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# A fine taste for business



**Professor Frank Peck** of the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development writes for in-Cumbria on the big issues of the day and the economic data behind them. This month, he focuses on the food and drink sector

Over the past decade, food and drink has invariably been identified as a particular strength of the economic structure of Cumbria.

The Strategic Plan of Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership gives particular prominence to advanced manufacturing, the nuclear industry and the visitor economy. However, the LEP Strategy also draws attention to "employment strengths" in food and drink manufacture and "product strengths" in the agri-food sector linked to food and drink provenance.

On this basis, it is suggested that there are opportunities for further development of niche and artisan food and drink products associated with a strong Cumbrian identity and other local brands. The strategy also notes the strong connections between the distinctiveness and high quality of local rural foods and the uniqueness of Cumbria's tourism sector.

So, what evidence is there to indicate the importance of food and drink to the Cumbrian economy and how has the sector performed in recent years? The data available from official government sources indicates that employment associated with food and drink continues to be highly significant for the county.

If we start with the producers of food products at farm level, latest available County-level data from the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (Defra) shows that in June 2016, around 12,400 people were working in the farm sector.

The most significant category relates to farmers and their spouses that account for over 9,000 persons or 74 per cent of the total. The remainder includes full and part-time regular workers, salaried managers and casual labour (the survey is taken in June each year).

Besides farm production, Cumbria also has a very important food and drink processing sector that has very



● Lynn Barnes, who runs Vista Veg in Crosby Ravensworth

diverse characteristics. It includes major production sites owned by multinational companies, locally owned food businesses that are important employers in many communities as well as a very significant number of innovative small and medium-sized businesses involved in production of specialist food and drink products.

Latest official data shows that this sector of manufacturing accounted for around 4,400 jobs across the county in 2015. It is interesting to note, however, that at a time of high levels of competition nationally and internationally, employment in the food sector has grown in the county 2012-15. If we combine these figures, there are at least 16,000 workers in the county either producing or processing food and drink products.

But this is not all the food sector in Cumbria. As noted in the LEP Strategy, there are very important links between some segments of the local food industry and the visitor economy where food and drink services are highly significant. The food services sector (restaurants, food outlets, pubs, cafes etc) adds another 13,400 to the total numbers employed in economic activities related to food and drink. This

is also an area that has demonstrated employment growth (+6 per cent) between 2012 and 2015.

It is clear from this evidence that food and drink activities are major providers of employment in Cumbria and that, at least in terms of manufacturing and service provision, employment has demonstrated growth in recent years.

There are some reasons to feel optimistic about maintaining this momentum in the food production and services sector. Over the years, employment in food manufacturing in the county has proved to be highly resilient despite national and international pressures on producers to increase productivity through automation and threats of closure associated with the drive for scale economies. Synergies between producers of niche products and the visitor economy are also very positive. There are, however, significant uncertainties facing the farm sector in particular as the UK seeks to disentangle itself from the Common Agricultural Policy. The challenge for the near future is how to sustain past dynamism in food and drink in the face of the complexities that currently surround the BREXIT process. [➤](#)