



The Food Coast Donegal  
Strategic Review & Recommendations  
for Future Development and Delivery  
2023 - 2026: *Summary Document*

# A *Recipe* for future growth



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

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# 01. Introduction

Having progressed the food and beverage strategy within the region over the last decade, in 2022 the Local Enterprise Office Donegal commissioned a review of the strategy for the Food Coast initiative. Following a tender process, James Burke & Associates (JB&A), were appointed to conduct a review of the landscape and to make recommendations for future direction.

This document is a summary document, supported by a full strategy review document, containing the backup detail. There is also a comprehensive action plan to support the execution of the strategy.

# 02. Foreward

Welcome. We are delighted to present The Food Coast Donegal Strategic Review & Recommendations for Future Development and Delivery 2023 – 2026. The Food Coast is a regional branding initiative which was developed by the Local Enterprise Office Donegal.

The launch of this strategy marks a significant milestone in the culinary journey of Donegal, as we embark on a mission to make our beautiful region renowned for its exceptional food and drink.

Donegal, with its stunning landscapes, rich heritage, and vibrant community, has always been a place apart. The original Donegal food strategy was written in 2012; we're now building on that legacy, as we continue our mission to cultivate Donegal's reputation for extraordinary culinary experiences that will tantalise the taste buds of locals and visitors alike. The Food Coast Donegal Food Strategy is a recipe for future growth and lays the groundwork for this exciting gastronomic journey.

Our vision is clear: to create an environment where local food producers, artisans, restaurateurs, and chefs can thrive, showcasing the incredible flavours and diversity of Donegal's culinary offerings. Through this strategy, we aim to nurture a strong and sustainable food ecosystem, supporting the growth of our local economy, and celebrating the exceptional talents and resources abundant within our county, sharing them with the world.

The Food Coast Donegal Food Strategy is the culmination of extensive research, collaboration, and consultation with key stakeholders from across the region. It provides a comprehensive overview of the current status of the food landscape in Donegal and reflects the collective aspirations of those who are passionate about the art of food in Donegal.

Conducting the strategy review would not have been possible without the input of a wide group of Donegal food and beverage stakeholders, and agencies that support the food industry. Our sincere thanks to those who gave willingly of their time and expertise. We would also like to express my appreciation to the broader community of Donegal, whose support and enthusiasm will be pivotal in driving the success of our collective vision.

In the pages of this comprehensive plan, you will find a roadmap that outlines our ambitious goals and the strategies we will employ to achieve them. From promoting sustainable practices and fostering innovation in food production to enhancing culinary education and establishing Donegal as a sought-after food tourism destination, every aspect of this strategy is designed to elevate our food culture to new heights.

As we embark on this culinary odyssey, let us remember that our journey does not end with the launch of this strategy. It is merely the beginning of an exciting chapter in Donegal's food story.

We invite you all to join us on this remarkable voyage, as we savour the flavours, share the stories and work together to develop the abundance, potential and reputation that is Food Coast Donegal.

Thank You.



**Brenda Hegarty**  
Head Of Enterprise,  
LEO Donegal.



**John McLaughlin**  
Chief Executive,  
Donegal CoCo.

# 03 Executive Summary



The Food Coast Donegal was established in 2012. A further review on progress was conducted in 2015. The review in this document was undertaken during 2022 and established the following:

## 01.

Since its formation, the Food Coast has achieved some major accolades e.g., finalist of the Foodie Destinations 2019.

## 02.

The Food Coast network has run an active calendar of annual food and beverage activities which have brought a new dimension to the local landscape, and drawn attention to Donegal's food and beverage offer.

## 03.

At national level, there is general acceptance from stakeholders in the food industry that Donegal has taken its place as a credible food and beverage destination region.

## 04.

Like most other regions, there are challenges to be faced by the Food Coast initiative including breathing fresh energy into the landscape in a post pandemic environment.

Having conducted research, interviewed stakeholders and looked at national and international food and beverage strategies, this report recommends the following:

## 01.

The formation of two industry clusters of stakeholders who will own and drive the strategy within their own sector.

## 02.

Build a new model for local agency collaboration.

## 03.

The appointment of a small leadership team to guide the journey.

## 04.

Secure funding to appoint a full-time Food Development Officer.

## 05.

Drive an added value mindset in the food and beverage manufacturing sector.

## 06.

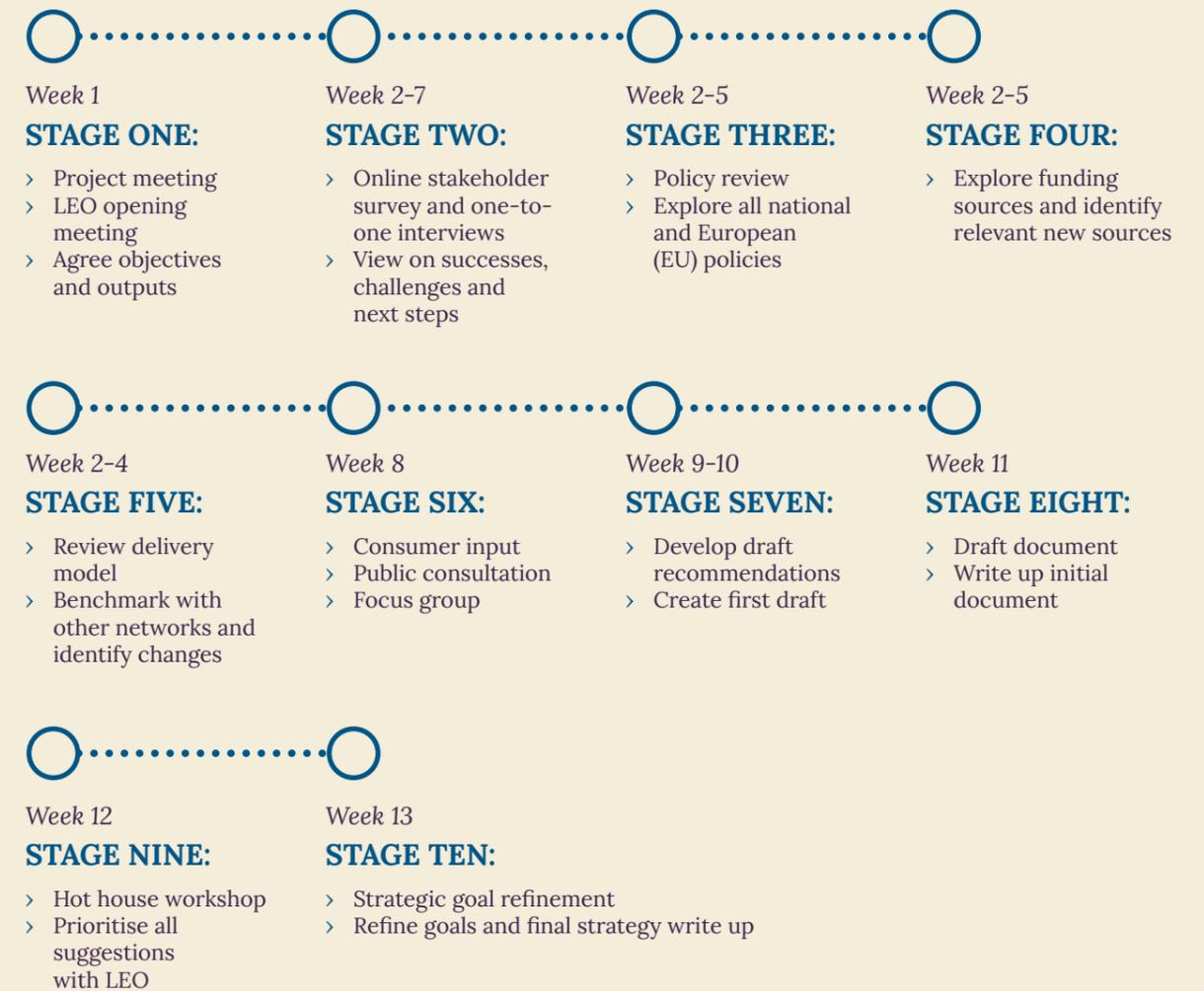
Become a champion of green and sustainability best practice.

The core strategic vision envisaged is to...

Empower and enable industry to own the Food Coast initiative and elevate the Donegal food and beverage offer to a new unique position on the national map. To ensure that all stakeholders across every food and beverage channel, and at all commercial life-stages, who engage with the Food Coast journey benefit from it.

# 04. Methodology

The methodology for the strategy was based on a stage gate process. Each stage informed the next stage and reviews were conducted on completion of each. The stages involved an online survey of food and drink stakeholders, a consumer survey, a consumer focus group, 1:1 consultations with over 25 stakeholders and ongoing meetings with local agencies and the Food Coast steering group.



# 05. Donegal Food Journey

## A Decade of Progress

The original Donegal food strategy was written in 2012. This followed an extensive review of the local landscape and the creation of a road map to build a local food ecosystem.

Four years later, in 2016, the original strategy was reviewed, the progress benchmarked, and a new set of priority pillars were created. These new pillars centered around the following:

- > Completion of any outstanding workstreams from the previous strategy and implementation of new recommendations.
- > Exploring the creation of community kitchens and incubation hubs. This was completed.
- > Development of a food series calendar. This was completed.
- > Development of a food tourism strategy. This was not completed by The Food Coast team, however there are several tourism initiatives running within the county.
- > Development of a Food Coast network. This was completed.
- > Putting appropriate resources in place to support the strategy roll out. This was completed.



# 06. Key Research Findings

Following stakeholder interviews, online stakeholder and consumer research, and a series of discussions with local government agencies, the following summary provides a good overview of the current status of the food landscape in Donegal.



Seafood and coastal links (longest coastline in Ireland)



Large seafood processors and blue economy



Part of Wild Atlantic Way



Foodie Destination Finalist 2019 (a legacy asset)



Emerging craft beer and distillery scene



'Taste of Donegal' Event



Food Stakeholder 'Movement'



Increasing dining choices and growing chef community



Food Coast brand (B2B)



Sustainable small food producers and farms - unique foodscape



Key industry educational centres (ATU and Killybegs)

Using the feedback from all stakeholder groups, a SWOT analysis was conducted with the output as follows:



## Strengths

- › A general acceptance that good progress has been made over the last 8 years. The role that the LEO played in underpinning the development of The Food Coast was acknowledged repeatedly.
- › There is much greater recognition of Donegal within “trade stakeholders” as an active food region.
- › Stakeholders have more confidence as a group. There is evidence of good support for each other and comradery.
- › There is a sense of a “food community” and a functioning network (a structure to collaborate within and “trying to achieve something”).
- › An emerging and enthusiastic chef cohort is evident, and the number of good restaurants has grown in recent years.
- › There is agreement that there is a definite improvement in “the offer”.
- › The Food Coast brand appearance is viewed as strong.



## Weaknesses

- › There is some confusion about what the Food Coast is trying to achieve, and its priorities, among stakeholders.
- › The commercial worth of membership is questioned by some stakeholders.
- › The Food Coast initiative is seen as agency led (not industry driven) with a quantitative approach.
- › There is limited recognition and credibility of the Food Coast Donegal restaurant plaque.
- › There is poor consumer awareness of the Food Coast brand.
- › There is no division within the structure to cater for very different needs and business life stages.
- › Interaction with farmers and farm diversification is weak.
- › There is erosion of the authentic Donegal fishing story.
- › The bigger food manufacturing and processing companies are slow to participate in Food Coast events and activities.
- › There are not enough new food producers emerging which leads to a weak artisan base.



## Opportunities

- › Integration of Donegal food and beverage more overtly with the Wild Atlantic Way initiative.
- › Greater combined activity between agencies Failte Ireland/BIM/LEO/Donegal County Council to create a unique proposition.
- › Further harness campaigns already there such as ‘Taste the Atlantic’ (BIM/Failte Ireland) and the new DEDP plans for the county.
- › Strengthening ties with other neighbouring regional food strategies e.g., Derry.
- › There is an opportunity to forge stronger educational links with colleges in Letterkenny and Killybegs.
- › Enhance and expand food hub training facilities with ‘short, sharp, focused’ training from what is already there through DETB and college kitchen facilities.
- › New unique visitor experiences are emerging i.e., Crolly Distillery’ and ‘Fish Stop’ in Killybegs. These and others will enhance the consumer offer.
- › Due to location, there are a number of cross border funding initiatives which could be explored.
- › New schemes launched in 2022 to deal with Brexit are especially relevant to Donegal e.g., Brexit Blue Economy Enterprise Development Scheme.



## Threats

- › There are different post pandemic priorities for some food and beverage stakeholders, with little time for “community/voluntary” activities.
- › Staff/skill shortages in the food service sector could cause operators to “revert to the basics” and abandon their local food focus.
- › Economic uncertainty, recession and the potential impact on inward visitor numbers and disposable income could distract from local food priorities.
- › Proximity to Northern Ireland and any potential future Brexit changes may have an influence on the Donegal region.
- › Other regions are working hard on reigniting their food story and festivals post Covid, posing a threat to Donegal (a busy national food and beverage calendar).

# 07. Recommendation for Future Development and Delivery with an Increase in Business Buy-in and Participation

The research findings conclude that great progress has been made over the last decade with regard to evolving the food and beverage agenda in Donegal. There is a general consensus that Donegal has taken its place at the national table and commands respect among its peers in other regions for what it has achieved with its Food Coast initiative.

The work over the last decade is now completed and the region can be proud of what it has achieved. It is now time to move forward to a new space, and the objectives set out in the following sections are focused on

supporting the region in the next chapter of its journey. The core focus should be on restructuring, reigniting the movement & enabling stakeholders. The aim of the next phase of the Food Coast

journey, is to elevate further the Donegal food and beverage offer and ensure that those who play an active role within it, reap commercial benefit.

*As part of the supports for this future journey a number of guiding principles have been established:*

## 01.

Change the focus from what has been there over the last decade and signal a move to a new higher positioning for the Food Coast initiative. Phase 1 of the Food Coast journey is over, and the objective has been achieved.

## 02.

The Food Coast initiative needs to transition to become an industry led initiative, from its current positioning of agency driven.

## 03.

It will need to be supported with an overarching strategy guided by three core values of Sustainability, Collaboration and Enterprise and Innovation (expanded in section 13).

## 04.

The initiative will need to be resourced with a full time Food Development Officer for a minimum of 36 months.

## 05.

The initiative will need to be supported with a strong communications plan to ensure that all stakeholders understand what is to be achieved and how to get there.

## 06.

The Food Coast brand should primarily be a B2B brand remaining true to the 'Core Values' above.

## 07.

In line with national policy The Food Coast should embrace the guiding values of sustainability and regeneration.

# 08. Strategic Objective

The core strategic vision envisaged is to...

Empower and enable industry to own the Food Coast initiative and elevate the Donegal food and beverage offering to a new unique position on the national map. To ensure that all stakeholders across every food and beverage channel, and at all commercial life-stages, who engage with the Food Coast journey benefit from it.

This will be achieved through focussing on 4 strategic pillars between 2023 and 2026.

<p><b>01.</b> </p> <p><b>Create an Industry Driven Food and Drink Eco System (Clusters):</b></p> <p>The creation of an industry driven ownership of the strategy through the establishment of two clusters were those from the same sectors will collaborate to drive the Donegal food and beverage agenda, guided by the Food Coast principles and the 3 core values.</p>	<p><b>02.</b> </p> <p><b>Build a new Model for Agency Collaboration:</b></p> <p>Create a practical working model that sees far greater inter agency collaboration and industry support in relation to the Food Coast and the development of the Donegal food and beverage sector.</p>	<p><b>03.</b> </p> <p><b>Drive an Added Value Mindset:</b></p> <p>Adopt the Food Coast+ approach as recommended by in the "Donegal 10 Year Strategic Enterprise Development Plan" in relation to producers "at scale, or capable of scaling", who would be supported with research, trend analysis and innovation enablers thus enhancing the sector "added value" and export potential. 'Added Value Mindset' could also refer here to smaller producers etc who wish to embrace a visitor experience or food tourism.</p>	<p><b>04.</b> </p> <p><b>Become a Champion of Green and Sustainability Best Practice:</b></p> <p>Ensure that Donegal own the green, regeneration and sustainable spaces within the food and beverage arena and that the Food Coast and its members take ownership of this area.</p>
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## PILLAR 01 Industry Clusters Explained



Pillar one recommends the creation of two industry clusters (expanding to three clusters at a later point) as an enabler for industry stakeholders to have greater ownership of the strategy and improved control for these stakeholders of the future of the Donegal food and beverage.

The cluster sectors will be:

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>01.</b></p> <p>Donegal Food Producer Cluster (B2B Focus).</p> | <p><b>02.</b></p> <p>Donegal Chef/Restaurant Owner Cluster (B2B Focus).</p> | <p><b>03.</b></p> <p>Donegal Food/Drink Experiences Cluster (B2B Focus).</p> <p><i>(Optional as a standalone cluster and will initially operate within the Producer Cluster).</i></p> |
|---|---|---|

# PILLAR 02

## A New Agency Collaboration Model Explained



### Possible Agency Partners

While the definitive list will be determined at local level, possible partners may include the following. A chair agency should lead the group:



# PILLAR 03

## Drive an Added Value Mindset: Food Coast+ Explained



### Key Areas of Focus

In order to achieve the Food Coast+ objective, the region and its producers will need to strengthen its capabilities and activities under the following headings:

- A deeper harnessing of the knowledge base and expertise which exists within the local third level institutions.
- Facilitate greater exposure for appropriate Donegal producers to the topics of food science, nutrition and agri-tech.
- Create a more immersive annual calendar to ensure producers have a deep understanding of global food and beverage trends, and future predictions.
- Stimulate greater levels of innovation by allowing Donegal producers greater access to innovation process and technical resources.
- Improve access to innovation funding by creating greater awareness of existing funds and providing an additional Donegal food and beverage innovation fund.
- Forming partnerships with packaging companies and those at the cutting edge of packaging innovation, so that Donegal producers have access to the latest developments.

# PILLAR 04

*Becoming a Champion of Green and Sustainability Explained*



An opportunity exists for the Food Coast Donegal to be the lead region in Ireland for its food and beverage sector under the green and sustainability heading.

This report proposes that this topic becomes a core objective over the next 3 years, designed to run in parallel to the other work streams, but more importantly to underpin all other activity.

# 09. Food Coast Leadership Group



In addition to the clusters, a separate Leadership Group will take ownership of the overall Food Coast Strategy roll out and provide stewardship and direction. The Food Coast Donegal Leadership Group should represent the following stakeholders:



Producers (small to medium enterprises and from different stages of the business life cycle).



Food Service providers or owners (to include the Chef Community).



A representative from wider supporting agencies such as those previously listed.



A representative from key regional educational and training bodies.

# 10. Critical Enablers

The strategy will only function properly if the following enablers are put into place to support the journey.



A fulltime Food Development Office in place for 3 years.



Minimum funding of €150,000 per year to be allocated to various food projects.



A concerted effort by all agencies to function as one co-ordinated support vehicle.



Greater recognition of business owners and businesses acting as champions and investing time in the Food Coast initiative.



The majority focus of the Food Development Officer's time on B2B activities, enabling the clusters to run any B2C activities.

# 11. Summary

Since the formation of the original Food Coast Donegal strategy in 2012, the initiative has enjoyed significant success. Donegal's place on the national food and beverage map is now undisputed. The core foundations are now in place and it is now time for the Food Coast Donegal initiative to begin a new journey to elevate the Donegal food and beverage landscape to an even higher level.

This will be achieved by facilitating stakeholders, through a series of industry specific clusters, who will focus on creating bespoke actions for their sector. Local agency support for the initiative will be paramount and this will require a new interagency collaboration model.

Further detail and the action plan detail can be found in the main document.



## Get in Touch

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The Food Coast is a regional branding initiative which was developed by Local Enterprise Office Donegal to support, celebrate and grow the Donegal food sector.

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