

## The Highland Council

### Planning, Development And Infrastructure Committee

14 May 2014

#### Establishing a Local Food Network

#### Report by Director of Development and Infrastructure

Agenda Item	20
Report No	PDI 17/14

#### SUMMARY

This report provides brief feedback on work undertaken by consultants Rural Analysis Associates on behalf of The Highland Council and the Think Local Community Food Fund. The consultants undertook consultations investigating the potential for developing an industry-led local food and drink network that could co-ordinate and drive future activities to support the sector in the Highlands. A copy of the full report can be found on the Committee bulletin. Committee is invited to:

- note the outcomes of the recent consultancy project and the support that exists for the establishment of a virtual local food network in the Highlands; and
- approve the recommendation to begin discussions with Moray Council, Business Gateway colleagues, HIE, Highland Opportunity Ltd and Think Local with a view to establishing a Highland and Moray Local Food Network at the earliest opportunity.

#### 1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) have supported the development of local food networks and initiatives throughout Highland region over the last decade. However, there has been very little real drive or ownership from the sector itself; and co-ordination at a regional level ended with the demise of Highlands & Islands Local Food Network (HILFN) in 2009. Current arrangements are fragmented and there is no central point of contact. Highland Council nevertheless remains committed to development of the sector and has an action “to promote and support local food production” in its Programme for 2012-2017. HIE is now focussed on its Account Managed businesses and has no remit to provide sectoral support for local food although it does support the annual Highlands and Islands Food and Drink Awards.

1.2 There are a few local food networks operating throughout the region; they tend to work independently of one another and levels of activity generally relate to the enthusiasm of a few dedicated volunteers. Inverness and Cairngorms Farmers Markets remain active and several community markets have developed more recently. Highland Council has been one of the pioneering local authorities to promote the procurement of local produce for schools meals and has secured Food For Life standards with its Catering Service.

1.3 Highland Council and other stakeholders are conscious of the void left by HILFN and recognise that there is a deficit of engagement, communication and support. The Council, in association with Rural Analysis Associates, carried out considerable background research prior to submitting the bid for this project. This showed that there was not a readily transferrable regional food group model that would suit the region, and the Council therefore applied to the Community Food Fund to seek a creative approach to address the issues pertinent to the region.

## 2 **The Project**

2.1 It was recognised that careful consideration would need to be given to establishing any network capable of co-ordinating and supporting the development of local food interests in Highland. Highland is different from most other regions in that:

- it covers a huge geographical area and communities are dispersed;
- it tends to have geographical groupings as opposed to common interest groups;
- local food groupings and networks have become semi-dormant; and
- there is a lack of finished products.

2.2 Many farmers and crofters in Highland are small scale and artisan producers and supporting and enabling them to make more local produce available to residents and visitors to the region is important.

A review of current activity throughout Scotland, and research with partner organisations, suggested that innovative solutions are required to address a range of issues. The challenges that appear to face other food networks and fora throughout Scotland which are also pertinent to the Highland area are:

- financial sustainability;
- volunteer fatigue;
- less interest in networking per se; and
- the need for activities to be commercially meaningful.

2.3 Bearing these differences and challenges in mind, the purpose of this project was to investigate the appetite for developing an industry-led network that could co-ordinate and drive future activities to support the sector in the Highland region. It was agreed at the outset that such a network, if desired by the industry, would need to be inclusive and relevant, and add profitability to its members. Notably, the project was designed to build capacity whilst it was being conducted by encouraging any immediate ideas to come to fruition and to ensure that any enthusiasm for action was supported.

2.4 It was recognised at the outset that considerable development work was required to engage the different areas of the region, establish their needs, and ask for their views on the need for and best structure of any pan-Highland grouping.

### 3 **Consultation**

- 3.1 Two electronic stakeholder consultations were issued in October 2013 that aimed to investigate business needs and identify barriers to growth, as well as identifying those interested in being involved in a food network. The surveys were designed to be quick to complete, and cover key criteria. One survey was for producers and the other was for local food providers - those involved in procuring food and drink in the Highlands, i.e. hospitality businesses, wholesalers, processors, distributors, local shops, etc.
- 3.2 The surveys were promoted through Highland Council's Environmental Health team who sent the survey links initially to all those on their database email and later by a post (approximately 300 producers and 1200 non-producers). The surveys were also promoted through Scotland Food and Drink e-bulletins, Highlands & Islands Food & Drink Forum LinkedIn group, Plunkett Foundation, Cairngorms National Park and Scottish Agriculture Organisations Society (SAOS). The surveys were also promoted via the Council's Facebook and Twitter pages and in press releases throughout the survey period.
- 3.3 A series of 8 local meetings were also held, aiming to reach as many remote, peripheral and micro-producers and providers as possible. These open meetings were held between October 2013 and February 2014 in:
- Portree, Skye
  - Torlundy, Fort William, Lochaber
  - Poolewe, Wester Ross
  - Thurso, Caithness
  - Dornoch, SE Sutherland
  - Lochinver, NW Sutherland
  - Dingwall, Easter Ross
  - Grantown on Spey, Badenoch and Strathspey

### 4. **Findings**

- 4.1 The combination of electronic surveys and local meetings enabled consultants to engage with over 250 local food producers and providers in Highland, and provided a credible source of information and data on which to recommend the direction of future support.
- 4.2 A key finding from the consultation is that there is keen demand for local produce in all areas of Highland. The demand from providers of local food and drink is frustrated by the real difficulties experienced in attempting to source local produce through a combination of factors not least of which is a lack of knowledge of what is actually available locally.
- 4.3 From the producers perspective the main issue emerging is difficulty in identifying and accessing local outlets for their products, with distribution also a key concern. The majority of producers that were contacted were small owner-operated businesses with limited time and resources to seek and develop markets, and so were generally not readily visible to food and drink providers looking for local

produce.

- 4.4 It is clear from the findings that one of the main barriers to raising the profile and accessibility of local food and drink in Highland is the lack of effective communication and linkages within the sector, principally connections between the producers and the providers of local produce. It is not surprising therefore that 68% of providers and 86% of producers (from the surveys) said that they would be interested in being actively involved in a network or forum to support local food and drink businesses.
- 4.5 Having explored various options at the meetings the favoured model to tackle the key issue of communication is considered to be the establishment of a **virtual network** using **social media**. This approach, combined with 'meet the buyer' and other promotional events, offers the most effective and sustainable way forward to support local food and drink businesses in Highland, and is strongly preferred to the more traditional network approach based on periodic meetings and very real concern expressed about setting up another 'talking shop'.
- 4.6 As a result of the findings and in order to maintain the momentum created by the surveys and the local meetings, pilot Facebook and Twitter pages have already been set up and are being actively managed to support local food and drink businesses in Highland. However further and ongoing commitment is required from the public sector to help promote the virtual network, and to bring forward some of the suggested events to provide real commercial benefits to small businesses in the Highlands.

## 5 **Next Steps**

### 5.1 Managing the virtual network

The project has demonstrated the appetite for a virtual network to be established and actively managed primarily to improve contact between producers and potential buyers and promote local businesses and events. Active input, management and promotion are essential to the success of the Facebook and Twitter accounts. During the first month of the Facebook page and Twitter account 635 interactions took place. At the time of writing the Facebook page had 353 likes and the Twitter account 235 followers. Although the main source of activity is around Inverness, Elgin and Forres within the Moray Council area also feature.

### 5.2 Social Media training for food and drink businesses

Since the launch of the social media sites and the social media workshop in Dingwall, several businesses have been in touch to ask if they too could get some training in social media. This demand could be met locally through Business Gateway or HIE Account Managers, or could be rolled out as a legacy action from this project.

### 5.3 Facilitating activities and events

Many suggestions for local events and activities have come forward at the local meetings and there is an opportunity to tailor these to suit producers, buyers, the

support sector and the hospitality sector.

#### 5.4 Establishing a network

There are a number of options to be considered when establishing and organising a virtual network of this type. At this stage and given the interest in local food within the Moray Council area it is suggested that Committee agrees that a local food network should be established and that discussions now begin with Moray Council, Business Gateway, Highland Opportunity Ltd, HIE and Think Local about how this can best be achieved. In the first instance the Network should be established for 2 years with a mid-term review at the end of the first year of operation.

### 6 **Implications**

#### 6.1 Resource

There are no additional resource implications arising from this paper. A partnership approach will be taken to the formation of a Highland and Moray Local Food Network and any financial resources required will be allocated from within existing Development and Infrastructure revenue budgets during 2014/2015 and 2015/2016.

#### 6.2 Legal, Equalities, Climate Change/Carbon Clever, Risk and Gaelic

There are no direct legal, equalities, climate change, risk or Gaelic implications arising from this paper.

### **Recommendation**

Committee is invited to:

- note the outcomes of the recent consultancy project and the support that exists for the establishment of a virtual local food network in the Highlands; and
- approve the recommendation to begin discussions with Moray Council, Business Gateway colleagues, HIE, Highland Opportunity Ltd and Think Local with a view to establishing a Highland and Moray Local Food Network at the earliest opportunity.

Designation: Director of Development and Infrastructure

Date: 28<sup>th</sup> April 2014

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#### Background papers

Establishing a Highland Food Network – A report for think Local, Community Food Fund.  
Rural Analysis Associates: April 2014.