Keeping Food Local: a remote challenge

Presentation to Meeting of Cross Party Group on Rural Policy
Scottish Parliament, Holyrood
16th November 2022

Professor David Marshall (UoE),
Professor Paul Freathy, Dr. Keri Davies, Dr. Eric Calderwood (UoS)
The Universities of Edinburgh and Stirling have examined the patterns of consumption, purchase behaviour and access to retail provision amongst Scottish island residents.

Findings have included:

- The spatial concentration of retailing and structural deficiencies in the transport infrastructure has impacted upon food access.
- Rural residents accessed food via online platforms, use local stores or travel to the main towns to undertake their primary shop.
- Remote communities remain resilient and adaptive in the face of specific challenges around food access.
- Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) award to examine the role of the informal food economy/network.
Crofting / Home production-sales

- Croft ownership widespread but limited commercial crofting (hard work for little financial return, paid employment essential for many);
- Many crofts produce for themselves, but short season and poor soil - amount of food sold/bartered/gifted (gluts) is “insignificant”;
- Eggs, milk, veg, bakery, sheep (fattened & slaughtered on mainland), fish, tweed / garment production and tourism (e.g. holiday rental/pods);
- Certain crofting skills are being lost/not being passed on (cultivation/home slaughter/butchering).
Local Markets / Stalls

- Seasonal markets, restricted trading hours, small independent traders;
- Includes local produce, may be combined with a box/home delivery scheme/social media;
- Some markets focused upon tourists rather than locals;
Community Co-operatives / Social Enterprises

- Seen as a response to spatial concentration of retailing and structural deficiencies in the transport infrastructure;
- Flexibility over price, range and stocking policy;
- Can choose to source from local as well as national suppliers (reliant on mainland supply and distribution networks);
Bùth Bharraigh - a community social enterprise

Strong sense of ‘community’ with a range of services (laundry, gift shop, museum);
Commitment to local producers (sourcing & labelling)
Community Gardens

- Educationally / socially focused on wellbeing often around growing plants, fruit and vegetables;
- Sell plants/seeds but limited selection of vegetables and fruit for sale;
- Limited scalability or capacity to meet volume demand (polycrub);
Food Banks

- ‘Lots of hidden poverty’ on the islands
- Food banks focused upon well-being and the supply of basic foodstuffs (food waste) not much local produce;
- Discretion and respect for the individual important (delivery service);
Local Grocery Retail

Vary from “excellent & innovative” to “poor and expensive”.
General support of independently managed stores and some evidence of local produce
Main source of supply came through the Co-op RDC;
National Grocery Retail

- Customer support due to range, availability and quality of produce;
- Different views on price;
- Co-op supports Nisa and local independents;
- Delivery slot up to 1 month in advance for those outside the urban area.
The remote challenge

- Reasonably good retail food provision but variable ‘local’ provision in the conventional market and a reliance of island residents upon national grocery multiples creating a degree of vulnerability to a wide range of market externalities.

- Limited evidence of informal provision in terms of growing/producing and gifting food in established networks – decline in ‘traditional localism’.

- Examples of good local/informal food networks but these are ‘complimentary’............
Thank you

Related research:


