

## **Group 2 (Online Food Hubs) - Draft Summary**

Group 2 was charged with examining the options for the establishment of "A Highland-wide Online Food Hub". What follows is a summary of our discussion to date.

### **Aims**

- A food hub in every community, providing a convenient way for local suppliers to supply local customers.
- Shorten supply chains, reducing food miles and increasing local resilience and food security.
- Support independent producers and other local businesses, bolstering the local economy and community cohesion.
- Promote sustainability by reducing packaging and encouraging the use of seasonal produce from responsible sources.
- Enhance health by ensuring more of the great food grown in the Highlands is eaten in the Highlands.

### **Scope**

The group feels that a single monolithic hub covering the whole of the Highlands is not the best solution, there are significant differences between areas and communities that indicate a more localised approach would be beneficial. This is in line with the strong undercurrent of localism running throughout the conference. Instead what is proposed is a group that is concerned with promoting and assisting in the establishment of a network of independent local hubs within Highland communities. This group is referred to in this document as the Hub Support Group (HSG), though no discussion on the actual name of this entity has yet taken place. The HSG would provide information, set-up advice and ongoing support to local food hubs, producers and other relevant entities, maintain a knowledge-base and directory, act as a communication and information nexus, and perhaps in time provide other practical services. The HSG would serve the local food hubs, the local hubs would not be subordinate to it, if anything the reverse would be the case.

### **Organisation Type and Funding**

In order to function in its most basic capacity the HSG would not need to formalise and could conceivably operate on a volunteer basis. It is also possible that the HSG could operate as a unit of some other overarching organisation, given the large overlap between the different project groups it may well be that the HSG would fit well within such a structure. It is also possible that an independent formal constituted organisation will be created. The exact model that is used is undecided at this time, but it is felt by all that it must be some form of non-profit organisation. One of the aims is to ensure that local producers receive a larger share of the sale price of their produce. If the HSG was operating on a for-profit basis then it would not be in best placed to meet this aim.

It is felt that some funding for a more detailed investigation of the needs and goals of the project, and the compilation of a formal (business) plan would be beneficial.

Individual hubs have different and greater needs. They would have to formalise from the outset as they would be taking payments and paying producers and would benefit from funding where equipment and/or premises for sorting, distribution and pick up were required. Again it is felt that a non-profit or co-operative model is best for this, though ultimately it is a decision for those setting up the hub.

## **IT Infrastructure**

The idea of creating new bespoke software to run the food hubs and serve as an online shop and ordering platform was rejected early on, there are existing capable and proven platforms already available. While these generally take a proportion of the sale value of produce, the time and cost of creating a new system would be prohibitive. The existing platforms that seem most aligned with our needs are [Open Food Network](#), [Neighbour Food](#), and [Big Barn](#). Open Food Network (OFN) has received most attention due to its features, ethos and its open-source non-profit nature.

It's worth noting that as it is the local hubs, producers and customers that would be interfacing directly with these existing platforms they need not all choose to use the same one, there are however significant advantages in standardising on a single platform. For instance if there was a wish for a producer to supply more than one hub this would be much easier if they were both using the same platform. There is a need for members of the HSG to become familiar with any platform that local hubs wish to use in order to provide advice. Of course the platforms themselves also provide support specific to their own systems.

Initially the IT needs of the HSG itself would be minimal, consisting of...

- A website including news, links to resources and possibly a blog.
- A knowledge-base and directory, perhaps in the form of a [wiki](#).
- A communication platform, possibly a web forum like the [interim HGF forum](#), or a group created on an existing social media platform.
- An email server providing HSG specific email addresses and [groupware](#) may be of use.

The skills and resources to provide these exist within the existing project group, any cost would be negligible (domain name and web hosting).

## **Other Needs**

The most pressing need for the HSG is more information in order to formulate a more concrete plan. This is likely to involve conversations with people currently operating hubs, producers and also

representatives of the aforementioned food network platforms. We also expect that other project groups are likely to have information that would be useful for us.

It is expected that the nascent local food hubs will have the following needs...

- An online shop front, likely provided by one of the aforementioned food network platforms, providing online ordering and payment processing facilities.
- A place where food from suppliers will be sorted into individual customers' orders, and people to do the sorting and administration. In most cases this site will also serve as a pick up point for orders. The preferred option for this would be a local shop who could take a small cut of the sale price in return for the use of their facilities and manpower, this could also benefit the shop by increasing footfall when people come to pick up their orders from the hub. Other options would be possible in cases where the use of a shop is not possible: a community hall, school or cafe for instance. It is noted that food shops, cafes and schools are likely to already be in compliance with food safety regulations.
- Transport of food from the supplier to the place where it will be sorted.
- (Optionally) a means to deliver orders to customers.
- Equipment, for instance for handling refrigerated stock.
- Numerous other administrative and logistical needs to be explored in more detail.

### **Long Term Possibilities**

In the longer term it may be desirable to expand the role of the HSG in order to provide additional support to local hubs. Ideas that have been discussed include...

- Seeking funding to provide a van and driver for both transporting food from suppliers to a central point and delivering it to customers. Since it is expected that hubs will tend to opt for a weekly or fortnightly order model such a resource could conceivably serve multiple hubs.
- Collective buying of produce and non-food items that cannot be sourced within the Highland network, or that is out of season. It is expected that customers will find local hubs a more attractive option if they have the potential to offer a larger range of items.

### **Overlap and Synergies With Other Project Groups**

- **Group 1 (Producer owned retail co-operative).** Should this group establish a retail outlet it would seem a good place to operate a local food hub from. In effect the retail co-op could also act as a local hub giving it an online presence and driving more sales. If the HSG was to engage in collective buying of goods not available locally the co-op would also benefit. Group 1 is also considering food processing, a butcher and kitchen were mentioned. It is expected that there would be demand for these finished products from hubs.
- **Group 3 (World class restaurants).** Hubs could streamline access to quality local food by providing a single point of contact for a large number of producers, effectively delegating a

portion of purchasing and driving economies of scale. In light of the current pandemic (and beyond) restaurants may wish to sell some dishes through the hubs (cakes for instance).

- **Group 4 (Lobbying and Policy).** It appears from their presentation that Group 4 is primarily interested in acting as an information exchange, knowledge-base and registry. This overlaps entirely with the same need identified by this and other project groups. It would seem sensible for this work to take place within the policy group with support and input from the other groups, and to be made available as a shared resource.
- **Group 5 (Food in schools).** There has been some discussion of hubs seeking status as a local government supplier that may be difficult for individual suppliers to attain. If this were to happen then the supply of local food to schools and other local government establishments (such as care homes) becomes easier. It was clear from Group 5's presentation that they see schools as more than just educational establishments, perhaps there are instances where they could also provide the premises required by local hubs.
- **Group 6 (Community growing network).** While generating income isn't necessarily the primary concern of community growing initiatives, hubs may provide a useful way to easily offer produce within the local community, with or without money changing hands. Community growing initiatives are unlikely to be producing the same food as local farms, thereby avoiding competition with commercial entities that have to turn a profit. Their inclusion as suppliers in the hubs would at the same time increase the diversity of local produce available through the hub, attracting more customers.
- **Group 7 (Bigging up small farms).** It is understood that this group is looking at ways to collectively engage with the supply side of farming, sharing skills, equipment and so on. In light of this the HSG would fit well into this model, specifically by driving local consumption of the products of members of the group. Hubs would in effect operate as collective marketing and a collective online shopfront.
- **Group 8 (Circular food economy).** If hubs were managing their own deliveries (rather than using a courier for instance) it is conceivable that food waste could be collected when food is delivered, and then dropped off to a central point for community composting. Similarly food waste collection could occur at pick up points. It is also worth noting that any reduction in packaging removes the need for recycling of the packaging completely.
- **Group 10 (Glasshouses and vegetable farming).** These would be producers, and therefore potential suppliers of the food hubs, which could provide them with the same benefits as they provide other producers. In addition the different and varying nature of the food would help expand the diversity of items the food hubs can offer.

The topic of local currencies or [LETS](#) hasn't been explored much during the conference, it *is* a bit without the remit, one can't eat money after all. It's apparent that such schemes would mesh well with more localised food networks, and we would seek to engage with and support such schemes were they to come into existence.

It has also been noted that there has been some discussion of resurrecting or replicating the Highland

Environmental Network (HEN). Some of the tasks/sub-projects mentioned within this document may well fit well within such an organisation's remit, particularly the knowledge-base/directory/registry.

### **Next Steps**

There is still a need to gather information. As stated earlier this will involve dialog with existing producers, hubs, online food network providers, local government and other entities that may be helpful, and also by locating and assimilating other existing resources. Your thoughts and insights are part of this information gathering process, so please share your comments freely. It is expected this process will take many weeks. Once we feel we have sufficient information we can form a more detailed plan to move this project forward.

The conversations we are having within the conference, via email and on this forum should continue and the group should seek to include other members with expertise in relevant fields. A template or playbook should be drawn up based on information gathered detailing the process of starting and running a food hub.

It is felt that one or two pilot projects should be attempted initially, preferably directly involving members of the HSG, in order to learn first hand the intimate details of starting and running such an operation. If these projects are successful then the lessons learned can be incorporated into the template and the process of replication can begin across the Highlands.