and reflect the specific conditions present in different geographical locations.

Although consumers have a range of reasons for wanting to source their food from AFNs, price is still an important consideration and can be a barrier to participation. Fitting participation into busy daily routines is also difficult, especially for working parents with young children who are often particularly aware of the nutritional advantages which may be present in both locally and organically-produced fresh food.

Despite AFNs generally being small and specialist, and some being organised so as to reduce the choice that consumers have—in their organic box for example—participants in AFNs reported eating more different foods, and more fruit and vegetables when they participated in these schemes. ‘Connection’ between food producers and consumers is one way in which diets and knowledge about food could be improved.

AFNs do not necessarily want to develop by growing bigger. In many cases this would damage the ethos of the scheme and undermine the sense of ‘connection’ which has been established between producer and consumer. A proliferation of diverse small schemes is more realistic than rationalisation and standardisation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY
Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring ‘alternative’ networks

The range and number of AFNs operating in the United Kingdom is enormous and includes well-established farm shops and organic box schemes, as well as unique and ingenuous projects such as animal adoption, allotment groups, health and educational projects.

More and more people in the United Kingdom are obtaining their food through ‘alternative’ food networks (AFNs). For many, participation is a way of establishing a sense of connection with the people, places and processes involved with growing and supplying their food. It reflects the anxieties associated with food consumption in contemporary society but at the same time, consumers report the pleasure they experience when buying, preparing and eating food from AFNs.

AFNs support relations of care between people, and some being organised so as to reduce the choice that consumers have—in their organic box for example—participants in AFNs reported eating more different foods, and more fruit and vegetables when they participated in these schemes. ‘Connection’ between food producers and consumers is one way in which diets and knowledge about food could be improved.

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HIGHLIGHTS
Alternative food networks: diversity and change

The term ‘alternative food networks’ has been used to categorise ways of producing and consuming food which differ in some way from the ‘conventional’ food supply system, dominated in western Europe and North America by supermarkets and large food processing companies. Yet our project highlights the great diversity of activities existing under that general banner, and also emphasises that they change and develop over time. As the Table (over) shows, AFNs are defined in many different ways by the people who establish them.

Consumers also have a range of motivations for obtaining food from AFNs instead of, or alongside, the food they obtain from conventional sources. These motivations change and develop over time and often involve a ‘push’ factors, such as anxieties about how food is conventionally produced and retailled:
Because AFNs come in so many shapes and forms, Direct farmgate retail
Educational, lifestyle and empowerment programmes
Health projects
Producer-consumer partnerships
Reconnecting consumers, producers and food
Socially-embedded
Community access
Bag/box schemes (organic, biodynamic and
Access to affordable, quality produce
Consider environmental, biodiversity and
because consumers tap into AFNs for different
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that holistic experience of shopping for the food,
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preparing it, cooking it, and then eating it myself
or having friends round to eat it. So it's the food
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Food, producers and consumers
Consumers in our case studies emphasise how important food from AFNs is to them. Many subscribe
to a notion of 'proper' home-made family meals and prepare these from raw, fresh ingredients, spending
a considerable amount of time in doing so. This does not, however, preclude convenience food and technology,
which were used to varying degrees. The significance of food from AFNs is evident in their everyday routines.
Buying, preparing and eating food, and in some cases being involved in growing food, is fitted into the wide
range of activities making up peoples' individual and family lives. Consumers demonstrate great creativity
in working food from AFNs into and around other activities.

But food also has wider significance. People engage with food in sensual ways. Food is looked at, smelled,
squeezed and tasted as its various qualities are assessed and appreciated:

'The other thing is that I love cooking and choosing the food, choosing the ingredients is really part of
that holistic experience of shopping for the food, preparing it, cooking it, and then eating it myself
or having friends round to eat it. So it's the food
experience, it's good'
Female, age 70, Bristol Farmers' Market

In social terms, the food practices associated with AFNs underpin diverse social relationships, for example with producers, with partners and other family members and with other food consumers. And in symbolic terms, food from AFNs can represent commitments to particular sets of ethical values, such as caring about social, environmental and economic sustainability. Food from AFNs seemed, from our research, to be special in the ways in which it permeated individual and family lives, contrasting with conventionally-sourced foods treated as mundane commodities.

Connections: buying, working and adopting
Different AFNs are set up to facilitate highly specific ways of managing a more direct connection between
food producer and food consumer. Consumers can, therefore, purchase from a farm shop in a way which is
similar in many respects to the act of purchasing from a supermarket, or buy from a stall at a farmers' market
in the same way as from any other market, with the added twist of meeting the person who has grown or
made the food being bought. On the other hand, they might order a weekly box of vegetables from a local grower, opening themselves up to the unexpected and losing the ability to choose what they receive each week in exchange for establishing a direct relationship with the grower. Or they might enter into longer-term commitments to support a particular farmer by joining a community supported agriculture project in which part of the payment for their supply of produce is physical work in the vegetable field. Consumers in the UK have even adopted sheep in Italy over the internet, receiving in return an adoption certificate and a twice-yearly parcel of sheep's-milk cheese.

Findings:
Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring 'alternative' networks

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Table: Comparison of main academic and lay definitions of 'alternative' food networks

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| Lay discourse and practice | Academic discourse and interpretation |
| Stakeholder involvement | Reconnecting consumers, producers and food |
| e.g. supporters' groups, participatory planning, workdays, schools projects, local procurement, demonstration farms, communal food growing |
| Producer-consumer partnerships | in new economic spaces which re-embed food production and consumption |
| e.g. bulk purchasing |
| Direct farmgate retail | Non-conventional supply/distribution channels |
| e.g. 'pick your own', mobile |
| Bag/box schemes (organic, biodynamic and conventional) |
| Farmers markets/specialist markets/independent food shops |
| Community access | Socially-embedded |
| e.g. cooking clubs, newsletters, social events |
| Access to affordable, quality produce |
| Consider environmental, biodiversity and conservation issues; restore/save land; seedbanks |
| Health projects | Quality |
| e.g. weight classes, diet courses, nutritional education |
| Educational, lifestyle and empowerment programmes | promoting quality; also preserving traditions, environment or heritage |
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'Connection', then, far from being a simple and easily
achieved phenomenon, can mean very different things in
different circumstances. One Bristol consumer expressed the significance of connection as follows:

'...what I hadn't expected or anticipated or looked for necessarily was a sense of it as a social occasion
and the sense of it as something that kind of, um, altered my perception of the city as a whole, you
know [...] It made it a more vibrant place and a friendly place and that thing about the connection
with the...the world around it, the rural land
and the fact that these producers come in from
Somerset and Gloucestershire and so on and
you know, you feel a bit more connected'
Male, age 43, Bristol Farmers' Market

Connection is in part a technical concern: how does
food, and information about that, food, get from
producers to consumers? But it is also to do with
relationships: what social relationships are established?
How close do they get? How do they function? How
important are they? The answers to these questions vary
different AFNs.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE
Because AFNs come in so many shapes and forms,
policies to support them need to respond to local needs
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Because consumers tap into AFNs for different
reasons, policies to enable consumers to access such
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representations of the middle class 'beard and sandals
brigade'. One implication of this is that it is important
not to 'dismiss' certain groups of consumer as being
'uninterested' in AFNs. Our research included those
who live in a deprived urban area who valued the opportunity
to obtain fresh vegetables from an AFN. Again, under-
standing the diversity amongst AFNs is key; they serve
different groups of consumers, are associated with
different sets of ethical values and long-term objectives,
Findings: Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring ‘alternative’ networks

And when I see the chicken for sale in the supermarket I think “where were you before you were in this packet?” And that kind of stops me now. I think, I back off. I lift it, then I put it down. I think “I won’t bother.”

Female, age 70, Bristol Farmers’ Market

Food, producers and consumers

Consumers in our case studies emphasise how important food from AFNs is to them. Many subscribe to a notion of ‘proper’ home-made family meals and prepare these from raw, fresh ingredients, spending a considerable amount of time in doing so. This does not, however, preclude convenience food and technology, which were used to varying degrees. The significance of food from AFNs is evident in their everyday routines. Buying, preparing and eating food, and in some cases being involved in growing food, is fitted into the wide range of activities making up peoples’ individual and family lives. Consumers demonstrate great creativity in working food from AFNs into and around other activities.

But food also has wider significance. People engage with food in sensual ways. Food is looked at, smelled, squeezed and tasted as its various qualities are assessed and appreciated:

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Connection is in part a technical concern: how does food, and information about that food, get from producers to consumers? But it is also to do with relationships: what social relationships are established? How ‘close’ do they get? How do they function? How important are they? The answers to these questions vary between different AFNs.

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Salop Drive market garden
Photo: Laura Venn

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AFNs do not necessarily want to develop by growing bigger. In many cases this would damage the ethos of the scheme and undermine the sense of ‘connection’ which has been established between producer and consumer. A proliferation of diverse small schemes is more realistic than rationalisation and standardisation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Reconnecting Consumers, Food and Producers: exploring ‘alternative’ networks

The production of relations of care can in some cases be an important consideration and can be a barrier to participation. Fitting participation into busy daily routines is also difficult, especially for working parents with young children who are often particularly aware of the nutritional advantages which may be present in both locally and organically-produced fresh food.

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