard Group (NCOG) and send a representative or two to pruning and grafting workshops and even host a NCOG visit at Fairhill so that the pruning gets done once in a while by other orchard enthusiasts from the north of the county. Or the Alston Recreation Ground Trust could pay an

arboriculturalist to prune each year to help maximise crop yield; this cost would likely be around £200.

It would be ideal for Alston Recreation Ground Trust to form a small orchard sub-group of volunteers who took a particular interest in the orchard and its on-going maintenance; either already experienced gardeners or those with a willingness to learn. It would not be an arduous task and the orchard could be set out purposely with the need for minimal intervention. A single path could be mowed through the orchard during the summer to encourage beneficial wildflowers and pollinators, with a late summer scything to clear longer grass near the trees ahead of harvesting.

A secondary crop of mistletoe could be encouraged on the apple trees as they mature; apple trees in particular provide favoured hosts for this semi-parasitic green shrub. This would also be a premium crop for local sales at Christmas time.

A further project on the Fairhill site would be to re-establish the defunct herb beds, which could be re-planted also and made available for community use. Fresh herbs are an expensive, premium product and so would provide a great asset to the local community. The herb plants could be propagated relatively cheaply by taking cuttings from existing plants over a two to three year period. They could include:- mint, lemon balm, dill, sage, thyme, marjoram, chervil, rosemary, chives, parsley, fennel.

2.2 Vegetable 'Suitcases' at South Tynedale Railway

The South Tynedale Railway Preservation Society operates a recently opened café – The Crossing Café – on platform 1 which serves food to the public seven days a week year round. The café uses local produce where possible and has been growing herbs in planters on site for use in the kitchen. The Preservation Society has a volunteer gardening team but does not have any land suitable for vegetable-growing to help make the café more self-sufficient. They could, however, create displays of old-fashioned trunks, suitcases and trolleys on the platforms from which they could grow cut-and-come-again salads, spinach, courgettes & dwarf French beans for use in the cafe. The displays would be a unique and quirky feature to greet the 20,000 visitors who come through South Tynedale Railway each year in addition to saving the cafe money on buying vegetables. The volunteer gardening team would need to be trained in the cultivation and harvesting of vegetable crops to ensure they are confident to manage them on an ongoing basis. This is again a project that the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator could initiate in the first instance, as the volunteer gardening team develop in confidence.

2.3 Alston Moor Community Growers Website

In order to connect a community of vegetable growers across the sparsely populated area of Alston Moor it would be useful to commission a bespoke website dedicated to Alston Moor Community Growers with associated Facebook page, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The website would be the 'go-to' place for community food-growing on Alston Moor. It would serve as a forum for local growers but should also have the capacity to take on the



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automated management of certain day-to-day administrative tasks on behalf of the grower's network.

Firstly, it could host a **noticeboard** on which training days, skills-sharing opportunities, Open Gardens, trips to other gardens & local 'foody' events (ie, Apple Day, Seeds Swaps) could be advertised and promoted. These notices could be submitted to the website by anyone but then approved by a website administrator (ie, the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator in the first instance) before final uploading. This would mean that the noticeboard content is essentially self-managed.

Secondly it could facilitate **land-sharing or companion-growing**, connecting those people who have land available for growing with those who want to grow but have no land. Land owners & growers could register on the site and be searched/browsed/matched against each other using criteria like location, size of space, whether they would be happy to companion grow, etc. Once matched, they could see respective contact details and get in touch.

Thirdly, the website could act as a **tool & machinery library**, offering an on-line catalogue of gardening tools and equipment available to the local community to borrow on a first-come-first-served basis. An on-line booking system would determine if a tool is already on-loan; tools could be booked by any member of Alston Moor Community Growers. It would be the borrower's responsibility to collect and return tools and to update the website accordingly when they were returned. The bank of tools and equipment for the library will be initially gathered by the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator via appeals, gifts, car-boot sales, house-clearance, Freegle, etc. It would also be the Co-ordinator's job to identify a safe, accessible place to store the tool library, bearing in mind it might include larger items such as rotavators, strimmers, canes, netting, knapsacks, etc.

Finally, there could be an **on-line 'fruit & veg shop'** as part of the website through which crops could be sold. This would be a direct route to customers and an alternative to selling through local shops, perhaps attractive to those less able to get out and about. Payment made on-line via the website could generate a small commission for Alston Moor Community Growers as an income to match-fund (initially) the Co-ordinator post and to buy further tools, seeds, training, pay for annual website hosting costs, etc, beyond the lifetime of the start-up period. A charitable payment gateway, like Just Giving, could be used in the first instance (whilst payments are essentially donations for produce), eventually transferring to a more commercial gateway, like PayPal, as the commercial aspect of supply and demand develops.

If the capacity and number of community growers increases over time along with their production levels, the availability of fruit and vegetables may reach the stage where it's feasible for a small box scheme to develop. It would be quite simple to add a page to the website promoting and explaining the box scheme and to sign up box scheme members via the website.



2.4 Training & Skills Sharing

During the public consultation many people modestly shared with us how they ‘just dabbled in’ or ‘knew very little’ about fruit and vegetable-growing. Almost everyone we spoke with said that their current growing practices in their gardens were based on trial and error, with every season varying greatly, although fruit was something that everyone agreed consistently produced a successful crop. The consensus of opinion was that some informal training and skills-sharing opportunities, offering the chance to learn from others with more experience, would be highly desirable. This is a role that the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator could fulfil, focusing on different elements of production horticulture and up-skilling an amateur workforce over a sustained five year period. Additionally other specialists could be invited to supplement gaps in knowledge, ie, grafting. Plans have already been put in place to offer a one day Grow Your Own Vegetable course in Alston in September 2019 as part of Cumbria Action for Sustainability’s Green Build & Sustainable Living Festival. See *Appendix 3* for a course outline.



2.5 ‘Roof of England’ Tasting Menus

The vast majority of fruit and vegetables sold to Alston Moor residents through the local shops or used by chefs in the local pubs, cafés and restaurants are sourced from elsewhere, predominantly through wholesalers such as Caterite, Pioneer and Starfruits. A small amount of local produce, most usually fruit, herbs, eggs and honey is sold by Alston Wholefoods when available. Bluebell Organics (based in Richmond in North Yorkshire) offers its vegetable box scheme fortnightly to Alston Moor with drop-offs at Nenthead Shop & Alston Wholefoods. At present there are 10 families who regularly take up this service.

A fashionably popular means of attracting visitors to a place is to offer locally produced food on the menu. Tasting the unique landscape of a place is as culturally significant as seeing the sites and also creates the commercial opportunity to sell produce to visitors eager to take a little bit of their holiday home with them. Being able to source the meat, honey, vegetables, yoghurt, bread, etc that you’ve tasted whilst dining out is therefore extremely important. The proposed Farm Shop at Epiacum and Alston Wholefoods are key local outlets for the promotion and sale of locally produced food.

The Community Food Growing Co-ordinator could work with chefs from the local catering establishments to develop a series of 'Roof of England' or 'Low Carbon' tasting menus based on locally produced food. These seasonal menus will showcase and utilise crops that can be produced plentifully on Alston Moor. The Community Food Growing Co-ordinator could work alongside community growers to develop a cropping plan to ensure a varied and year-round supply of what the local pubs and restaurants will require in order to maintain their tasting menu offer. This direct relationship between growers and chefs is mutually productive, offering a secure sales route for growers and easy access to fresh, high quality produce for the chefs. There won't be so many places that can serve up vegetables that have been picked earlier in the day!

2.6 Alston Moor CSA @ The Firs

The single most-requested action emerging from the public consultation was the establishment of a communal growing area that could be 'worked' collectively by a group of like-minded growers.

The Community Food Growing Co-ordinator could facilitate and support the formation of Alston Moor Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme to bring together this group and kick-start this venture. The field at the end of Church Road, close to The Firs estate, is a possible site for this.

This site is owned by Eden District Council and is currently rented privately for horse-grazing. It is situated at the end of a cul-de-sac, close to the centre of Alston town and adjacent to two housing estates. It is an easily accessible site, offering gated access to a west-facing sloping site of approximately 3,500 sq m (0.85 acres). The field is at present quite uneven and would benefit from some levelling to make it more uniform for easier management. A

small hard-core area immediately on entry would allow one or two vehicles to be drawn up off the road for the unloading of any deliveries, machinery or for short-term parking whilst on-site. A central drain runs down the middle of the field from top to bottom which Eden District Council states it has recently



done some work on. Eden District Council also owns the woodland to the south of the site,

the boundary of which is in need of re-fencing and the over-hanging trees de-limbing. It should be borne in mind that the south section of this field alongside the woodland will be an almost permanently shady area. There is no mains water supply in the field at present.

The soil testing of this site produced a pH level of 6.5; the site would be suitable for fruit production and, with the addition of a little lime to raise this level to 7.0, would lend itself to vegetable growing. So, potentially, a good site for mixed fruit and vegetable cultivation.

In terms of planning permission, the field is currently designated as agricultural land and as such would not require planning permission for a change of use. However, the development of the site as individual allotments, with associated multiple sheds, etc, may require a change of use because of its wider visible impact. A conversation with Eden District Council's Planning & Development department would be required ahead of any move to develop allotments on this site.

This site could be 'farmed' as a single holding by a group of people who come together as a co-operative to set up a crop-share or [Community Supported Agriculture](#) scheme. Rather than having a series of allotments (where everyone grows a little bit of everything) the site could be divided into crop types grown on a rotation within the field. The site could be worked communally by the crop-share members at agreed work-times. There could, for example, be 20 members who all pay £1 a week and work in the field for 4 hours a week in exchange for a weekly bag of fruit & vegetables when available.

A £50 a year membership from 20 people would generate £1,000 annually. This would more than cover the annual rent for the field and help to purchase seeds, compost, rotavator hire, netting, canes, etc. The co-operative could prioritise the acquisition of different equipment, materials and plants each year.

As tenants of the site, the co-operative could register the land with the Rural Payments Agency. The Rural Payments Agency is DEFRA's online registration system for farmers, animal keepers and rural traders and businesses. This would enable the co-operative to see and update a digital map of its land and make online applications for certain [rural grants and payments](#). These payments could help the co-operative to manage the site productively over a long period of time. The group may even wish to include the adjacent woodland in the tenancy agreement with EDC, (1) to ensure that the woodland adjoining the field is being well managed, (2) to harvest firewood for co-operative members as part of their crop-share, (3) to utilise the forest floor as a productive area and (4) to replace some felled trees with productive species. An indicative budget for The Firs is at *Appendix 4*.

Surplus crops could be sold via the Alston Moor Community Grower's website or through local outlets such as Alston Wholefoods and The Nook Café & Farm Shop at Epiacum or donated to Alston Food Bank.

How could it happen?



- 1) A group of like-minded people from Alston who have expressed a desire to grow fruit & vegetable collectively with others, get together to form a constituted group or co-operative – ie, Alston Community Growers – facilitated by the Community Food Growing Co-ordinator
- 2) Alston Community Growers contact the Estates department at Eden District Council (Chris Slater – 01768 212231) and register their interest in the annual tenancy of the field at The Firs when it is next up for renewal (April 2020)
- 3) Alston Community Growers apply to become the next tenant of the land
- 4) Alston Community Growers each pay their £50 annual subscription to start their bank account
- 5) Alston Community Growers may wish to apply for a small grant to kick-start their activities (ie, to cover the initial cost of site clearance & set-up) from Eden Community Fund or Awards for All using some of their capital as a match
- 6) Alston Community Growers pay for site clearance (or do it themselves), plan the layout of the site and start growing

In terms of maximising productivity on this site, not purely for efficiency but also for financial gain, there is a strong argument to consider introducing layers of benefit (ie, hens, fruit, mistletoe). Income will become important to the co-operative because it will enable re-investment back into the enterprise and can be used as match funding for any small grants it may wish to apply for in the future. The growing on this site may well evolve into something bigger in collaboration with other sites (such as Fairhill orchard and companion growing plots), and lead to the development of a commercial food enterprise on Alston Moor.

2.7 Old Primary School , Alston

Since 2017 Alston Primary School building and associated land on the B6277 (Garrigill Road) has been redundant following the school's amalgamation with Samuel Kings School into a single campus on Church Road. A group of local people are keen to identify a new community use for the former school building and land. The land and building is owned by Cumbria County Council and could be available as a Community Asset Transfer to a local community group or organisation willing to take it on, similar to other Cumbria County Council-owned assets, ie, Centre 67 in Appleby and Shap Library. To date Cumbria County Council has received no formal expression of interest in the site. It is likely that whatever happens to the Old Primary School will take several years to come to fruition.

The school playing field – amounting to approximately 30 x 50m (0.4 acres) – is perfectly level, lending itself to vegetable-growing and, ideally, to **polytunnels** for protected growing. The site is large enough for a ground-source heat pump to be installed to provide heat for the building and possibly even heat off-take for the polytunnels. Soil testing of this site produced a pH level of 6.0 which is slightly acidic and would require the addition of lime to raise this level to 7.0, which is the optimum pH level for vegetable growing. Screened and graded top soil could also be imported into the polytunnels to help address the low pH level.





Food grown here could be used for special events, a community café, a pop-up shop or whatever food-related requirement forms part of the building's reincarnation. Importantly the act of food growing lends itself to therapeutic and rehabilitative recovery, horticultural training and youth work; again this offers great potential to be integrated into whatever service the new building provides.

It is rather difficult at the time of writing this report to propose anything tangible for the Old Primary School site, merely to flag up the potential the site has for food growing. Ultimately though, whatever happens on this site must be part of an holistic development proposal for the whole site. Working in partnership with the Old Primary School to develop an area for fruit and vegetable growing on-site could be part of the Community Growing Co-ordinator role if a re-development does eventually go ahead.

2.8 Skelgillside – Food Enterprise Zone

In 2019 Eden District Council designated a parcel of land at Skelgillside in Alston as a Food Enterprise Zone (FEZ). This status lasts for 5 years, prior to review, and provides permitted development rights for food businesses on this land; any development will be subject to a reduced planning process, as a means of actively encouraging food enterprise in Alston. This does not mean that food enterprise cannot occur elsewhere across Alston Moor; there is the potential to review the FEZ and to add another site(s) in the future (ie, there are two

FEZ sites in both Penrith and Appleby), although a consultation process would need to happen in order to add any new sites.

The location of the Skelgillside FEZ is indicated in the map at *Appendix 5*.

The FEZ comprises two adjacent parcels of land, one already partly developed with industrial units and the other a grazed field. Both are in separate private ownership. Access to the site is excellent from the A689, Nenthead Road; this would remain the only access to the site if it was to extend to its southern-most boundary into the grazed field. Good parking facilities are available on site currently associated with each industrial unit.

That Alston has this element of infrastructure already in place is a real opportunity for would-be food businesses.

The soil testing of this site produced a pH level of 6.0, making the site naturally better suited to fruit rather than vegetable cultivation, if indeed food growing was to take place at this



location at all. Food growing on this prime business development land would only really make sense if the crop(s) being grown were also being processed on site in one of the existing industrial units – or even a newly built unit if further development takes place. The site could accommodate up to 4 acres of polytunnels, benefitting from heat generated from a renewable energy source and potentially hydroponic growing.

If a food enterprise was to develop at Skelgillside it should ideally be associated with a crop that is being produced, farmed or made on Alston Moor. Given the longevity of these plans this could be something that will be newly farmed or grown in the future by the next generation. Some ideas include natural spring water, an abattoir, eggs, a smokerie, mushrooms, a creamery, goat's milk/cheese/meat, top & soft fruit, honey, flavoured oils, fresh & dried herbs, kale crisps, rhubarb, blueberries, a distillery or micro-brewery, ice-cream, preserves, pies, puddings & baking.

It would be advantageous for a new food enterprise to focus on creating a premium



product that is exported off the Moor and which becomes synonymous its geographical provenance in much the same way as Cartmel's Sticky Toffee Pudding or Wensleydale cheese.

A hub of various 'foody' businesses all operating from Skelgillside would help to make Alston a visitor destination whilst providing mutual benefit for those businesses in terms of cross-marketing, inter-supply of ingredients staffing, etc.

The exciting possibility of developing a food enterprise in Alston brings us back to our opening statement that Alston Moor has the potential to feed itself, create training and jobs within the sector, grow or process a product that could be exported off the Moor and create a reason for people to visit the town.

3. Feasibility Summary & Recommendations

Clearly there already exists a community of shared interest in Alston centred on food growing. It is quite possible that, given time, people will convene of their own accord and deliver some of the ideas (or variations thereof) outlined in this feasibility study. Certainly the key recommendation to appoint a Community Food Growing Co-ordinator post would accelerate this process and help to deliver tangible outcomes sooner rather than later. It is worth acknowledging that a person dedicated to this role who drives forward the vision has a greater likelihood of success than voluntary members of the community unsupported.

We gathered much insight and learning from the sites we visited. The message was unanimous; "by all means think big but start small". A small project or organisation will gather momentum if it is a credible and viable proposition and, most importantly, if it is desired by the community or if it fulfils a gap in provision by offering a service or product not available locally. Part of demonstrating credibility is having a tangible infrastructure in place early on – polytunnels, land, potting shed, orchard, machinery – things that people can see immediately, identify with and buy into; this is the key catalyst for engagement. Capital investment is certainly required to put such an infrastructure in place. By embarking upon the community food journey in Alston with something modest, like the Fairhill Community Orchard, a physical presence would soon be established. The orchard would create a reason for people to come together to plant, maintain, harvest and celebrate that space.

We also observed that the personnel involved are always THE critical success factor to any project or organisation. Having a shared vision and a like-minded approach is essential for community groups as they may need to adopt a constitution or set of rules which dictates how they manage themselves, their land and their services. Differences of opinion such as whether to grow organically or not can divide a group at the outset.

The skills-set of people involved is another important factor. A range of skills and experience is useful to have – not just for practical horticultural tasks but for the inevitable



marketing, fundraising, finance, project management. Having a competent person who drives a project forward in a positive way is a real asset to any group or organisation.

The small gains and triumphs are the building blocks of something much more substantial in the future; don't try to be all things to all people at the outset. Have a clear purpose in mind and do not deviate from this as it communicates a confused message to potential users, supporters and customers.

In terms of securing finance to kick-start some of the ideas expressed in this study a mix of public, private funding, loans and crowd-funding should be explored. The following sources are possible options:-

- Big Lottery Fund, Reaching Communities England >£10k
- Eden District Council, Eden Community Fund £500-£10k
- National Lottery, Awards for All £300-£10k
- Cumbria County Council, Community Grants <£1.5k
- Princes Countryside Fund <£50k
- The Co-Op Local Community Fund <£5k
- Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Pocket Parks <£15k
- The Co-Op Foundation, interest-free loans of <£50k
- LEAP Loans for Enlightened Agriculture Programme £25-£100k
- Dean Organic Fund, interest-free loans of £5-25k
- Seedrs Equity Crowdfunding Platform
- Crowdcube Equity Crowdfunding Platform

Based on the research undertaken as part of this feasibility study, it is recommended that:-

- Alston Moor Partnership apply to Reaching Communities (National Lottery) for a grant to support a part-time Community Food Growing Co-ordinator operational across Alston Moor
- Alston Recreation Ground Trust forward a site plan of the proposed orchard area, (Ordnance Survey, scale 1:1250) for Eden District Council's planning team to discover previous site history
- Alston Recreation Ground Trust apply to Eden Community Fund 2019/2020 for a grant to establish a community orchard at Fairhill
- Cumbria Action for Sustainability deliver a series of Grow Your Own Veg training days in Alston
- Alston Moor Partnership registers its interest with Eden District Council's estates department in the field at the end of Church Road (The Firs) so that when the annual tenancy is up for renewal it is informed
- Alston Moor Greenprint Project Manager continues to advocate for vegetable-growing to be part of any new proposals for the Old Primary School in working group discussions

- A database of interested community growers is created in readiness for communicating with them and gathering them together for an initial networking event

4. Acknowledgements

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 Tracey Moran, Cumbria County Council

Special thanks go to Roe Baker, Project Manager, Alston Moor Greenprint Project.



JOB DESCRIPTION GROWER**Alston Moor Community Growers****POST:** Community Food Growing Co-ordinator**LOCATION:** Alston Moor (various sites)**REPORTS TO:** Cumbria Action for Sustainability (Community Growing Steering Group)**HOURS/SALARY:** 28 hours per week / £24,000 (pro rata)**Overall purpose:** To build local fruit & veg-growing capacity and develop opportunities for community veg growing across Alston Moor.

General Responsibilities: To initially lead all aspects of growing and harvesting of crops including: effective rotations, composting, fertility building, weed control, pest and disease management and mechanisation. Develop a cropping plan and sowing/planting schedule alongside community growers so that crops are varied and provide as much produce as possible throughout the year. Manage all day-to-day aspects of working with community growers, seeking support from the Steering Group as necessary. Arrange (initially) weekly work plans for community growers and manage volunteers appropriately. Liaise effectively with community growers and attend regular grower's meetings. Liaise with local shops and other retail outlets when excess produce is available for sale. Lead guided tours of Alston Moor Community Grower's sites for visiting groups or interested parties. Attend steering group meetings to report on progress, set-backs and concerns as well as seek approval for any significant changes in working practices; accommodate suggestions from the steering group when these are feasible and practical. Think strategically and operate in a joined-up way about future developments. Be able to assemble credible funding applications. The Growing Co-ordinator is expected to work in a flexible way when the occasion arises and where tasks not specifically covered in the Job Description need to be undertaken. It is likely that the Growing Co-ordinator will need to work flexible hours throughout the year due to the seasonal nature of the work. The Growing Co-ordinator will be responsible for ensuring that essential tasks are managed (ie, harvesting) whilst he/she is on annual leave.

Specific Duties

1. Establish a community orchard at Fairhill.
2. Establish seasonal veg-producing 'suitcases' as features on the platforms at South Tynedale Railway; train a team of STRPS volunteers to manage these on an ongoing basis.
3. Commission a bespoke website/Facebook page/blog to bring local growers together. The website should operate as an on-line management tool on four levels; as a noticeboard to advertise training days, skills-sharing opportunities & local 'foody' events (ie, Apple Day, Seeds Swaps); as a mechanism for matching those with land to those willing to grow and/or to be companion growers;



as a booking system for a tool/machinery bank; and as an on-line 'shop' through which crops can be sold.

4. Deliver regular Grow-Your-Own-Veg and other more specific training days, (ie, grafting, scything, propagation, composting, etc).
5. Act as a mentor for a Farmer Network mentee looking to develop a farming-related business on Alston Moor (possibly in tandem with developing a local food enterprise).
6. Establish and manage a grower/land partnership scheme.
7. Re-instate & develop the herb garden at Fairhill.
8. Work with chefs from the local eateries to develop a series of 'Roof of England' tasting menus based on locally produced food.
9. Establish and co-ordinate a gardening tool/equipment library.
10. Facilitate and support the formation of Alston Community Supported Agriculture Scheme and the creation of a fruit & veg-growing plot at The Firs (end of Church Road), ensuring availability of seasonal, high quality and varied produce throughout the year for members.
11. Work in partnership with the Old Primary School to develop an area for fruit & veg growing on-site if this re-development goes ahead.
12. Facilitate an Alston Moor Growers network to bring together Garrigill Allotments Association, Nenthead Play Park and Alston CSA for training, skills-sharing, bulk purchasing, Open Day trails, etc.
13. Broker local easy routes to market for surplus crops via The Nook Café & Farm Shop at Epiacum, monthly craft market, Alston Wholefoods and a pop-up shop at the Old Primary School.
14. Develop a funded proposition (Business Plan) for a fruit/veg enterprise from 2025 onwards, evolving from the experience & successes achieved 2020-2025 and based on (1) what grows successfully and (2) the strengths and expertise of local personnel.

APPENDIX 2

Fairhill Orchard - Budget Monitor

		Budget	Actual	%	+/-
Income					
1	sponsor-a-tree campaign (own funds)*	£1,521.00	£0.00	0%	£1,521.00
2	Alston Moor Greenprint Project	£1,000.00	£0.00		
3	Eden Community Fund	£4,241.69	£0.00	0%	£4,241.69
Total Income		£6,762.69	£0.00	0%	£5,762.69
Expenditure					
4	project management 2 days @ £200	£400.00	£0.00	0%	£400.00
5	Site clearance/preparation - 2 people x 2 days @ £120	£480.00	£0.00	0%	£480.00
6	travel - site clearance/creation, 58 miles @ 50p x 5	£145.00	£0.00	0%	£145.00
7	man & digger x 2 days @ £30 p/hour	£480.00	£0.00	0%	£480.00
8	posts x20	£100.00	£0.00	0%	£100.00
9	canes x 120	£43.80		0%	£43.80
10	tree lopping & chipping on site	£350.00	£0.00	0%	£350.00
11	rhubarb crowns x 10	£100.00	£0.00	0%	£100.00
12	raspberry canes x 224	£896.00	£0.00	0%	£896.00
13	gooseberry/blackcurrant x 20	£200.00	£0.00	0%	£200.00
14	apple cordons x 45	£1,125.00	£0.00	0%	£1,125.00
15	plum/pear/damson/greengage trees x 10	£400.00	£0.00	0%	£400.00
16	metal tree protectors x 10	£193.80	£0.00	0%	£193.80
17	tree ties	£19.59	£0.00	0%	£19.59
18	plastic tree guards (for cordons)	£9.60	£0.00	0%	£9.60
19	ladders	£225.00	£0.00	0%	£225.00
20	wire & barrel-strainers	£53.10	£0.00	0%	£53.10
21	secateurs x5	£61.80	£0.00	0%	£61.80
22	fruit press & shredder	£200.00	£0.00	0%	£200.00
23	individual tree labels	£25.00	£0.00	0%	£25.00
24	Interpretation panel	£1,255.00	£0.00	0%	£1,255.00
Total Expenditure		£6,762.69	£0.00		£6,762.69
Total Income		£6,762.69	£0.00		£6,762.69
Surplus/Deficit		£0.00	£0.00		£0.00

45 apple cordons @ £25 each

*

10 plum/pear/damson @ £40 each

224 raspberry canes @ £4 each

20 currants/berries @ £10 each



Grow Your Own Veg Course

10.00-10.30am	Tea/Coffee/Welcome & Housekeeping Introductions (leader & participants) Why you want to go. Check previous veg-growing experience; summary of their growing spaces & what they'd like to grow.
10.30-11.00am	Soil & soil-testing
11.00-11.30am	Compost & composting
11.30-12.00pm	Planning your veg plot; crop rotation
12.00-1.00pm	Seed propagation Seed types/sizes/sowing into trays/pots/direct drilling Where to buy/acquire seeds Varieties Seed saving
1.00-2.00pm	LUNCH & WALK TO GARDEN SITE <i>(uneven surfaces, trips, tools, first aid kit)</i>
2.00-2.45pm	Clearing a site & preparing the ground; including identifying weeds, useful tools & how to use them, supports & structures, transplanting out/potting on
2.45-3.30pm	Aftercare, including netting/protection, pests & diseases, watering & feeding, removing unwanted plant material, harvesting & crop monitoring
3.30-4.00pm	Vegetative propagation Taking cuttings & dividing plants
4.00pm	Tea & Finish

The Firs - Budget Monitor

	Budget	Actual	%	+/-	
Income					
1	membership from 20 people @ £50	£1,000.00	£0.00	0%	£1,000.00
2	Eden Community Fund or Awards for All (start-up funding)	£540.00	£0.00	0%	£540.00
Total Income		£1,540.00	£0.00	0%	£1,540.00
Expenditure					
3	ploughing & rotavating (with tractor)	£90.00			
4	annual rent	£250.00	£0.00	0%	£250.00
5	man & digger x 2 days @ £30 p/hour	£480.00	£0.00	0%	£480.00
6	posts x24 (to de-mark growing areas)	£120.00	£0.00	0%	£120.00
7	rhubarb crowns x 20	£200.00	£0.00	0%	£200.00
8	gooseberry/blackcurrant x 40	£400.00	£0.00	0%	£400.00
Total Expenditure		£1,540.00	£0.00		£1,540.00
Total Income		£1,540.00	£0.00		£1,540.00
Surplus/Deficit		£0.00	£0.00		£0.00

