



Good Food - the report from the 2021vSRP Session on 16th March 2021

Session curated by the [Highland Good Food Partnership](#) and Scottish Rural Action and chaired by **Professor Julie Fitzpatrick**, Scientific Director of the [Moredun Research Institute](#) and Chair in Food Security in the College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

Julie welcomed delegates, introducing herself as the co-Chair of the Scottish Food Commission which from 2015 to 2018 helped build significant momentum around the [Good Food Nation policy discussion](#) in Scotland. 2021 will see the passage of a Good Food Nation Bill through the Scottish Parliament.

The purpose of the 2021vSRP session was:

1. To explore how rural and island communities and businesses are leading the way in establishing Scotland as a good food nation.
2. To identify action that will enable rural and island communities to nurture and develop local/micro good food production and distribution and ensure good food is accessible to all.

Summary of Presentations

The scene was set by **three delegates of the Scottish Rural Youth Parliament** and who outlined their vision for Scotland as a Good Food Nation in 2025. Their presentation touched on:

- good local food being locally available and affordable
- food and food production/preparation being a core part of the curriculum
- accessible and relevant opportunities to develop skills in local food production and to build a career in agriculture, horticulture, processing and retail
- agriculture being small-scale and using techniques in harmony with nature
- food production aligned with tackling climate change, contributing to biodiversity and social justice

They were followed by **Emma Whitham**, founder of [MOO Food](#) and coordinator of the [Highland Good Food Partnership](#), presented an overview of the Highland Good Food Conversation (HGFC) movement:

- The Highland Good Food Partnership started two years ago as a grassroots movement to identify how communities could make access to good, local food 'the norm' rather than a luxury.

- The Conversation itself had three stages – stage 1 saw the launch of a website and podcast campaign; stage 2 brought people together in a structured series of events and workshops to create an action plan to help realise a vision of ‘a food system that is better for people, better for the planet and better for food producers’. Stage 3 involves taking forward the action plan.
- The action plan includes creating a Highland-wide farmers market and growers’ network, the establishment of a circular food waste economy and building a ‘thriving glasshouse sector’. Dedicated teams are taking forward the development of these projects. Where they end up will be down to their energy and direction – [watch this space!](#)
- Emma highlighted the **importance of promoting diversity in all aspects of the food system** – diversity of seeds, plants and animals; diversity of land use and types of farms; diversity in retail etc. With diversity comes greater resilience.
- She also highlighted the **need for collaborACTION**. The HGFC has attracted diverse participation, from farmers to producers and food activists to retailers and health professionals. It generated greater understanding of the degree of connectivity and mutual dependence between stakeholders and of the need for collaboration to change the food system. The ACTION bit is crucially important. As an illustrative wake-up call - the volume of vegetables grown in this country barely scratches the surface of what we, the population, needs for our five-a-day. As well as collaborating on action plans, now is the time to put those plans in motion.

Emma was followed by **Nikki Brown**, co-owner of [Shellfield Farm](#) which is a 2,500 acre hill farm in Argyll.

- Shellfield has mixed livestock - cattle, sheep and pigs as well as chickens and ducks. The land is rugged West Coast croft land with little topsoil. There are no large sheds or enclosures so farming takes place outdoors, on a small scale and at subsistence level.
- Shellfield has had to **diversify to survive**. Nikki and her partner installed a hydro in 2013 to generate income through selling electricity to the national grid. In 2014, they also invested in a fully branded catering stall, selling lamb and beef burgers at events across Scotland and parts of England. Covid-19 impacted on this element of the business but another element – a commercial kitchen and butchery, which was built to help expand the private catering business– thrived during lockdown.
- Nikki and her partner further diversified into producing a menu of ready-made meals - high quality home cooking using local ingredients. Demand has sky-rocketed, and they are now hoping to recruit a full time chef.
- It has taken nine years to build a business model that comfortably makes ends meet. Business Gateway has been a good source of support and LEADER funding, though enormously bureaucratic, has been pivotal to the success of the venture. The diversification strategy helped the farm survive the pandemic, demonstrating the resilience of micro food initiatives that are flexible and quite to adapt to changing circumstances.

Kate McDonald from [North Uist Distillery](#) spoke next and offered insights into the development of the business she runs with her partner in the Outer Hebrides:

- Both Kate and her partner wanted to return to live on the island. Their vision was to set up a business that would be fun, creative and allow them to make a decent living. It took them five years to prepare the ground. Kate’s partner completed an MSc in Brewing & Distilling, and Kate developed the creative and marketing side of the business.
- They have kicked off with a gin launch but have plans to move to whisky production at some point.
- Despite the long lead-in time, **setting up a business in a rural community brings a lot of positives including the backing of the local people** and other local businesses. North Uist Distillery uses heather as one of the botanicals in the gin and have a barter system going – if people harvest heather for the

Distillery, they get paid back in gin. The same applies if people harvest brambles. Batches are named after the places where the harvesting took place. It gets local people involved in the process and fosters a sense of community spirit and celebration.

- Challenges include finding a space big enough to house your production. North Uist Distillery has recently bought a steading which will offer enough space to make the whisky, but these kinds of properties are rare. Kate advised to dream big but start where you can!
- Covid-19 has impacted on the Distillery. Kate and her partner were planning to be on the mainland on a promotional tour which had to be cancelled but the move to a digital retail model has proven beneficial. Also beneficial is the fact that skills development training previously sourced from the mainland can now be accessed online.
- The Distillery used its small size and agility to the community's benefit during the pandemic, temporarily switching production from gin to hand sanitiser and distributing food & drink parcels.

The final presenter was **Kate Rowell**, farmer and Chair of [Quality Meat Scotland](#), the levy body of meat in Scotland. Kate chose to focus her presentation on highlighting the issues with food production infrastructure:

- The pandemic saw an upsurge in demand for local food. Local shops, butchers and farm stores have seen a huge increase in their customer base. Covid-19 has been an accelerator for the 'grow local, buy local' movement.
- While it is easy for vegetable producers to take advantage of this, the infrastructure required to produce other forms of food or drink - dairy and meat in particular - is lacking at local level. Abattoirs are a particular problem.
- In 1930s the UK had over 30,000 abattoirs compared to 250 today. Only 25 abattoirs operate in Scotland with six or seven of them serving smaller farms and crofts. There are well documented challenges in setting up abattoirs, both micro and mobile, including high capital costs, increasing regulations, constraints with waste disposal and a dwindling skilled workforce.
- However, the opportunities in terms of creating local food systems, reducing food miles, improving animal welfare and evidencing local provenance are equally well documented. Instead of using a business lens (or profit lens), **abattoirs and other food processing plants, such as canneries and food waste management sites, should be regarded as basic community infrastructure.**

All four presenters and the Chair debated the **tension between maximising productivity and supporting diversity**. Three points were agreed on:

- It is time to do things differently. It is easier to balance productivity and diversity if you move away from large-scale enterprises and instead support a model based on a larger number of smaller farms each with their own distinct business strategies.
- It is also time to value things differently. Productivity is not just about generating large amounts of food or profits. It is also about increasing biodiversity, water quality and human and animal health. Smaller farms will find it easier to adapt to new approaches that ensure productivity on all outcomes – economic, social and environmental.
- **Skills development** for the food and drinks industry must focus on meeting the needs of small scale business and locally-rooted businesses and community enterprises. Echoing the Youth parliament delegates,

Discussion Points

- Scotland is in an incredibly strong position to become more self-sufficient in producing its own food. Large scale producers and retailers have a role to play in furthering this agenda but much also depends on supporting the contributions of micro and community food initiatives. **Decentralisation of production, if well planned and resourced, can lead to diversification and increased accessibility of good food.**
- The workshop groups explored what good food looks like locally:
 - As low food miles as possible; as organic and unprocessed as possible
 - Affordable but also supporting local producers to sell at a fair price
 - **Circular food economies and zero waste initiatives**
 - Opportunities for community involvement in growing food and sharing meals
 - Easy **access to land** for micro businesses supporting youth enterprise and for community food initiatives
 - Animal welfare, environmental and human wellbeing at its heart
- They also looked at action which would support the development of local rural and island food systems. Much discussion centred around the need to push on with the **land reform agenda** and also the review of **crofting legislation and the role of the Crofting Commission** in managing township development plans and preventing crofts from falling into disuse. Linked to this, the development of the **National Planning Framework** must be fully aligned with the Good Food Nation policy agenda.
- Delegates called for a **marine land reform agenda** with a view to ensuring the ‘good food’ discussion is inclusive of micro and social aquaculture and fishing enterprises.
- A lot is being done at policy level but the reality for small scale rural community and business endeavours is that policy does not enable them to maximise contribution to agenda. Small scale and community food production initiatives get limited subsidies/funding and struggle to survive – the economics do not make sense. There was a call for increased (non-bureaucratic) **funding** for business and community food initiatives, as part of a coordinated national investment package which integrates **wrap-around support**, including training and mentoring, for those looking to begin growing, processing or retailing food and drinks.
- Equally, investment in **regional networks of producers, retailers, activists and consumers**, was seen as critical to build momentum for coordinated local action while at the same time, would help share information on what kind of projects, methods etc. work best in different geographies and spaces. Delegates shared advice within the workshops of local initiatives using glasshouses, polytunnels, poly-cribs etc.
- Such a network could potentially also support **cooperative purchasing arrangements** for small food producers as well as increase opportunities for **cooperative selling arrangements** e.g. creating local delivery systems that could dovetail with delivery of post, people and other small freight or setting up in-person and online farmers markets and **community food hubs**.
- **Incentives for big supermarkets** to work with local small-scale food producers are required, acknowledging that supermarket chains will face challenges in taking on a large number of diverse

suppliers. Similarly, **public procurement** for food tenders must be simplified. Councils and other statutory providers need to spend their food budgets much more effectively.

- We need to ramp up the conversation about **nutritional equity** while at the same time stop apologising for how much high quality local food costs. The **human right to good food** should be enshrined in Scots law.
- At UK Government level, **trade deals with major agricultural producers and exporters** such as Australia, New Zealand and the USA must be negotiated on principles of protecting the UK's small farms and safeguarding animal welfare and the global environment.

Summary recommendations

The summary recommendations is available as separate document.