

Feeding the Interest

A discussion of the potential benefits of the local food sector to the economy, the environment, communities and health in Scotland



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■ introduction

Food occupies a fundamental position in people's lives. Regardless of age, income, social standing, culture or religious belief, every individual has to eat and so has a stake in where their food comes from and how it is produced. But food adds much more to life – it is part of our heritage and shared meals are an important way to share our culture with family and friends.

Food therefore connects to many policy areas including the economy, health, social justice, sustainability, agriculture and rural development.

During the 1990s, a 'local food sector' emerged in the UK with a diverse range of organisations and businesses working to promote socially and environmentally sustainable food systems.

The importance of the sector is reflected in the Scottish Executive Partnership Agreement (2003) A Partnership for a Better Scotland:

- *We will encourage localised food distribution systems involving more local processing of produce.*
- *We will support local marketing schemes, with clear accreditation and labelling of local produce... and food produced by organic and sustainable farming methods.*
- *We will support regional marketing co-operatives where this is necessary to enhance the marketing strength of food producers.*

The following discussion paper considers the benefits of local food; identifies opportunities for development; highlights barriers and encourages action. It also asks important questions which are the basis for future discussion and action.



Sampling local cheeses
at a farmers market in
Portree

■ summary

Local food in Scotland impacts on four main policy areas: the economy, the environment, communities and health.

This discussion paper looks at each of these areas in turn, and highlights important questions for discussion.

In recent years, food and farming crises such as BSE and foot and mouth disease have raised concerns about the food we eat: where it comes from, how it is produced and how it affects us and the world around us. Increasing consumer enthusiasm for farmers markets and organic food are examples of a growing awareness of the importance of quality and choice as well as cost.

Over the past decade, the idea of a 'local food sector' has gained momentum and credibility. The case study examples in this paper highlight only some of the local food initiatives which have developed in Scotland.

There is clearly scope for developing the sector because of the wide-ranging and long-term benefits it can bring. These may include fresher and better quality food for consumers, less pollution, more money circulating in local economies, increased employment, opportunities to develop new skills, as well as the potential to add value and open up new markets.

Local food has moved up the policy agenda and the links between local food and sustainable development are increasingly recognised. However, there are some obstacles to developing the sector, many of which are economic and stem from a lack of local infrastructure. Also, because local food has an impact on four very diverse fields, there is no integrated policy to shape its development. Such policy would not only recognise the importance of the local food sector but would also act as an instrument for overcoming some of these obstacles.



Fresh local produce
supplied directly to
local markets

■ local food

There is no commonly accepted definition of 'local food'. It can be fresh produce, such as fruit, vegetables, fish and meat. It can be processed food such as cheese, bread and preserves. It can even be local if the final product is processed in the area, although constituent ingredients are from elsewhere. The source is important but other factors, such as quality, flavour and freshness, are also associated with 'local food'.

Recent food and farming crises such as BSE and foot and mouth disease have raised questions about farming methods, the food supply chain and the viability of the food system in Scotland. There are also concerns about the impact of food production on the environment and on our health. Debates about global markets, cost, quality and variety all foster this new interest in the way we eat, and consequently, the way we live.

The 'local food sector' is increasingly seen as encouraging many economic, social, environmental and health benefits. The recent increase in farmers markets is a good example of the contribution that the sector can make. For example:

- A wider range of foods produced in a sustainable way can increase biodiversity and maintain the countryside
- More people can access fresh food, particularly fruit and vegetables
- More local employment and less leakage from the local economy
- More physical activity associated with local food production
- Promotion of public health in its widest sense.

In 1999, the Soil Association set up the Food Futures programme, a three-year initiative to develop the local food economy in 11 different areas of the UKⁱⁱ. The programme worked with local communities to support and create community-based food growing and distribution schemes alongside local networks. In Scotland, Dumfries & Galloway, Forth Valley and Skye & Lochalsh were chosen as sites for Food Futures.

Forth Valley Food Links

Through a series of six workshops, which brought together individuals in central Scotland who had an interest in food issues, the Forth Valley Food Futures process highlighted a lack of diversity in local food

Craigend Farm near Stirling received a grant from Forth Valley Food Links enabling it to diversify into soft fruits. The farm's raspberry preserves are sold locally.



production, barriers

to access what local produce there was, and a need for comprehensive advice and information on ways to overcome these difficulties. Local people identified the need for a new food organisation in the area which would address these shortcomings and, with funding from the Scottish Executive, Forth Valley NHS Board

and Clackmannanshire, Falkirk and Stirling Councils, Forth Valley Food Links was born in 2002. With an office base in Stirling, three Food Links Officers are now working actively with commercial farmers, retailers, and community groups across the three council areas to increase the production, availability and consumption of local food for local people.



The experience of local initiatives suggests there is potential to develop a strong and well-supported local food sector in Scotland. However, taking action on local food involves more than local activity. It is a political issue which is influenced by local, national and international developments. It is shaped globally through the World Trade Organisation and within Europe by the Common Agricultural Policy. In Scotland, the policy agenda is clearly changing as a result of the Forward Strategy for Scottish Agricultureⁱⁱⁱ which recognises the need to shorten the food supply chain.

Discussion of local food issues is, therefore, timely.

local food key questions

- Should definitions of 'local food' be for specific purposes, such as trading standards, farmers markets or supermarket labelling?
- How can our food culture change towards one which values seasonality, local distinctiveness and less processed foods?
- Are consumers sufficiently informed about the health, quality, source and production methods of food so they can make better informed choices about the food they eat?
- How can motivated and dedicated individuals be supported in their involvement in local food initiatives?

ii Local Food Routes: A summary report of Food Futures (2001) The Soil Association, Bristol

iii www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/agri/fssa-00.asp

■ economy

Although it is difficult to measure the economic impact of the local food sector on the economy, as many initiatives are small scale and geographically scattered, experience indicates that there are benefits.

The food industry – production, processing, manufacture, distribution and retailing – is important to the economy. Much of this activity is in rural areas and so is of special importance to the rural economy.

Tourism is an important market for local foods with many farms diversifying and producing local food for the tourist trade. Connecting speciality food to tourism and the quality restaurant sector, as in Skye & Lochalsh, is likely to benefit local economies.

Food produced and sold locally usually reaches the final consumer through shorter marketing chains. When sold direct by the producer there is greater scope for a larger proportion of the consumer's pound to stay in the area rather than going to a producer or processor elsewhere^{iv}.

While adding value through local skilled processing, farm diversification or using existing local markets for direct sales keeps money circulating for longer in local economies. Significant amounts of produce may be sold locally through farm gate sales, home deliveries or farm shops. Economic potential may also lie in the integrity of the produce itself – responsibly produced, community-supported and health-sustaining food.

By using these local approaches, farms and other food producers may be more viable and less likely to be affected by external forces such as disease or currency fluctuation. This is also important for the survival and development of smaller-sized farms.

However, there are also economic barriers to supplying local food. These may include:

- Limited resources for promoting products – a serious issue for small and micro-businesses
- Gaps in local processing which, if rectified, could shorten supply chains and provide local outlets and jobs
- Lack of infrastructure can lead to insufficient volume of activity to sustain growth without subsidy, for example small throughput abattoirs
- Poor local food distribution networks and carriers favouring bulk deliveries
- Supply may not fit with demand, limiting access to markets for both producers and consumers.

There can also be problems with range, quantity, seasonality and regularity of supply. However, the Skye & Lochalsh Food and Drink Initiative, particularly its Food Link Van, is a good example of balancing supply and demand, for the benefit of both consumers and producers.

To date, advice and support to food companies has focused on the export market and adding value, reflecting the interests of the big, rather than the small players, who are more likely to be able to supply the local market. There is a dual challenge for the local food sector: to keep as much as possible of the food chain local whilst developing markets and exporting capacity.

Developing local food initiatives means engaging local enthusiasm and expertise as well as appealing to business self-interest. Dynamic, energetic individuals, sometimes volunteers, who are committed to the issues, drive many successful initiatives in the local food sector. However, commitment from business and consumers is also needed to allow the local market to develop^v. Business advice is important too. At a UK level, the Institute of Grocery Distributors (IGD)^{vi} publishes best practice guides on local sourcing and for small businesses supplying supermarkets. Business advice of this kind could be developed for the local food sector.

iv www.pluggingtheleaks.org

v Food projects and how they work: Pauline McGlone, Barbara Dobson, Elizabeth Dowler and Michael Nelson, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999

vi www.igd.com

■ economy key questions

- How are the infrastructure needs of local food processing and production best tackled?
- How can best practice be shared, businesses advised and cross-sectoral local initiatives developed?
- Should partnerships between large-scale retailers and the local food sector be encouraged?
- How can major public sector purchasers, such as health boards and local authorities, be encouraged to use more local produce in their catering departments?

Skye & Lochalsh Food Link Van

The Isle of Skye produces an abundance of fresh local food. However, only three years ago, it was easier to drive a lorry load of shellfish to Spain than to send a crateful of prawns across the bridge to Lochalsh. A delivery area of 2,700 square kilometres appeared to rule out a viable service, but with the help of a grant from Skye & Lochalsh Enterprise and the Scottish Community Diet Project, a local distribution service was piloted. Twice weekly,

the producer-led Food Link Van loads up cool boxes with freshly picked organic salads and vegetables together with shellfish straight from the sea. On the way to Portree, the van collects strawberries and free-range eggs before taking the long and winding road to collect cheese from the dairy in Lochalsh. The van then drops off orders to hotels, restaurants, shops and box scheme subscribers. Within three years, the Food Link Van has increased the volume of produce remaining in Skye & Lochalsh from £6,800 to £35,000. It has improved the local economy, promoted healthy eating,

helped the environment and built up community pride and confidence. Not just a local success story, the van was awarded the UK's Best New Local Food Initiative by the Mail on Sunday/Soil Association in 2001.

Farmers and producers supplying the Food Link Van, deliver to local consumers throughout Skye & Lochalsh



■ environment

The benefits of local food systems extend far beyond the marketplace. Fewer road miles, less packaging, environmentally friendly farming systems, stronger local economies and the preservation of regional specialities are all potential benefits that make for a healthier environment and population.

Consumers are increasingly concerned about how food is produced, including chemical use, rearing practice, animal welfare, biodiversity, quality, traceability, origin and the impact on their health. Local markets, farmers markets and direct sales provide an opportunity for these concerns to be listened to and acted on.

The Countryside Agency's Eat the View initiative in England^{vii} encourages links between environmentally-sound production and local food. This includes showing consumers that they can support the local countryside by choosing local products produced using sustainable methods.

The cost of conventionally produced food rarely reflects the external factors associated with producing it, for example acid rain or global warming resulting from pollution from transport. There are many environmental and consumer concerns linked to conventionally produced food. These include the use of irradiation, food additives and antibiotics; genetic engineering; or high levels of pesticides and chemical inputs. The local food sector generally aims to reject all of these. There is an increasing association between tourism, food and the environment. For example, a study commissioned by the Southern Uplands Partnership to investigate the potential for developing a 'green label' for the area concluded that linking sustainable production with local branding could provide opportunities to add value and make products more marketable^{viii}.

There is a need for more research into the environmental impact of food production, as well as clear policies to link biodiversity, pollution, food miles and wider sustainability issues. It is also important to share good practice from initiatives already developed.

■ environment key questions

- How can local food systems contribute to sustainable development?
- What would enable consumers to support local foods produced in an environmentally friendly way?

vii www.eat-the-view.org.uk

viii Review of Potential for Green Labelling in the Southern Uplands, RSK ERA Ltd for the Southern Uplands Partnership, 10 2002

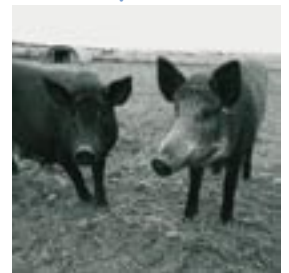
EarthShare

EarthShare, near Forres, is a not-for-profit community-supported agriculture scheme established in 1994, in which the subscribers share the risks and benefits involved in the growing of their food using organic methods. The organisation grows over 50 varieties of soft fruit and vegetables for distribution to some 200 families. Subscribers sign up to the scheme for a year and in return, they receive their share of the year's harvest in the form of a weekly box. There is a discount for any subscribers

who help with labour-intensive work such as weeding and soft fruit picking.

Healthy food is produced locally at cost price with no intermediary and minimal advertising and distribution costs. The weekly boxes

are taken to pick-up points in Findhorn, Forres or Elgin. Subscribers collect their own boxes and are encouraged to organise a rota to collect for their nearest neighbours. The scheme promotes recycling and general environmental awareness, organises regular social events and keeps subscribers up to date through notes in the weekly box and a newsletter, *The Onion String*. Subscribers say they benefit both from the fresh local produce and the opportunity to work on the land in harmony with nature and the changing seasons.



■ communities

Food is important to society in many ways. This is clearly demonstrated by the many community projects and initiatives which are tackling locally identified issues. However, there is a lack of policy which links local food to social need. The local food sector has the potential to alleviate social and economic disadvantage and the impact this has on business, diet and health. There is significant scope to increase the uptake of local food. With a co-ordinated approach, locally produced foods could be sold locally at affordable prices and still be profitable for the supplier. This would need greater co-operation among producers and better connections between suppliers and consumers.

Co-operative working associated with local food initiatives – such as developing project management skills, networking and building links with local colleges and the tourism sector – can make a valuable contribution to community development and social capital building.

An issue for remote rural communities is getting fresh local produce rather than centrally sourced food, which is often all that is available. Even in more urban areas, people may depend on a small corner shop with little fresh local produce. One way to expand the market is to convince local businesses that it makes good business sense to stock local, traceable produce.

Home food production is important for some, although allotments are relatively scarce in Scotland compared to England. Garden production of fruit and vegetables is geographically widespread, and is a significant source for some households. Traditional social pastimes, such as wild fruit harvesting, have declined in recent years, but others, such as gathering fungi, have increased.

Recent crises in food and farming have dented consumer confidence. Encouraging consumers to have direct contact with producers is one way to improve consumer confidence. Farmers markets, vegetable box schemes, community-supported agriculture and other forms of direct sales, are good examples of this.

■ communities key questions

- Which organisations are best placed to nurture and promote the local food sector at community level?
- How can access to existing local produce be improved to benefit consumers?

Knowetop Community Farm

Knowetop Community Farm was set up in 1980 in West Dumbarton to provide recreational, educational, and employment opportunities for people living in a deprived area.

The farm has since become a limited company; has grown from three huts to around twelve acres; is a registered SQA training



centre for horticulture and animal care; and a New Deal provider.

Schools make good use of the farm and its new educational unit. The vegetable garden sells produce directly to local residents and visitors.

Recent additions include a new shop, training room and indoor soft play area.



■ health

The local food sector can have positive benefits on health. Food can be fresher because it is nearer to its market and is likely to be less processed and therefore contain fewer additives.

There are also health benefits from increased physical activity (such as gardening or collecting wild food), increased social interaction (through involvement in the community), more self-worth and control, and the chance to share experiences with others.

Access to and availability of fruit and vegetables have been recognised for some time as key components of national and local health strategies. Community cafés and food co-operatives, often supported as part of health strategies, are increasingly aware of the benefits of using local produce so that people can eat fresh local food. People are more likely to support initiatives when they see a direct link with local producers.

People need to know more about food, nutrition and health. Young people may need to learn about raw ingredients as well as basic cooking skills. This means a fundamental change in attitude which sees eating well as better, and not just healthier.

The new Health Improvement (HI) directorate within the Health Department of the Scottish Executive indicates that policy makers regard health improvement as a major new crosscutting priority. Each department within the Scottish Executive now has to review how it interacts with and can contribute to improving the health of the people of Scotland. The HI framework will fit across multi-agency departmental business plans and this will mean a more integrated approach to addressing food and local food.

The connections between local food systems, social exclusion and health have not been quantified. Although the relationship between health and dietary behaviour is well known, the extent to which dietary problems can be addressed by local food (rather than changes in dietary and other behaviour such as exercise) is less clear. This is an area which needs further research.

■ health key questions

- How can local and national health strategies be connected to locally sourced food?
- What are the best methods of addressing the barriers of affordability, availability, culture and skills relating to accessing local food?



Renfrewshire Community Gardens

Renfrewshire Community Gardens involves nursery and school age children and disabled and elderly people active on 11 different sites. As part of the initiative, pupils at Moorpark Primary School in Renfrew have created their own vegetable garden. The

children have learned about planting, composting, recycling, and much more. They also harvest, prepare and cook their produce in the classroom so they can taste what they have grown. The work is supported by the local Sustainable Communities Project established to 'ground' Renfrewshire's Local Agenda 21 programme. The project has worked closely with the Scottish Executive's National Health Demonstration Project 'Have a Heart Paisley' and has won a COSLA Excellence Gold Award for Social Inclusion.



■ policy

■ current

While there are policies which support local food systems, these tend to sit within individual Scottish Executive departments involved in health, environment and rural affairs, enterprise and transport, or different agencies (such as NHS Health Scotland). So, although important, local food is not at the top of any specific agenda.

The Scottish Executive's Partnership Agreement (2003) recognises the importance of developing local food with an emphasis on the rural development context. The Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture gives strong direction on market identification and mentions shortening the food chain, adjustment, quality assurance and traceability. However, although clearly relevant, local food is not included.

Within the Scottish Executive, the Environment and Rural Affairs Department supports a range of agri-food marketing initiatives. This includes administering the Processing and Marketing grants schemes that support food producers, including those in the local food sector. The Executive also supports the Scottish Diet Action Plan, which notes that important groups of fresh food consumed in Scotland are also produced in Scotland, and recommends that action should be taken to stimulate consumer demand for the local product.

The Enterprise Networks generally focus on developing the food sector through developing markets and products and improved business performance. They play a key role in the industry-led Scottish Food and Drink Strategy. They do not regard 'localness' as a separate issue; its relevance lies in being part of the overall market.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise identifies 'local' as one of the markets to address for niche products and regional import substitution. It encourages producers to meet the demand for local sourcing from the tourism market as one way of addressing regional import substitutions.

Scottish Enterprise focuses on adding or retaining value and removing costs from the food chain. This means it will help food processors to keep their costs down, and encourage food processing to be done locally where possible.

Local authorities and Local Enterprise Companies are keen to promote local business development. Their efforts are not targeted particularly at local foods but at strengthening the local food industry through improved performance, skills and marketing. When this relates to local food, there is a strong link with tourism. They have scope to target local food production and processing, but this tends to focus on marketing these outwith rather than within the area. Some local public bodies and institutions promote the use of local produce in-house. However, this is constrained by tendering rules, range of produce available and continuity of supply.

The underlying pressure from the World Trade Organisation is to reduce barriers to trade in food products. Such trends will increase globalisation in the food industry and undermine local food systems.

■ moving forward

There are good reasons for developing the local food sector in Scotland because of the diverse and long-term benefits it could provide.

While there are isolated examples of highly effective partnerships encouraging local food systems, these are the exception. Lack of continuity, limited resources and fragmented policy impede progress. Integration and focus tends to be better at a local level, closer to the community where the benefits arise, and where dynamic individuals are able to reduce the barriers to change. A cohesive approach is now needed.

The policy agenda is changing as a result of the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy which, for the first time, will link payments for food production to compliance with standards covering

environment, public health and animal health. It also recognises the economic, social and environmental role of agriculture in rural development. These policy changes should provide an opportunity to develop the local food sector.

A Scottish Executive commitment to integrate economic, social, health and environmental policies for food could assist the local food sector. Agencies related to agriculture, enterprise, communities, environment and transport need to work together to best effect. Current mainstream agricultural policy supports food exports but could provide more support to local marketing. Incentives and subsidies are mainly directed at conventional food production (especially at farm level) but could be more focused on the local food economy.

In England, there has been some success in joining up food and local food agendas. After foot and mouth, and following the Policy Commission Report into Food and Farming^{ix} the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has taken a lead in developing a crosscutting food group which integrates the agendas and includes a working group on local food^x.

Despite the challenges, there is a clear opportunity for the local food sector to grow. Local food is moving up the policy agenda and the links between local food and the economy, communities, environment, and health are more clearly evident. An integrated, evidence-based approach will put the local food sector on a strong foundation. The time is now right for a full discussion of the issues and to develop a framework for action.

■ policy key questions

- What information is needed to measure the impact of food production on health, environment, economy and community?
- How can all the relevant groups work individually and collectively at all levels to maximise the potential benefits of the local food sector in Scotland?

ix Farming and Food: A Sustainable Future, The Policy Commission, 2002

x Local Food – A Snapshot of the Sector, Report of the Working Group on Local Food, DEFRA, March 2003

■ further information

scotland

FSA Scotland	www.foodstandards.gov.uk
Forth Valley Food Links	www.forthvalleyfoodlinks.org.uk
Highlands and Islands Enterprise	www.hie.co.uk
Mull & Iona Community Partnership	www.mict.co.uk
NHS Health Scotland	www.healthscotland.com
Scottish Association of Farmers' Markets	www.scottishfarmersmarkets.co.uk
Scottish Community Diet Project	www.dietproject.org.uk
Scottish Consumer Council	www.scotconsumer.org.uk
Scottish Executive – Healthy Living	www.healthyliving.gov.uk
Scottish Food and Drink	www.scottishfoodanddrink.com
Soil Association Scotland	www.soilassociationscotland.org
Southern Upland Partnership	www.sup.org.uk
Skye and Lochalsh Food Link	www.skyefoodlink.co.uk

england and wales

Bucks & Milton Keynes Food Group	www.buckscc.gov.uk
Calderdale & Kirklees Food Futures	www.foodfutures.org.uk
Countryside Agency: Eat the View Campaign	www.eat-the-view.org.uk
Devon Food Links	www.devonfoodlinks.org.uk
Dorset Food Links	www.dorsetfoodlinks.co.uk
East Anglia Food Link	www.eafl.org.uk
East Sussex Food & Health Partnership	www.foodandhealth.org.uk
Forest Food Links	www.gafm.org
Foundation for Local Food Initiatives (f3)	www.localfood.org.uk
Gloucestershire Food Links	www.gafm.org
Herefordshire Food Links	www.greengate.org.uk
London Food Links	www.londonfoodlink.org
National Association of Farmers' Markets	www.farmersmarkets.net
Nottingham Food Initiatives Group	www.foodfig.org.uk
Oxfordshire Food Group	www.oxfordshirelocalfood.info
Rural Regeneration Unit	www.rru.org.uk
Somerset Food Links	www.somerset.foodlinks.org.uk
South West Local Food Partnership	www.southwestfoodlinks.org

united kingdom

Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens	www.farmgarden.org
Food Links UK	www.foodlinks-uk.org/index.asp
Henry Doubleday Research Association	www.hdra.org.uk
Institute of Grocery Distributors (IGD)	www.igd.com
New Economics Foundation (Plugging the Leaks)	www.neweconomics.org
The Royal Horticultural Society	www.rhs.org.uk
Soil Association Local Food Works	www.localfoodworks.org
Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food & Farming	www.sustainweb.org



This paper has been compiled by a partnership of the former Scottish Food Futures programme areas, NHS Health Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Community Diet Project, the Scottish Consumer Council, Scottish Executive Health and Environment & Rural Affairs Departments and Scottish Natural Heritage. It is based on a review of the local food sector in Scotland commissioned on behalf of the partners by NHS Health Scotland.*



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