Establishing a Highland Food Network

A Report for Think Local, Community Food Fund

by

RURAL ANALYSIS ASSOCIATES

www.ruralanalysis.com

April 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Highland Council with the support of the Think Local Community Food Fund, set up this project to investigate the potential and appetite for developing an industry-led local food and drink network that could co-ordinate and drive future activities to support the local food and drink sector in the Highland region.

To gather views from the industry and test current thinking two separate electronic surveys were issued, the first to **producers of local food** and the second to the **providers of local food** (hospitality businesses, local shops, wholesalers, processors, distributors, etc.). Alongside the surveys we ran a series of local meetings in 8 locations throughout Highland to validate and discuss the emerging survey results, and to explore ideas on future activities to support businesses working in this sector.

The combination of electronic surveys and local meetings enabled us to engage with over 250 local food producers and providers in Highland, and has provided a credible source of information and data on which to recommend the direction of future support.

A key finding from our research is that there is keen demand for local produce in all areas of Highland. This stated 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.

From the producers perspective the main issue emerging was the difficulty in identifying and accessing local outlets for their products, with distribution also a key concern. The majority of producers that we 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.

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.

Having explored various options at the meetings the favoured model to tackle the key issue of communication was considered to be the establishment of a **virtual network** using **social media**. This approach combined with 'meet the buyer' and other promotional events was deemed to offer the most effective and sustainable way forward to support local food and drink businesses in Highland, and was strongly preferred to the more traditional network approach based on periodic meetings and very real concern expressed about setting up another 'talking shop'.

As a result of our findings and in order to maintain the momentum created by the surveys and the local meetings, Facebook and Twitter pages have already been set up and are being actively managed to support local food and drink businesses in Highland. Further 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.

CONTENTS

1.0 Background

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.

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.

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.

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.

Many of the 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.

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.

2.0 – Research and Consultation

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.

In October 2013 we launched two electronic stakeholder consultations 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 analyzable on 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.

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 postal mailing (approximately 300 producers and 1200 non-producers). The surveys were also promoted through Scotland Food and Drink ebulletins, Highlands & Islands Food & Drink Forum LinkedIn group, Plunkett Foundation, Cairngorms National Park and SAOS. The surveys were also promoted via the Council's Facebook and twitter pages and in press releases throughout the survey period (see Annex 1).

We also held 8 local meetings, 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

They were advertised in the local press (see Annex 1) and anyone with an interest in local food was invited to attend. We also promoted the meeting through flyers sent to Highland Council Ward Managers, venue hosts, community councils, and those who had already responded to our survey.

The meetings were structured to:

- enable business to business contact
- promote our surveys and present and validate our survey findings to date
- seek business needs/training and introduce Business Gateway
- present information on what other networks do and thereby highlight future opportunities
- ultimately, determine the need for a (local) network/interface and what it should achieve.

All attendees who signed the meeting register were emailed a summary of the key points captured at the meeting. These summaries can be found at Annex 2.

A database of both producers and local food providers has been created from those who responded to the survey and those who attended to the meetings. This comprises approximately 250 producers and providers.

3.0 – Survey Findings

The electronic surveys were open over a 7-month period from September 2013 to March 2014. There was an increase in the number of responses received following the emailing from Highland Council's Environmental Health Service (EHS) in October 2013 with responses from 47% (55) of the local food users and providers and 39% (25) of producers during October 2013. Smaller spikes in responses were seen after the local meetings, and again in March 2014 following a postal reminder included in an EHS circular.

The survey findings were presented at the local meetings for verification throughout the survey period and any comments from the meetings are included below.

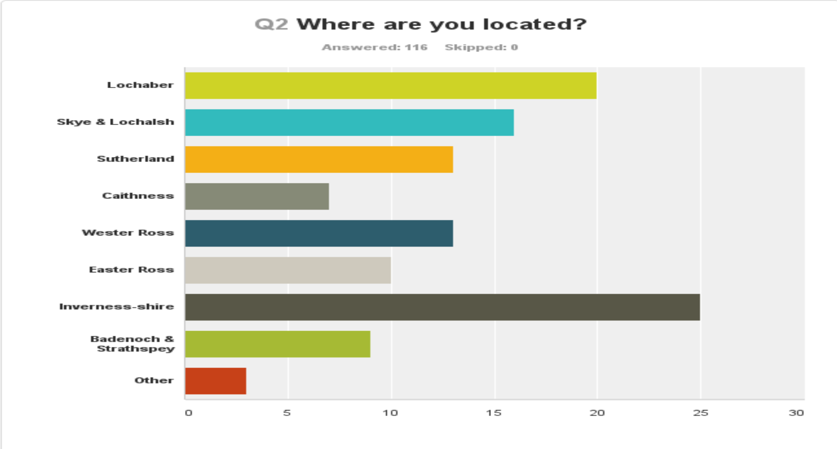
3.1 Local Food Users and Providers

A total of 116 surveys were completed.

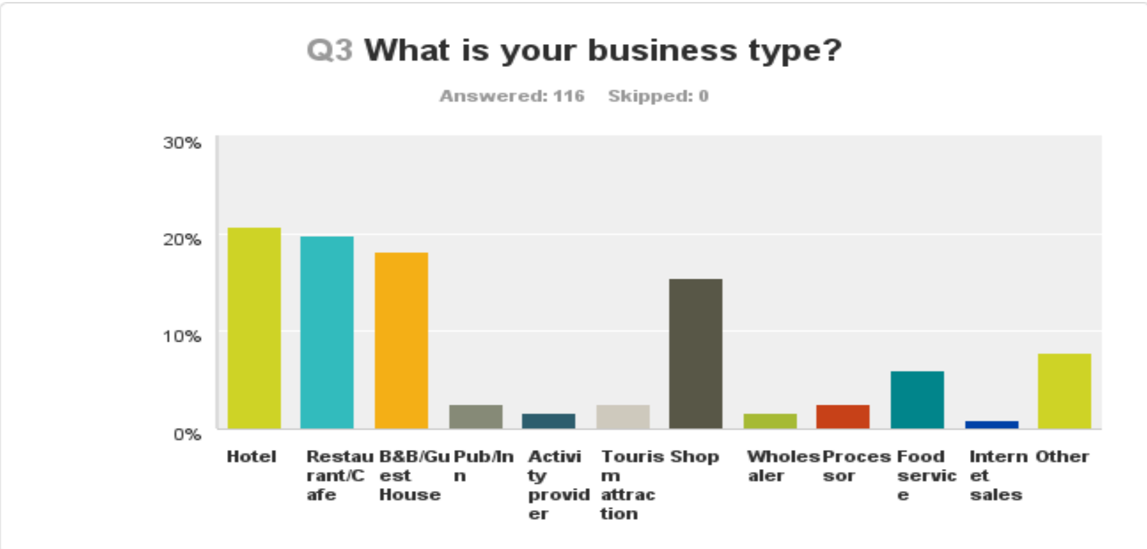
The first question asked for business name and contact details so that these could be used to create a database to send further information on the project meetings and any outcomes arising from the project.

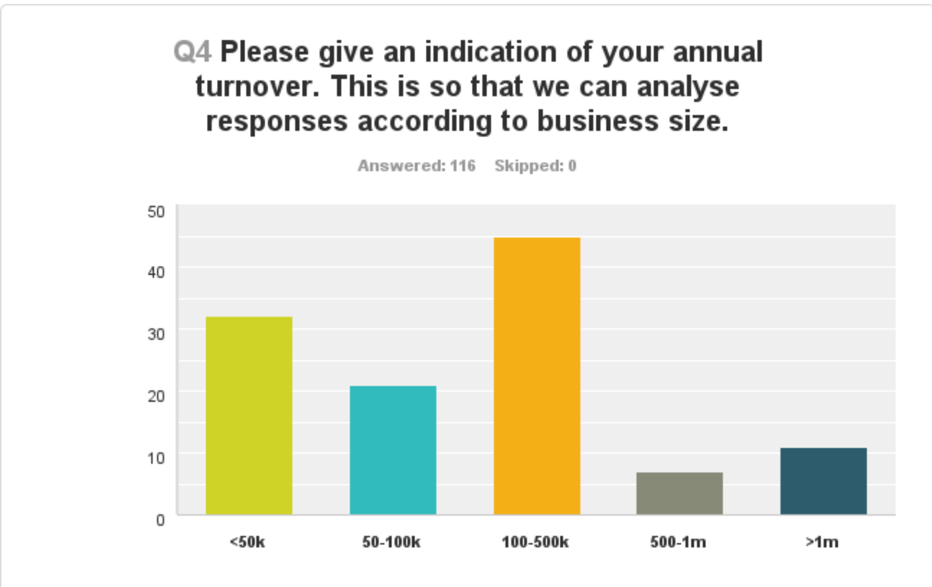
As the table and chart below shows, the highest proportion of respondees (25 in total, 22%) are located in Inverness-shire, 17% in Lochaber and 14 % in Skye and Lochalsh.

Location	% of respondees
Inverness-shire	22
Lochaber	17
Skye & Lochalsh	14
Sutherland	11
Wester Ross	11
Easter Ross	9
Badenoch & Strathspey	8
Caithness	6
Moray/Nairn	3



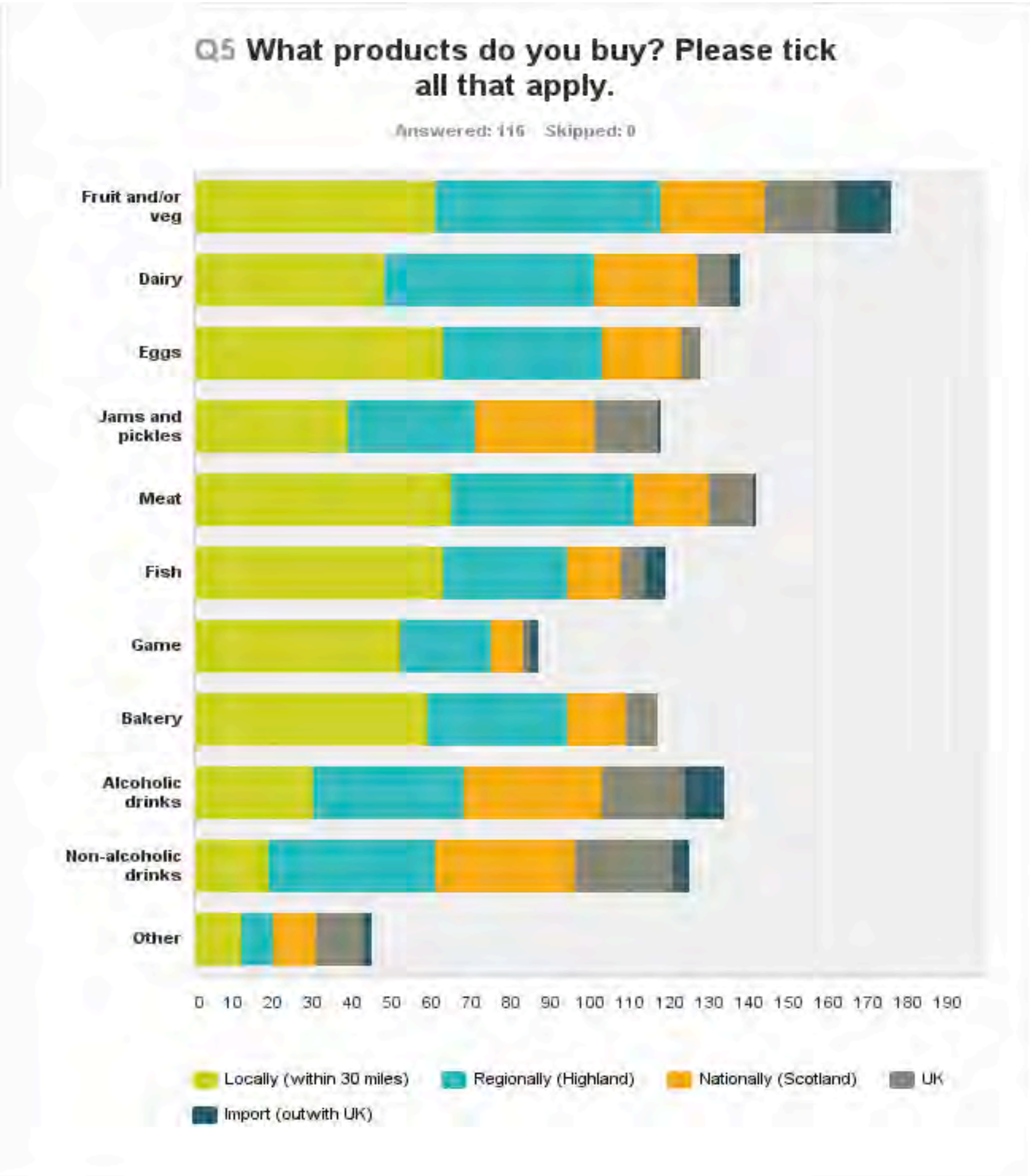
Forty eight (41%) of respondees were from a hotel, B&B/guest house or pub/inn, with an additional 23 (20%) being from restaurants. A significant proportion (16%) was from shops. Nine responses came from "other" businesses including a church/community centre, a residential care home, mobile catering vans and bespoke caterers.

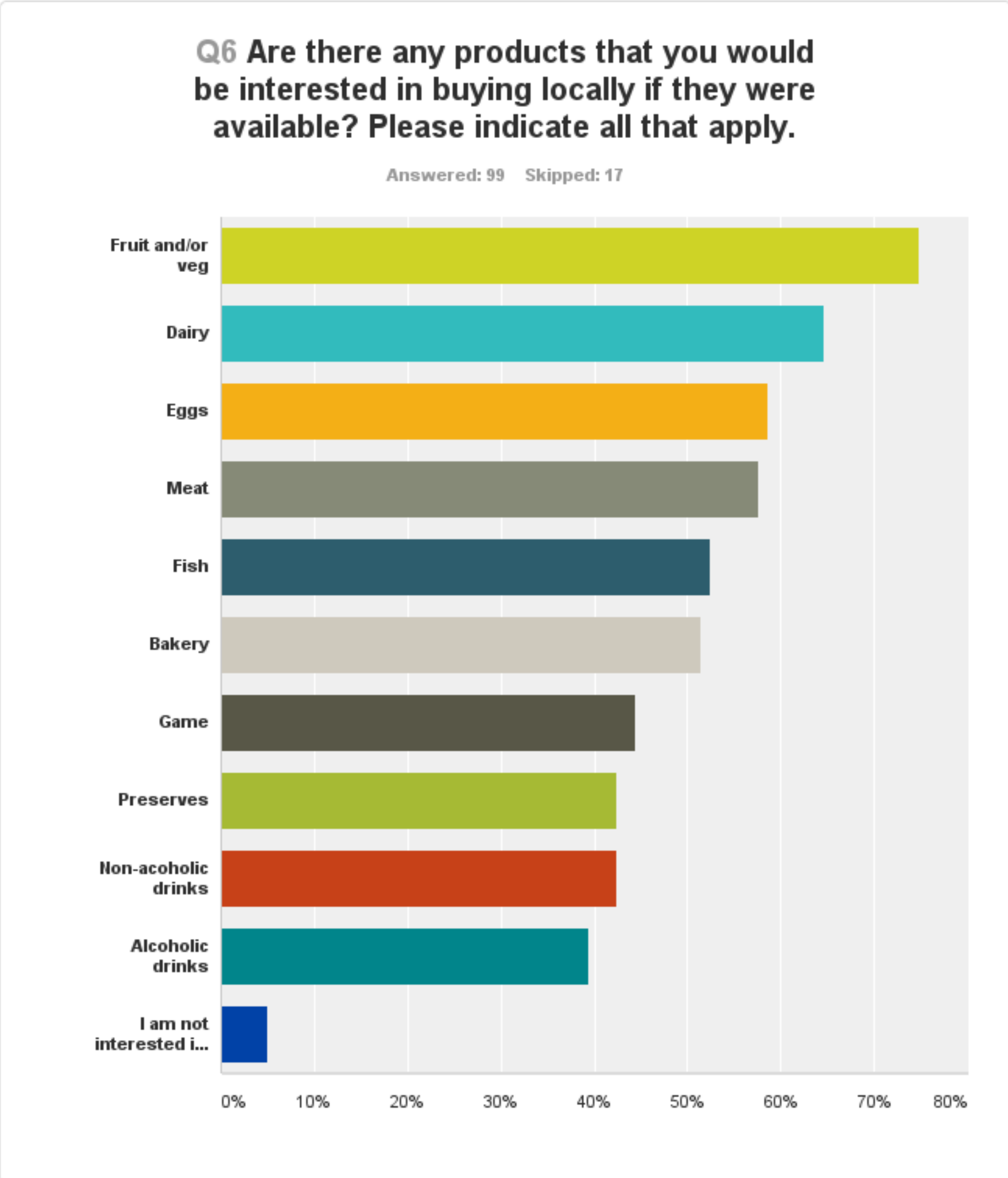




The majority of businesses (45%) had a turnover of £100-500k, with an additional 32% having a turnover of less than £50k and another 21% £50-100k. Sixty per cent of those with a turnover of more than £500k were from hotels. Forty four per cent of those with a turnover of less that £50k were from B&Bs and guest houses.

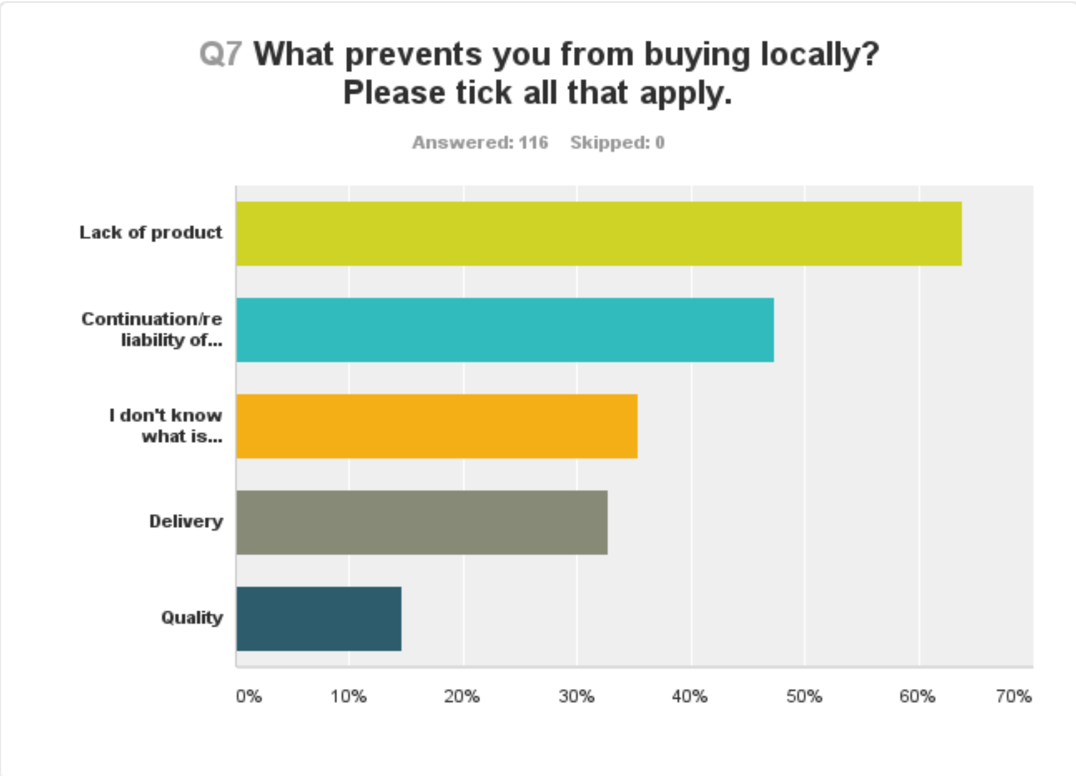
Businesses were then asked to indicate where they bought different products – whether it be locally, regionally, nationally, within the UK or imported. They could tick as many boxes as were applicable. As can be seen from the chart below, may people buy their products from a variety of locations depending on availability and price. Nearly one third of respondees made additional comments on this question. Some businesses buy all of their stock from a wholesaler who sourced products from across the UK, but many commented that they use local produce wherever possible, although some products, such as bananas, although purchased locally, had obviously been imported. Some commented on the fact that although they bought products from a local supplier they hadn't actually been produced locally. This was also discussed at the local meetings where again it was pointed out that locally bought does not always mean locally produced. Some commented that although they prefer to buy locally produced products, supply is limited and often more expensive. This was further verified in responses to Questions 6 and 7.

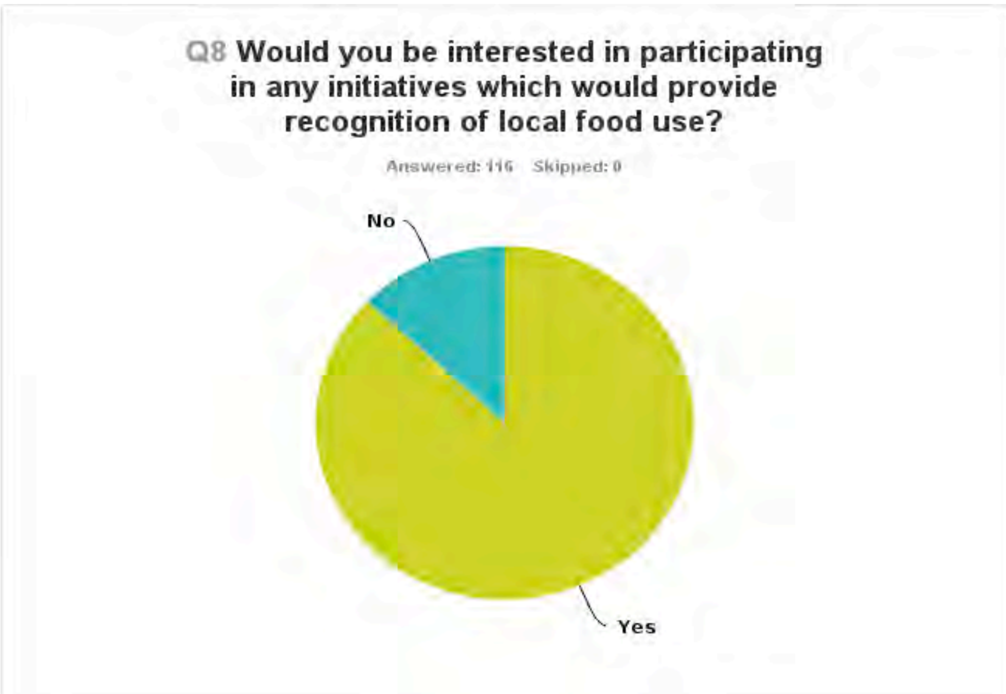




As can be seen in response to Question 6, notably 75% of businesses would like to buy fruit and vegetables locally; and over 50% would like to buy dairy products, eggs, meat, fish and bakery products locally. Five businesses who responded are not interested in buying any local produce.

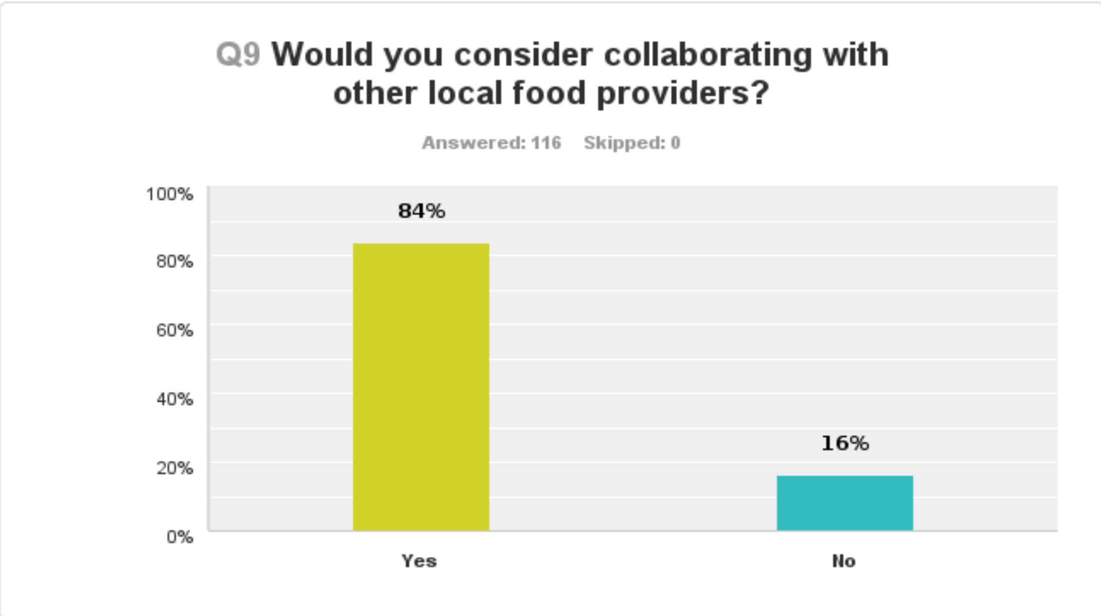
However in response to Question 7 (What prevents you from buying locally?) 64% of businesses said that there was a lack of product, particularly seasonal vegetables and salad leaves. Chicken and shellfish were mentioned by several businesses as being unavailable locally. Interestingly over a third (35%) of businesses said that they didn't know what was available (the middle row in the chart below). Continuity and reliability of supply was also recognized by 47% of businesses as a barrier to buying local products. However in the comments box to this question, 17 businesses mentioned price as being a barrier – with local products cited as being significantly more expensive. One business said that they did not want to deal with multiple suppliers and 3 mentioned environmental guidelines meant that they could not use local suppliers. These responses were explored at the local meetings, with most local food providers saying that they would like to use more local produce and be able to tell their customers about it. However it was also recognized that not everyone had a business model that could necessarily afford local produce. Those that did want to buy locally produced food and drink for their clients said that they were able to sell it at a premium as customers (particularly visitors) were prepared to pay for the quality, freshness and were particularly interested in the story behind the produce – something that has become more apparent in recent years.





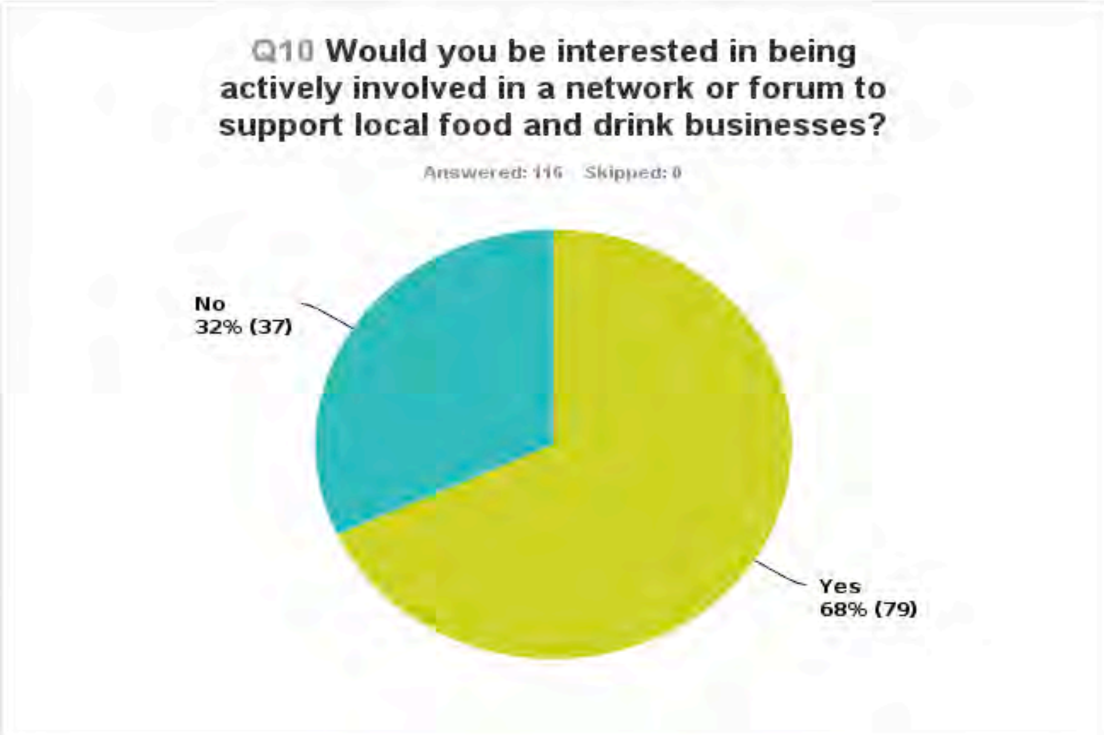
Many respondents (87%) expressed enthusiasm for initiatives that would provide recognition of local food (Q8) with one respondent saying that "guests love the fact that I can tell them where ingredients have been sourced". There were suggestions that businesses that source local food products should be given some public recognition of this. The new VisitScotland Taste Our Best award was discussed at some of the meetings – some felt it was a step in the right direction at recognising those businesses that did source locally (Grantown) but many felt that it did not go far enough) and it was far too easy to comply with the standard by not sourcing very much locally. “60% Scottish produce is not ‘local’ enough” – said a Portree meeting participant.

Eighty four percent of businesses said that they would consider collaborating with other local food providers. Two respondents said that they were already involved in collaborating with others, but would like to do more; on the other hand one said that their stand-alone status was very important which would preclude any active involvement.



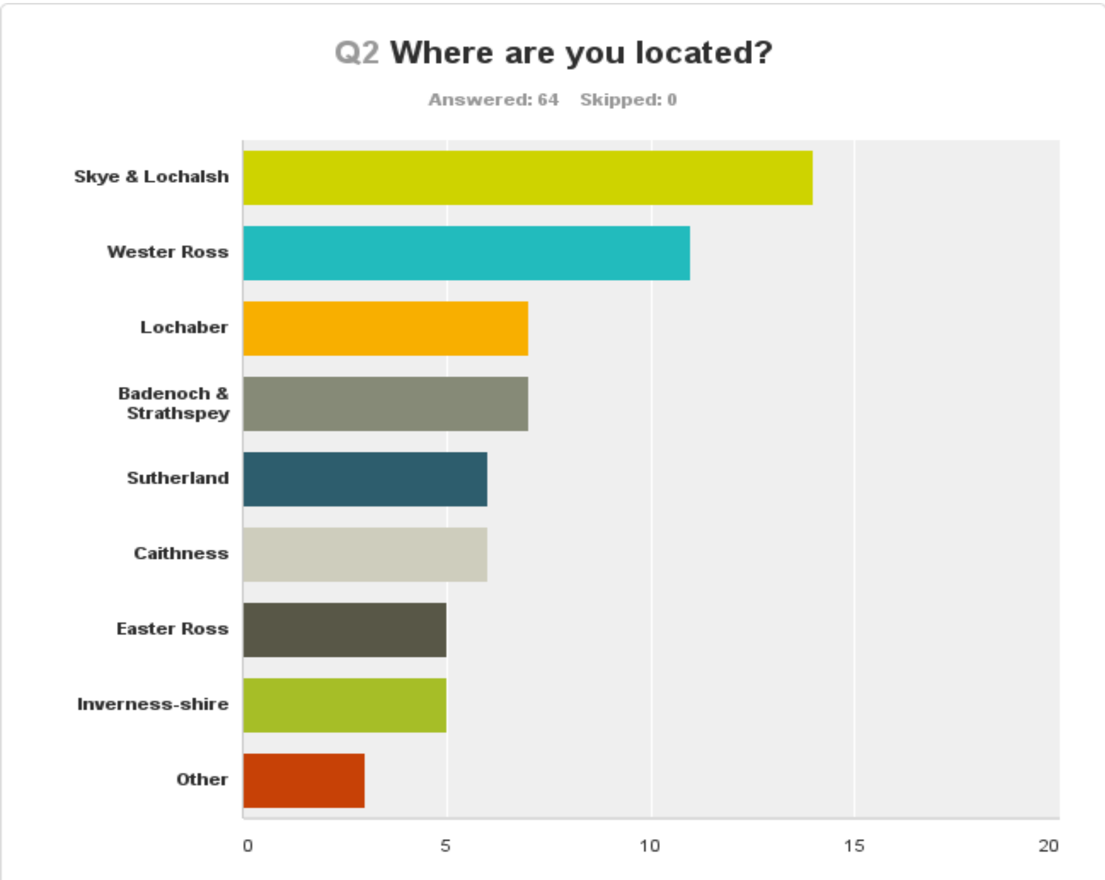
With regard to a network (Q10), many businesses said they would like to be involved but had “not enough time”, and those who are already involved in other projects or who had previously been involved in a network were reluctant to commit time. Some people said they would not be interested if it’s “only a talking shop” and one said that it should be “local not Inverness based”. Despite these comments, two thirds (79 respondents) said that they would be interested in being actively involved in a food and drink forum or network.

Furthermore, we analysed the responses according to business size - there was no significant difference in the responses apart from Question 10 where the smaller businesses were less interested in becoming actively involved (56%) in a food and drink network – predominantly due to lack of time and/or being the sole proprietor of the business.

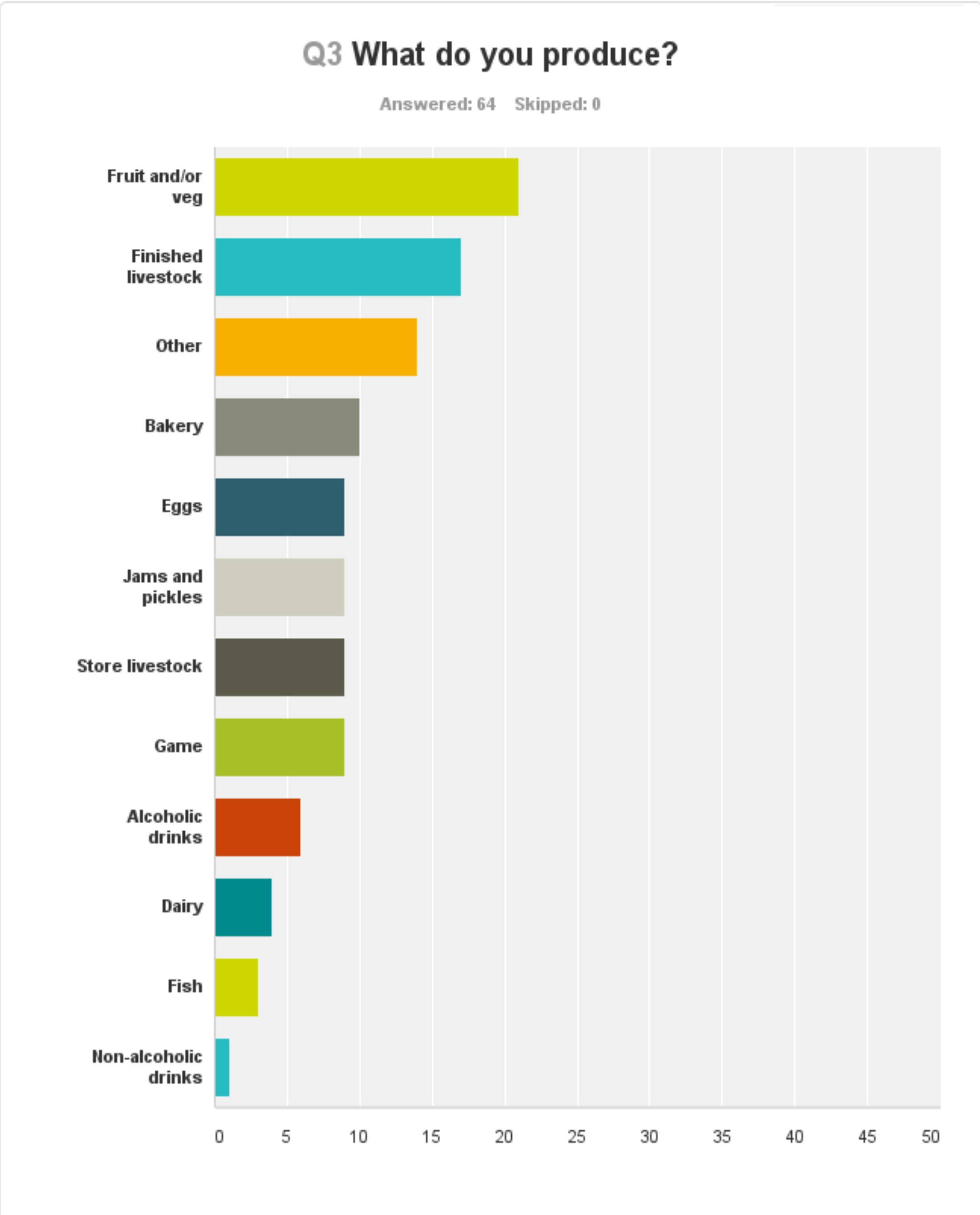


3.2 Local Food Producers

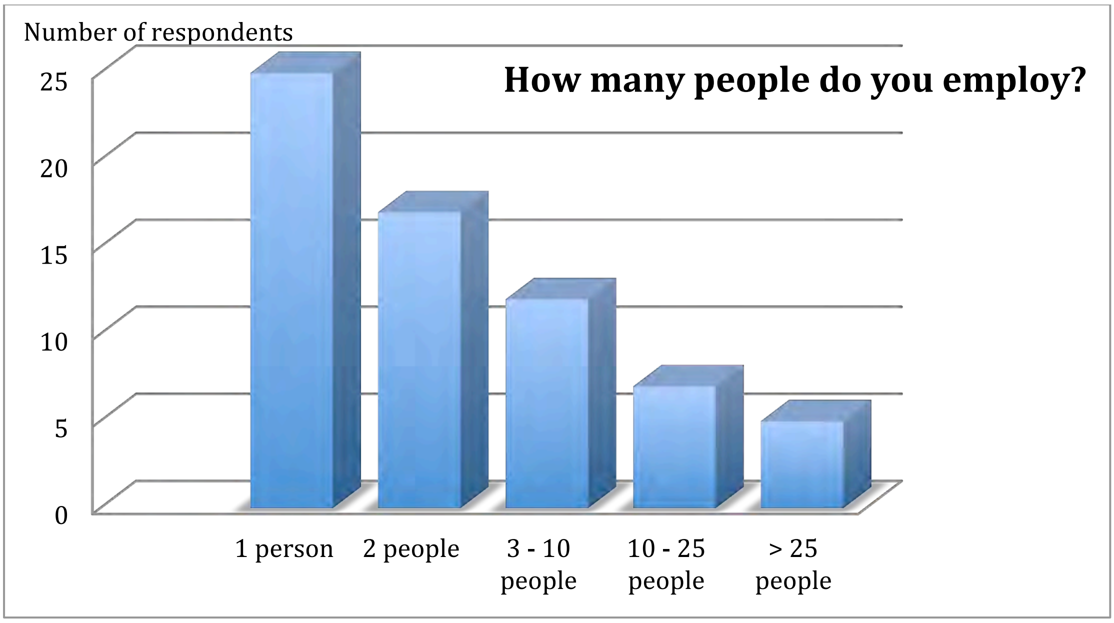
A total of 64 responses were received. As with the Local Food Users and Providers survey the first question asked for business name and contact details to create a database for on-going communication with local food producers in the area. This was to allow dissemination of the report findings and also facilitate distribution of relevant information and activity in the sector generated by the project. The chart below shows the distribution of respondees to the survey and demonstrates the level of interest in local food in the remoter parts of the region with the highest number of respondees from Skye and Lochalsh 22% and Wester Ross 17%.



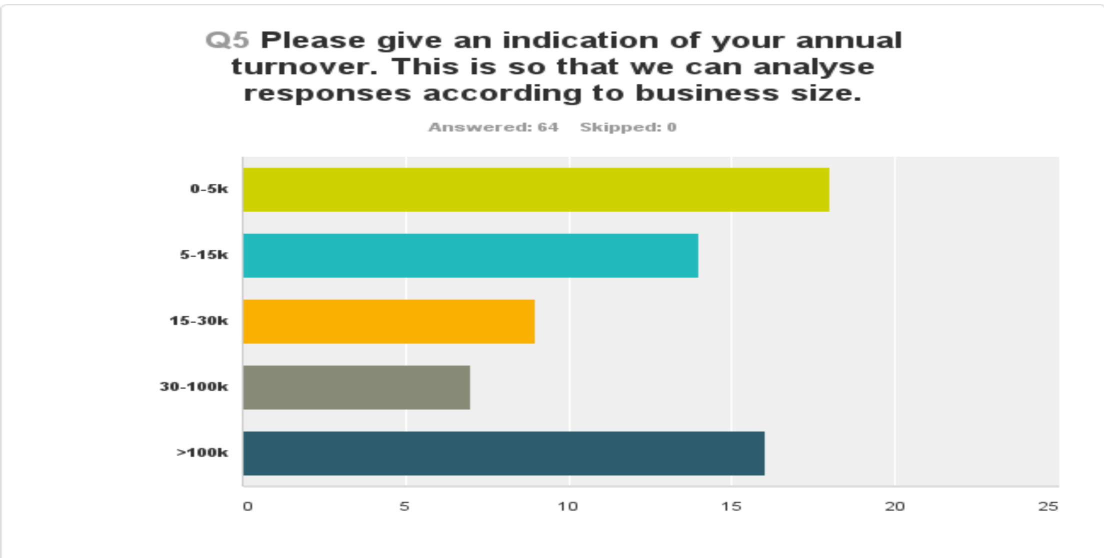
The chart below lists the range of produce available from those replying to the survey, with fruit and/or vegetable production the most common at 33% of respondees. The number of producers of finished livestock was also encouragingly high at 27%, and many of those in the 'Other' category were also adding value to fish or animal products, mostly by smoking or further processing. It was interesting to note the relatively high number involved in bakery products. As with all questions the results here merely reflect the position in respect of the survey respondees and cannot be taken to represent the relative volume or frequency of types of production in the Highland area, but do show the wide range of goods being produced.



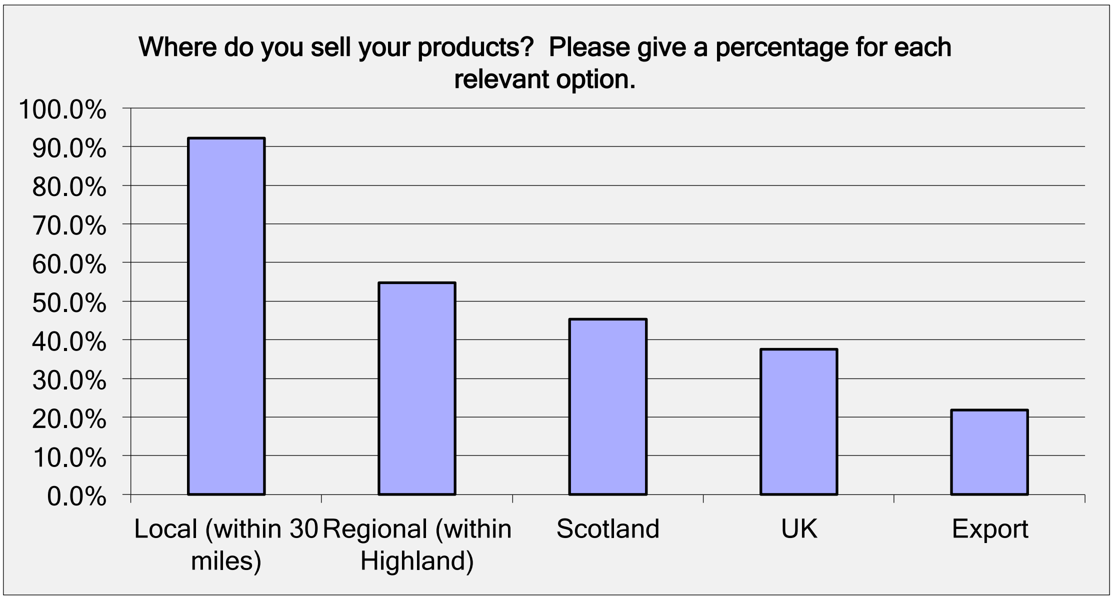
It became clear from the survey (see table below) that many of the local food and drink producers are owner-operated businesses and the local meetings confirmed that many businesses depend solely on family labour, some with just occasional casual help at particularly busy periods. The low profitability and small scale of many businesses does not justify employing staff and this often results in the producer being fully focused on production with very limited time available for finding markets and distribution of their goods.



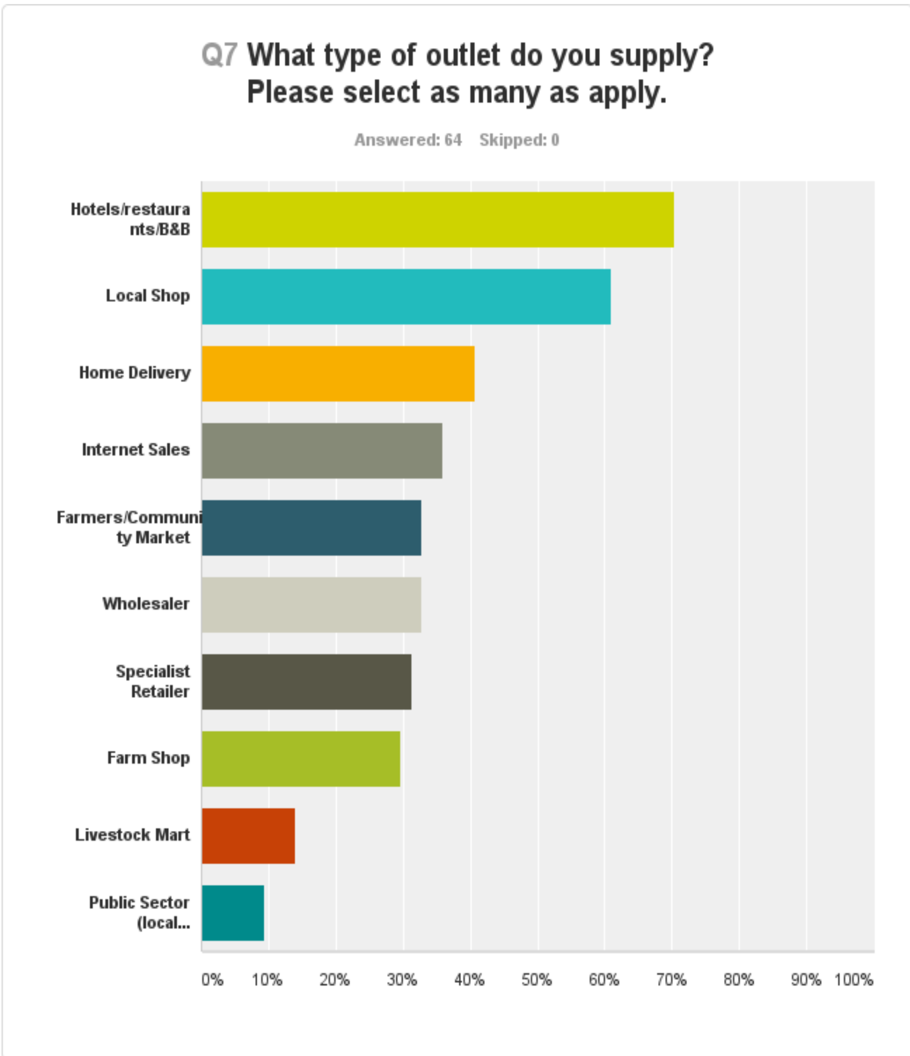
A significant number of businesses had a turnover of less than £5K (28%) and a further 22 % had a turnover of £5 – 15K, indicating that there are a good number of small scale producers involved in the local food sector. The area meetings validated this finding, and as low returns for so many producers demonstrated the challenges in justifying the time and expense involved in finding markets and distribution for these small businesses. The larger businesses, some 25% of respondees had a turnover greater than £100K, reported different headline challenges in terms of cash flow and marketing issues.



In terms of outlets the vast majority of respondees 92% sell at least some of their produce locally (within 30 miles) with 55% selling within Highland. As can be seen from the chart below a number of producers are also involved in wider distribution and these tend to be the larger businesses and those offering on-line sales.

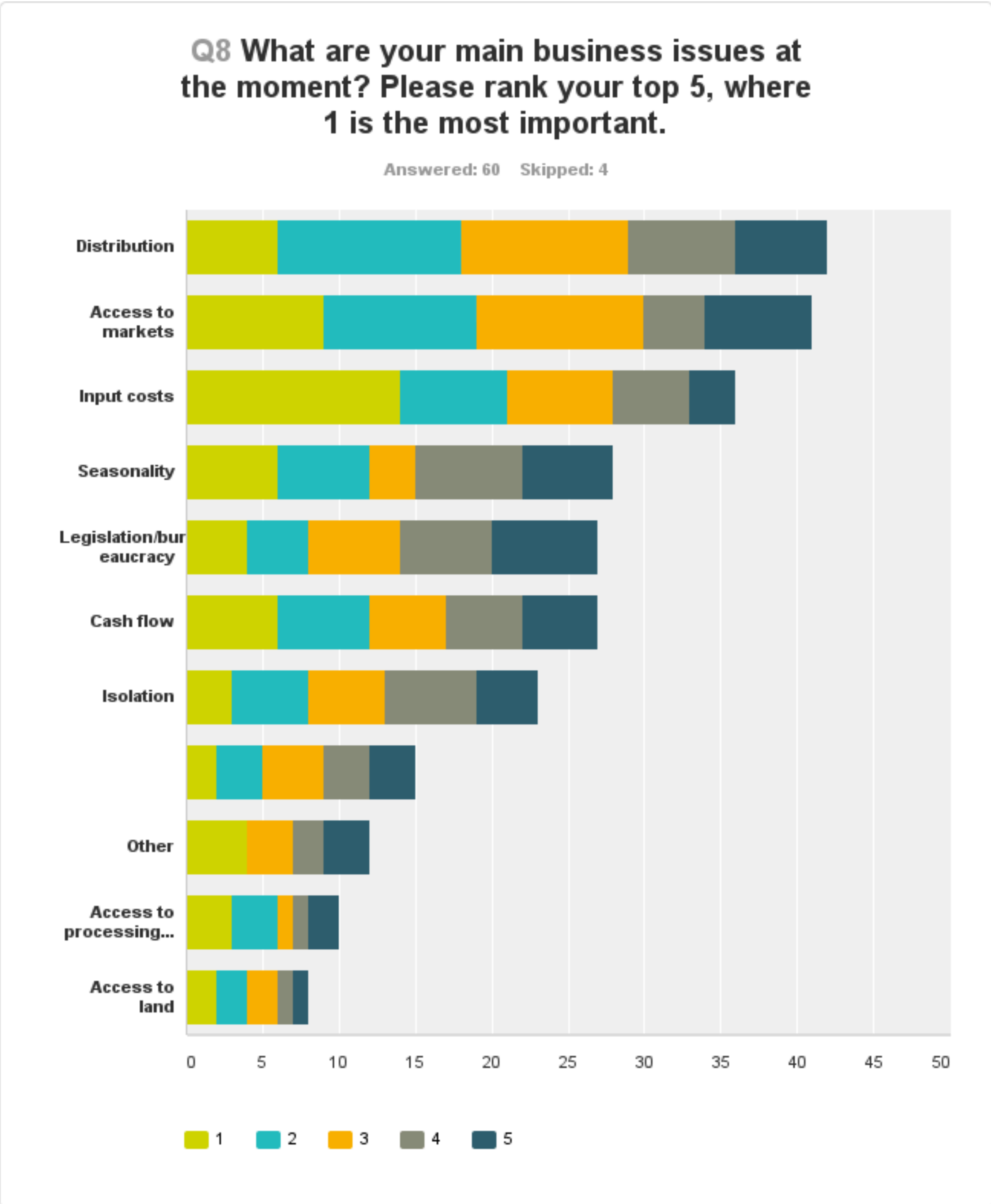


Businesses were then asked to identify the type of outlet that they most commonly supply (Q7). The hospitality sector including hotels, restaurants and B&Bs at 70% was the most popular outlet, with 61% of producers also supplying a local shop. This perhaps demonstrates that there is a good deal of locally produced product sold and distributed locally, which represents the most efficient and cost effective outlet for small scale local producers. Generally the further the distance from the farm gate to find a point of sale the higher the costs and lower the margin from that sale.

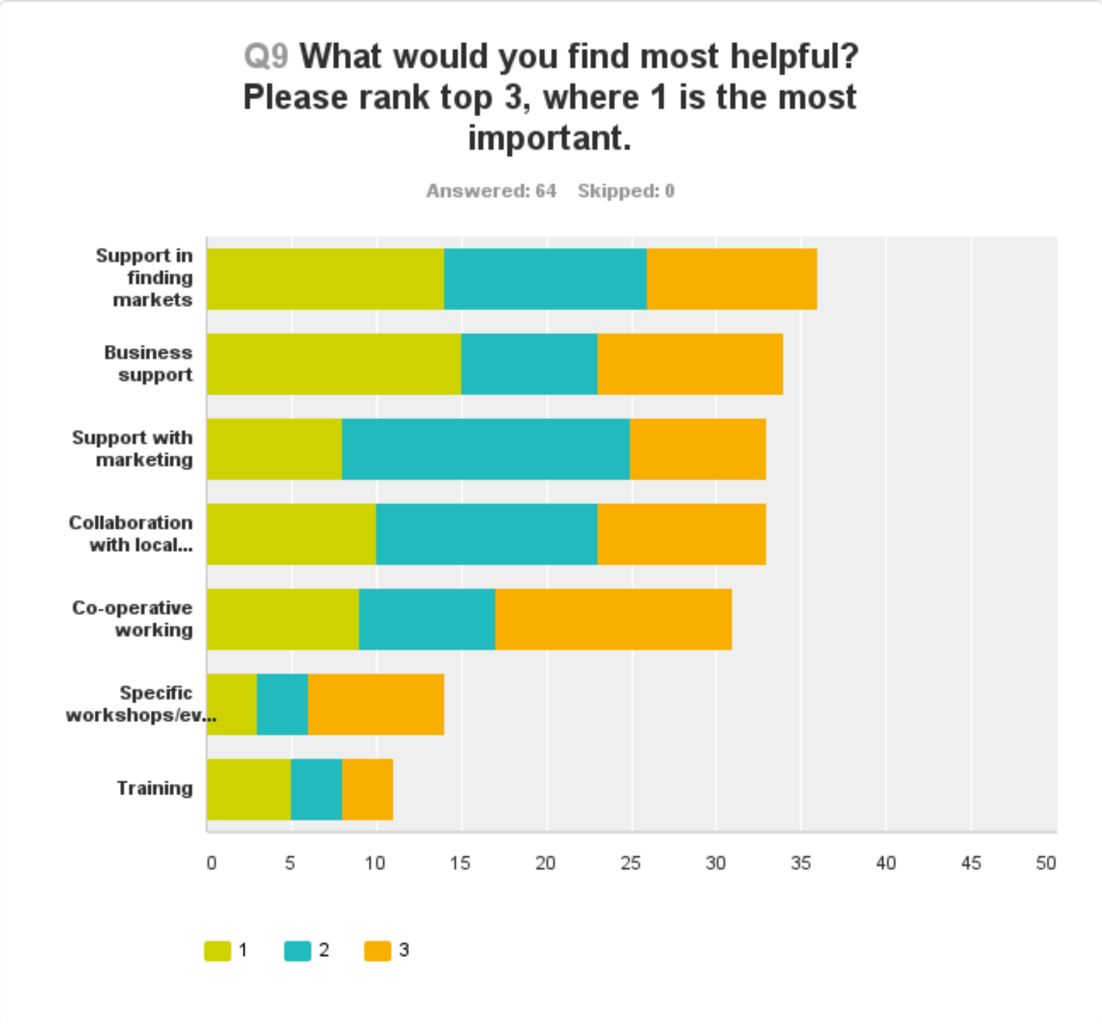


The chart below (Q8) seeks to demonstrate the range and relative importance of issues facing local food and drink producers. Cumulatively the most pressing issues for businesses are *distribution* (70% listed in their top 5), *access to markets* (68% listed in their top 5) and *input costs* (60% listed in their top 5).

It was apparent from the meetings that many of these issues arise from the remoteness and isolation of the small often single-handed businesses, and as mentioned earlier it is a challenge to distribute what is often relatively low value produce over significant distances and to dedicate time to seeking new markets. Seasonality of the product itself as well as seasonality of demand from the main outlets was often raised at the meetings and also features in the survey results as a concern for some businesses. Trying to match production with demand is a continuing challenge for all those working with climatic and other seasonal issues of production.

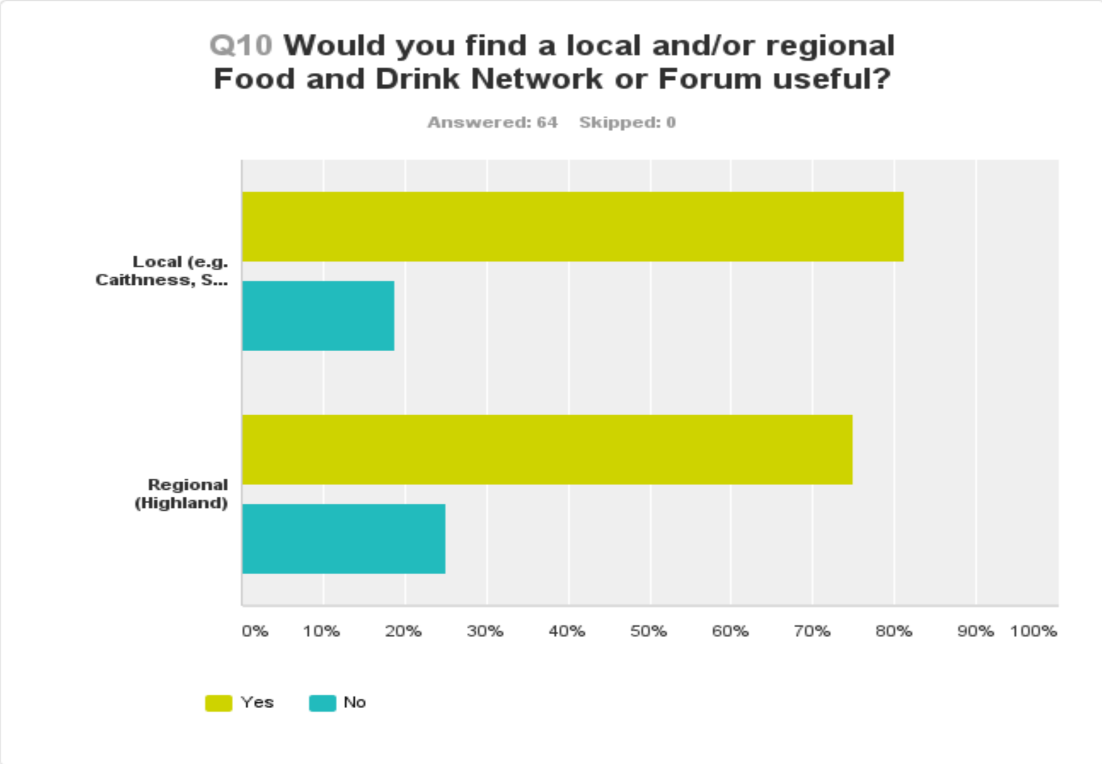


In terms of going forward with their business the survey sought to identify the key areas where producers felt help or support would be most useful. Cumulatively the most common issues identified were *support in finding markets* (56%); *business support* (53%); *support with marketing* (51%); *collaboration with the hospitality sector* (51%); and *co-operative working* 48%. For the smaller businesses co-operative working was seen as more of a priority and at the local meetings issues around helping with continuity/volume of supply and shared distribution were the main factors within that context.

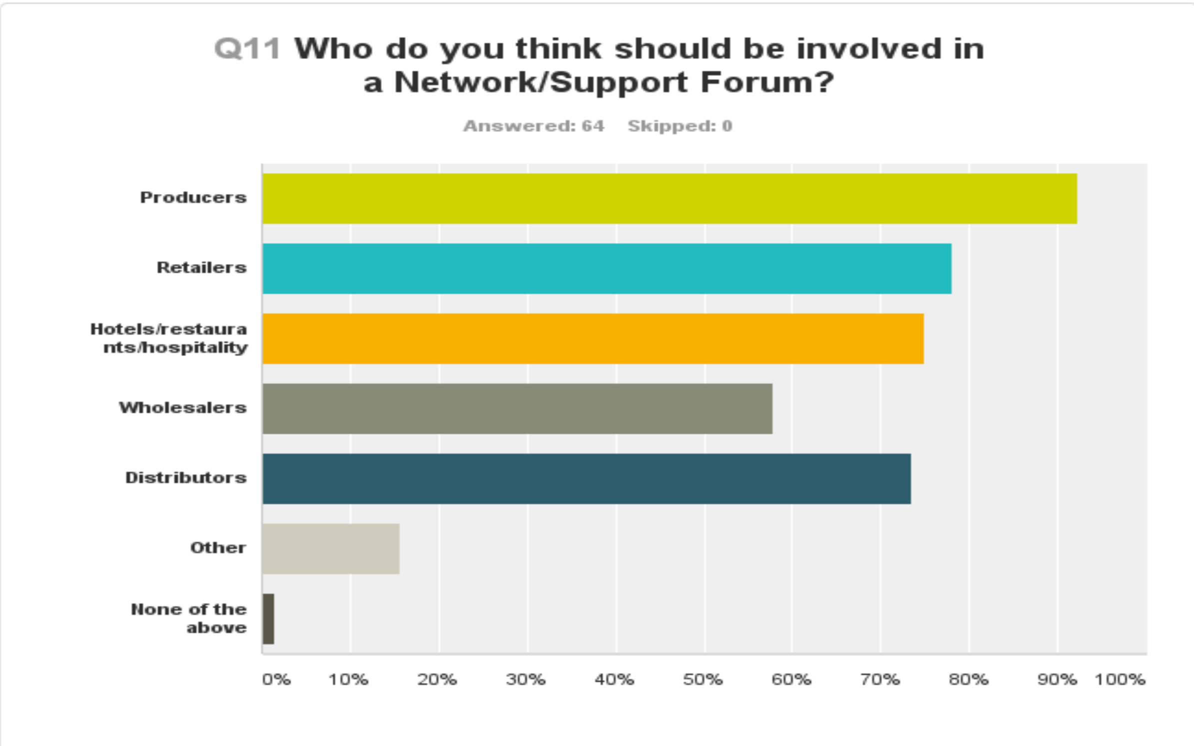


It was extremely encouraging to note the high number of people (81%) that believed a local food and drink network or forum would be useful. This response was developed further at the area meetings with most expressing the view that while yes they felt a local network could benefit their business, care must be taken to avoid a simply establishing a ‘talking shop’ and that any local network must deliver in terms of local actions and meaningful business improvements.

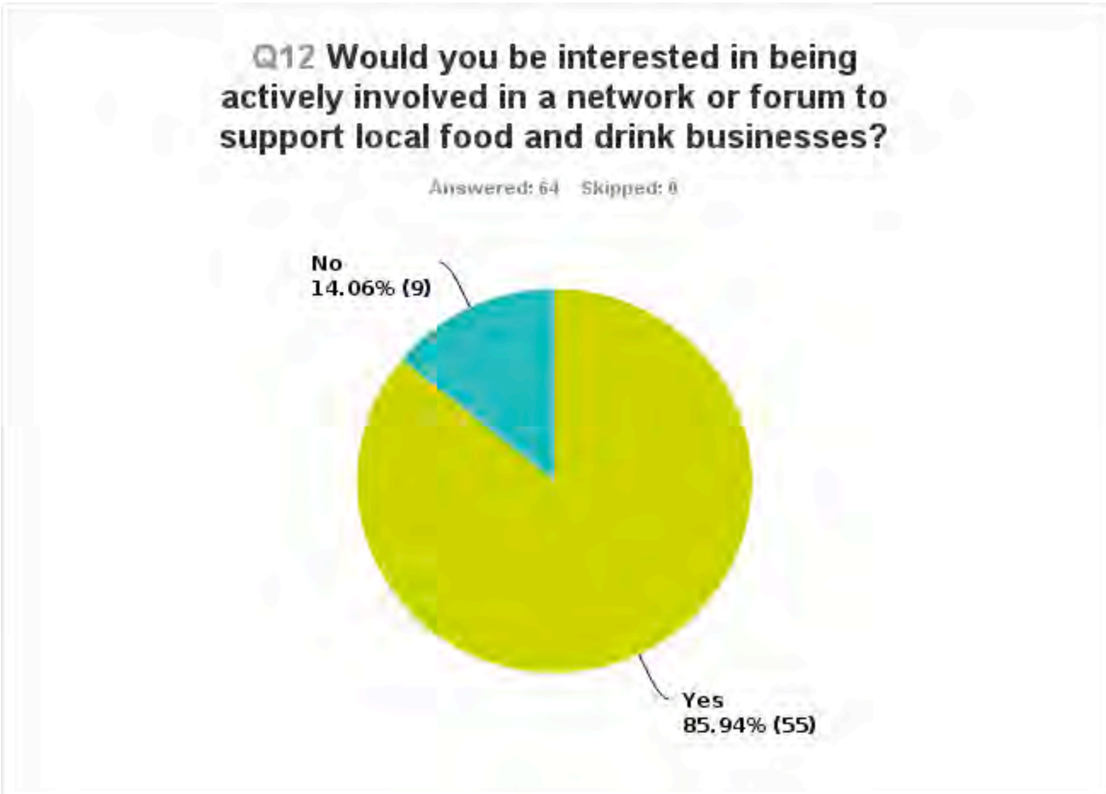
There was less support for a regional network or forum (75%) and a concern expressed at the meetings that with the time and travel likely to be involved it was less likely to be well supported or as effective.



It is clear from the chart below that there is wide support for involving a broad range of interests in any local food and drink network or forum. It is recognized that you need everyone involved in the sector at a local level round the table to develop the most effective way forward and to drive locally based actions. For local producers it certainly appears key that they fully engage with local retailers, the hospitality sector and distributors in the area, who all have a key role to play in the promotion and development of local food and drink.



From the responses to the survey (see chart below) and feedback at the local meetings it is clear there is a real willingness to get involved at a local level, with the often stated proviso that it is not just a talking shop. In terms of output from the local network if producers can see clear benefits to their business in terms of making connections with potential buyers and support with issues such as distribution and marketing, then people are happy to become actively involved in a local network.



4.0 Meeting Outcomes

The table below shows that a total of 106 people attended the meetings; this does not include Business Gateway staff who attended 6 meetings and Environmental Health Officers who attended 4 of the meetings. Five local Councillors attended 4 of the meetings. Only 30% of participants had completed the electronic survey prior to attending a meeting.

Interestingly, there were slightly more producers attending the meeting than providers which is converse to the final number of electronic surveys completed. As was expected there were a range of issues and suggestions recorded for each of the meetings, and these can be found at Annex 2. The prevalent issues are discussed below.

Number of People at Local Meetings

LOCATION	PRODUCERS	PROVIDERS & RETAIL	OTHERS/UN KNOWN	TOTAL	COMPLETED SURVEY PRIOR TO MEETING
PORTREE	6	7	0	13	7
FORT WILLIAM	3	3	3	9	6
POOLEWE	10	4	6	19	2
THURSO	5	8	4	17	4
DORNOCH	4	9	2	15	5
LOCHINVER	1	3	1	5	1
DINGWALL	11	0	5	16	3
GRANTOWN	3	5	4	12	4
TOTAL	43	39	25	106	32
PERCENTAGE	41	37	24		30

4.1 Supply, Seasonality and Viability

The financial viability of small producers was discussed at some meetings and difficulties for small producers to be commercial and make capital investments without match funding were highlighted. It was suggested that it is difficult for small producers in West Highlands to compete with bigger businesses nearer Dingwall and Inverness; however it was also apparent that producers in the East also find it difficult to find markets – not that dissimilar to the west coast situation. It was discussed whether the situation may be improved for some if fruit and vegetable growers are eligible for Direct Payments under CAP from 2015.

Whilst it was felt that improving relationships with local buyers would benefit small producers (if they could find time) it was also felt that a critical mass of producers would be required to be able to make any inroads into retail trade and supply.

Seasonality was raised as a barrier in limiting production (Poolewe) yet as an asset that if promoted as mark of respect for quality produce (Thurso) - citing that there is more trust and respect from buyer if you do not attempt to supply produce which is out of season. However it was recognised that raising consumer awareness of the 'limitations' of local produce and education on how to adapt and maximize its use would be helpful (Portree and Grantown).

Although the survey results highlighted significant demand for local products, it was pointed out that demand for local produce is affected by global competition and we need to accept that not everyone wants to buy local food. It was recognised that producers should make the best use of limited resources and only target buyers who *are* interested in local produce (Dornoch, Thurso and Poolewe).

4.2 Communication and Collaboration

It was recognised that there is an increasing interest in local food from residents and in particular from visitors to the Highlands and that information about what is on offer and where is often lacking. Communication and collaboration between buyers and producers was also seen as a positive way forward. Suggestions included:

- Groups of small producers could work together to supply local hotels (Poolewe) or
- Encourage local hotels (where interested) to commission local growers. Produce first, menu second (Lochinver)
- Example of a group of local hotels in Perthshire collaborating to share cost of collection van to go round local producers – would this work here? (Grantown)
- Coordinate opening hours of local hospitality/food providers so that they aren't all closed on the same evening. Dornoch
- A local food ambassador could visit interested local hotels and restaurants with a list of products on behalf of producers, possibly paid by % of sales made (Poolewe)
- Labour Pool - Swap/share hours (Portree)
- Establish a local hub for collection and distribution of local produce – potential for local wholesalers (Portree)
- Focus on Year of Food & Drink 2015 – focus on food tourism links.
- utilise local events e.g. cycling and arts events to draw in local food interests, and create new communication channels to connect local producers and buyers

It was thought that there might be opportunities for some businesses to do some development work when they weren't so busy during the winter, on promoting the local food experience for visitors to the Highlands. It was felt that visitors should be encouraged and provided with information on where to complement their food shopping with local produce – e.g. go to the butcher, to the jetty, where to get free range eggs, etc.

There were specific pleas to make better use of social media from the meetings held in Portree, Poolewe, Lochinver, Grantown, Fort William and Dornoch. There was also a call for more accessible and managed supplier's listings for businesses to connect (Dornoch and Portree) and to create a West Highland Larder (Fort William and Poolewe) to compliment the North Highland Edition. Other areas recognised that local directories existed but needed to be managed and promoted appropriately (Dingwall and Grantown). It was felt there was a definite role for the destination management organisations in promoting and perhaps even managing the listings in some areas.

However the overriding suggestion was to improve communications through the better use of social media (predominantly Facebook and twitter) to

- promote local food and drink to locals and visitors;
- promote local events;
- promote and manage local food listings;
- build business contacts and better connect those involved in the sector;
- communicate quickly and effectively with other businesses;
- promote local businesses and provide interesting local stories;
- provide opportunities for brokerage between those who are selling and those who want to buy;
- widen range of contacts, and

- make links with other networks.

4.3 Farmers Markets and Local towns

There was discussion at some of the meetings (notably Grantown, Dornoch and Dingwall) about supporting local town centres and improving the operating environment for farmers markets. There was a call for farmers markets to be subsidised directly by the Scottish Government and for the Council to provide regular space and facilities for farmers markets.

4.4 Specific Events

Several specific events were mentioned:

- Meet the buyer event for local hoteliers, cafes, B&Bs to meet producers and taste their products. Learn about seasonality and develop business contacts (Lochinver, Portree & Dingwall)
- Build on local events to promote local food e.g. upcoming visit of Royal Academy of Culinary Arts (Thurso)
- As a spin off from the meeting in Portree, Destination Skye and Lochalsh held a tourism business information day in on 27th March enabling the hospitality industry to meet local producers see http://www.destination-skye-lochalsh.com/DSL-BIZDAY-2014.pdf
- Encourage local producers and hotels, B&B etc. to attend "Round About Gairloch" (March 2014)
- Kinlochbervie fishmarket - expand to include other local producers. Promote and develop it as an attraction/event
- Nevis Radio Food Festival – Is it on in 2014? Support this event and maximise use of genuine local produce (Fort William)
- Cooking demos / Chefs club – use as a basis for an event to showcase local produce and engage with other local producers (Fort William)
- Food on Film (Kingussie) explore potential for similar project in Lochaber
- Biannual meet of B&Bs at the golf club – invite local producers to meet potential buyers (Dornoch)
- Improve communications and business relationships between hotels & producers. E.g. Chef workshops – beginning of year is a good time to run them (Dingwall)

4.5 Highland Council's Role in Local Food

Highland Council's role in local food was raised at the Dingwall meeting where it was suggested that the Council is not the appropriate organisation to take forward local food issues, but should use its powers to positively influence the local food agenda by influencing the location of supermarkets through planning permission, increasing rates to supermarkets to subsidise local markets, and interpreting Environmental Health legislation to benefit small businesses.

Business Gateway officials attended most meetings which was generally appreciated by participants and some referrals for further support were made. It was mentioned in Grantown that there was a lack of foresighting in the local food and drink sector, with the example given that there is an increasing demand for artisan breads which may provide opportunities for small businesses. No-one was actively thinking about the sector locally and providing appropriate training. There was also a call for more accessible business support (Grantown) and help with regulation and marketing.

4.6 Other Suggestions

There was a suggestion to create a Local Food Finder app that pinpoints local food producers and providers in the area (Dornoch). Participants at the Lochinver meeting wondered whether the ERDF "creative clusters" bid could also be applied to local food. In Dingwall it was suggested that public agencies could be used as a consumer network with local food deliveries being made make to their place of work. It was also suggested that a voluntary scheme could be established for Highland Council employees where they could opt to take up to 15% of their salary in local food tokens.

5.0 The Virtual Network

In order to build on the momentum generated via the local meetings we decided to immediately proceed with setting up a Highland Local Food & Drink Facebook page and Twitter account to facilitate communications, build business contacts and generally raise the profile of local food and drink. We contacted all survey and local meeting participants by email asking for local food and drink champions to attend a workshop to help promote the sites and connect with existing networks.

The workshop took place in Dingwall on the 28th of March and was hosted by Rene Looper of Tuminds, a company specializing in the use of social media. 16 people attended the event from different parts of the Highland region and all came armed with laptops, tablets or smart phones so that they were able to fully participate in this interactive session.

The first hour focused on Facebook and used a pre-prepared page populated with relevant images of local food and drink to demonstrate how to manage the pictures and page content to best attract followers and comment, and how to advertise on Facebook. The success of this site will depend on maintaining a stream of fresh and relevant postings of comments and images, principally relating to local food and drink, and if this can be achieved the site will hopefully develop into an interactive tool to link local food and drink producers with their present and future customers and vice versa. The aim is to create an online food and drink community supporting each other.

The second hour was spent demonstrating the potential role of Twitter to promote local food and drink and to connect with others who have an interest in the sector. Twitter is a very different and much more public platform than Facebook but if used appropriately and cleverly can be a useful business tool. A live Twitter account has been opened for Highland local food and drink and again this was used to demonstrate how to interact with this site, make connections and promote your own and linked businesses. The basics of Twitter language (e.g. RT, DM, and Hashtags) were explained and demonstrated. There was also a live demonstration on how to find new customers through Twitter, and how to Tweet with confidence, as there were concerns expressed about privacy when using this platform. Rene explained that with judicious use and good discipline Twitter can indeed be a very effective business aid.

The links to the sites are:-

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Highland-Local-Food-Drink/667523919968835

Twitter: http://www.twitter.com/HighlandLocalFD

6.0 Conclusions

We have engaged with over 250 producers and local food providers during the course of this project[1]. Participation has been widespread with 50% of respondees being based in the West Highlands (Wester Ross, Sutherland, Skye & Lochalsh and Lochaber). We have found interest and demand for support in local food activities throughout the whole of Highland region and perhaps relatively more interest in more remote areas, which is understandable due to the prevalence of small businesses with little time to dedicate to communication and marketing and also to the distance involved in transporting relatively low value and sometimes low quantities of product.

There is significant demand for local produce - 75% of local food providers who responded to the survey would like to buy locally grown vegetables and fruit - yet a third of them do not know what is available. It seems obvious therefore that some effort is required to connect producers with local businesses who are interested in buying local food. However often being one-person businesses operating at capacity leaves little or no time for additional marketing work. There are also barriers to overcome with regard to seasonality, but overall there is a tremendous interest in local food, particularly in supplying the tourist trade where good back-stories can justify a higher price to retailers which means they can afford the higher prices often required by local producers.

All sectors who have engaged in this project have highlighted the lack of communication between local food providers and producers and recognise the potential powerful impact of greater communication – particularly through the use of social media due to its ability to communicate quickly and effectively with other businesses and potentially reach a wide audience.

In responding to the electronic surveys, 68% (79) of local food providers and 86% (55) of producers said that they would be interested in being actively involved in a network or forum to support local food and drink businesses. Clearly, there are a number of businesses (both producers and providers) that are committed to developing local food activities, who would benefit from dedicated support to coordinate events that would bring together business interests.

It soon became clear at the meetings that we held, that there was an overriding requirement to improve communications across all sectors and independent suggestions to bring them together in a virtual network using social media. There was enough impetus and enthusiasm for us to bring together interested participants at a social media workshop in Dingwall in March. Although this was not envisaged at the outset of the project, Highland Council wished to support the momentum built up through the local meetings to support grass roots calls for improving communications. Facebook and twitter pages were launched in March and Highland Council has engaged a social media consultant to establish and manage these sites for a three month period (until the end of June 2014) whilst more sustainable support is investigated.

[1] 180 surveys completed plus 74 meeting participants who hadn't already completed the survey

We have found that the majority of participants wanted activities, events and support to be delivered very locally so that it would be of direct benefit to them. There was little appetite for travelling to a central location to attend a "talking shop". It was felt that any future network must have commercial benefit to participants.

There was also demand for locally run "meet the buyer" type events and for chefs workshops where local chefs could substitute local ingredients into menus. The hospitality industry is keen to pursue building a rapport and developing business contacts with local producers. Destination Management Organisations, Dornoch and Grantown Initiatives, NW Geopark, Cairngorm Business Partnership and local Show Societies have all expressed an interest in developing ideas. If the project does create the linkages and synergies envisaged for the local food sector in Highland, there will be a large multiplier effect.

7.0 Next Steps

1. Managing the virtual network This 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 is essential to the success of the Facebook and Twitter accounts.
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 part of this project.
3. Facilitating activities and events. Many suggestions for local events and activities have come forward at the local meetings (Annex 2). Someone is required to bring forward planning for these specific events and to engage with local networks and organisations.

We recommend that a new part time post is established to actively manage the virtual network and to advance some of the suggested events. This will build on the momentum developed during this project to support business development in the local food and drink sector.