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Producing but Not Consuming? Food Provisioning in Remote, Rural Areas of the UK☆

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Abstract This is one of the first studies of food provisioning in remote rural areas of Scotland and England, providing evidence of precarity in food access at the same time as agricultural products are exported from the region to the global food system. We interviewed residents of four remote and rural areas of the UK about their food shopping habits and their purchase of local foods. Using theoretical resources from social science literature on food shopping, alternative food networks, and resilience to identify the influence of daily routine on rural food shopping practices, the importance of local retailers, the limited availability of locally produced foods, and the distinct nature of remote and rural households' food and shopping practices. Our findings illustrate the greater fragility of these rural food systems, the challenges faced by residents of these communities who can be unusually dependent on long and sometimes unreliable supermarket supply chains for the bulk of their food purchases, and the 'buffering' practices that they adopt to guard against possible food shortages. We argue that these practices can be considered as a form of care for both individuals and communities, but that, on their own, they cannot fully address this fragility. Initiatives to support shorter supply chains could improve the resilience of rural food systems but would require investment in infrastructure such as abattoirs, market spaces, and polytunnels in order to increase production, meet existing demand for locally produced food, and keep that food within these areas for local consumers.

Introduction

Recent increases in food prices, previous debates about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on food supply chains, combined with concerns about the possible impacts of severe weather events resulting from climate change, have focused UK attention on food security as a major risk to be managed (DEFRA 2021; Lang 2021). Most attention, however, is on whole national populations (DEFRA 2023) or disadvantaged and largely urban communities (Long et al. 2020). With some exceptions (e.g., Carolan 2021; Hendrickson, Massengale, and Cantrell 2020), less attention is paid to the complex patterns of food provisioning—shopping and other forms of food acquisition—in different contexts, including remote and rural areas. The role of shorter supply chains in reducing environmental impact and improving food system resilience is again focused on urban rather than rural contexts

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(Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019; Treagar 2011). Rural areas where food is produced are usually assumed to be food secure and, perhaps for this reason, rarely studied. Our contribution is one of the first studies of food provisioning in remote rural areas of Scotland and England, providing evidence of precarity in food access at the same time as agricultural products are exported from the region to the global food system.

As part of the ResULTS project, in this exploratory piece of research we interviewed residents of four remote and rural areas of the UK[1] about their food shopping habits and their purchase of local foods. Our focus on remote rural areas revealed that even people living in these areas, many of whom are food producers themselves, rely on global supermarket chains for the majority of their food. We demonstrate the fragility of the supply chains on which these residents rely for food and the important role consumption practices appear to play in managing uncertainties in supply, thereby increasing household and community resilience.

These consumers face particular issues when shopping for food due to the greater distances they and their food have to travel, which in turn is related to the geographical distribution of food retail outlets. Supermarket chains dominate food retailing in the UK: in 2022, six companies (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Aldi, Morrison's and Lidl) had a combined market share of 74 percent (DEFRA 2023), and 96 percent of consumers shopped for food at large supermarkets (Hasnain, Ingram, and Zurek 2020). These companies' policies on where to locate stores, what products to stock, and at what price have an important influence on food access and availability for all British consumers. Studies of retail provision in Scotland (e.g., FSS 2007) show that larger food stores are concentrated in urban areas and that in remote and rural areas people rely more heavily on smaller outlets. The situation in England and Wales is likely to be broadly similar. This means that acquiring food is often more time-consuming for those who live in remote and rural communities, and the available range of foods is usually also more restricted in these areas. Wage levels in remote and rural areas are also lower than the national average (Scottish Govt 2021) and higher prices for food (Nourish Scotland 2022; HEI 2016) plus transport costs may also contribute to higher rates of poverty in rural areas.

In the following sections, we first describe our interdisciplinary analytical framework. We then outline our methods of data collection and analysis, describing our findings thematically using four themes: mass retail and the rhythms of daily life; the importance of local retailers; the limited availability of locally produced foods; and the practices households use to manage variable food supplies. Finally, we suggest how these findings relate to existing research in this area and discuss their broader implications for food security and the availability of locally produced foods in these predominantly agricultural areas of the UK.

[1]In Scotland, approximately one-third of the population lives in rural communities and 6% in remote, often island, communities (http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0046/00464780.pdf); in England and Wales, less than a fifth of the population (17%) lives in rural communities and 1% in sparse settings (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-population-and-migration/rural-population-201415).

Figure 1. Interview Sites.

Analytical Framework

The shopping and other food provisioning practices of remote and rural communities remain relatively understudied. Developing an analytical framework therefore involved combining theoretical resources from three largely distinct social science literatures on food shopping, alternative food networks, and resilience, particularly as it pertains to consumption. Drawing directly on these literatures, we were interested in: what structural factors (place of residence, transport, work patterns) influenced their routine food shopping; if individuals experienced problems in food supply (related to where they lived, not to income); and whether individuals wanted to and were able to buy locally produced foods.

Resilience and Consumption

This research was part of the ResULTS project which examined the resilience of the food systems in remote and rural farming areas of England and Scotland, specifically: Orkney, Skye, the Scottish Borders, and North Yorkshire (see Figure 1).[2] These areas mainly produce beef cattle and sheep, often in extensive grazing systems, with limited cereal cultivation, often for fodder. The case studies were selected to represent different upland farming contexts. Orkney is an island with high numbers of beef cattle and predominantly owner-occupied farms; Skye is an area with predominantly small,

[2]This research was part of the UK's cross-government Global Food Security Programme's research programme on 'Resilience of the UK Food System in a Global Context' (GFS-FSR).

crofting units; the Scottish Borders is dominated by tenant farmers on large estates; and North Yorkshire is farming in environmentally specially protected areas and close to large conurbations.

The ResULTS project investigated the resilience (economic and environmental) of the food production that took place in the four case study areas.[3] However, this subproject extended the focus to look at the resilience of related consumption activities, specifically food provisioning.

In ecology, resilience is used to describe the ways in which ecosystems respond to environmental threats. As part of social-ecological systems models, its use has spread to other disciplines, including economics, international development, and social policy (Cote and Nightingale 2012; Robinson and Carson 2016). Authors reviewing the use of the term across a range of academic and policy literatures (e.g., Welsh 2014:15) agree that it is often poorly defined and its meaning varies significantly across different contexts.

In agricultural economics, resilience describes the capacity of individual farms, particular regions, and specific farming systems to cope with financial and environmental stresses and shocks, highlighting the strategies that farmers adopt to maintain the profitability of their businesses (Darnhofer 2010). These responses can be divided into three categories:

> absorptive (enabling system persistence); adaptive (enabling incremental system adjustments); and transformative (enabling profound system change by intentionally crossing thresholds) (Doherty et al. 2019:xx)

When responding to stresses, such as increased costs or reduced yields, farmers have three main ways of responding—they can absorb the extra costs (or manage on a reduced income), they can change their farming techniques to reduce the inputs they use and/or increase yields, or they can change their business model by developing other sources of income.

This categorization could also be applied to food shopping and other consumption activities, as we begin to do below. However, to date, food systems research has rarely considered the resilience of such practices, at least not in industrialized countries like the UK which, until recently, have been assumed to be largely food secure (Lang 2021:xiii–xxvi).[4] Moreover, 'there is a common perception that inadequate food access cannot exist in rural areas since the "rural" is equated with agriculture' (McEntee 2010:787). Rural areas are often imbued with notions of a rural idyll where there is no poverty or hardship (e.g., May et al. 2020). This may be why the resilience of rural food systems in industrialized countries remains an under-researched topic.

Perhaps because of these gaps, Doherty and his co-authors (Doherty et al. 2019:7) describe consumption as 'the least studied and therefore least understood aspect

[3]These are important areas for upland livestock farming in the UK as beef cattle and sheep rearing are a significant part of agricultural production in each area.

[4]There is however a well- developed literature analyzing household resilience and food insecurity low- and middle- income countries (e.g., Bene 2020).

of the resilience framework' showing that the 'production-consumption divide' (Goodman and DuPuis 2002) persists in contemporary food systems research.

Our exploratory study of everyday food shopping practices aimed to remedy this situation, using a resilience framework to provide a holistic perspective foregrounding the adaptive strategies used by individuals and households to respond to food systems challenges.

Local Foods and Alternative Food Networks

In the last 20 years, one outcome of debates about the negative impacts of globalized food production and distribution has been a focus on the economic, environmental and ethical benefits of local food (Kneafsey et al. 2013). Encouraging shorter supply chains, where food is sold close to where it has been produced, is seen as a way of revitalizing rural economies, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving conditions for rural food producers. Alternative food networks—farm shops, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture and co-operative growing (Treagar 2011)—have been an important means of creating these new, shorter supply chains, and increasing supply of 'local food'.

However, assessing claims about the benefits of local food' is difficult due to the lack of clarity about what is meant by the term. First, there is the often-elided distinction between locally produced food and food sold by locally owned businesses (Ilbery and Maye 2006). Second, there is the problem of defining 'local' production. In the context of this research, 'local' could be defined as the immediate locality (North Yorkshire cheese), the region (Highland venison) the country (Scottish seafood), or the whole of the UK (British tomatoes). Because of the complex global nature of food retail, all of these definitions are plausible, but refer to very different methods of production and distribution. Given this ambiguity it is not surprising that the benefits of local foods are debated within the research literature (e.g., Edwards-Jones et al. 2008). Because we were interested in the links between food production and consumption, in our research we defined 'local' relatively narrowly to mean food produced in the immediate locality (county or island) of our study areas.

Despite such caveats, buying locally produced food seems to have become accepted as an ethical choice, aspired to by many consumers described in the literature as a new form of 'care' for local economies and businesses, akin to the 'care at a distance' practised by those who buy Fair Trade and other ethically-certified products (Dowler, Kneafsey, and Holloway 2009). McEntee (2010:786) describes two contrasting approaches to local food adopted by rural consumers in New Hampshire:

> The contemporary local is represented by current local food initiatives and fits within the umbrella of alternative food networks sometimes associated with middle and upper-class consumers… The traditional local, similar to contemporary local in that it represents food growing activities that are in close geographical proximity to consumption, lacks the associations and motivations associated with the contemporary local. Traditional local is instead guided by a motivation to obtain fresh and affordable food and/or to continue traditional modes of food production.

However, Massengale and Hendrickson (2024) found that their participants blended aspects of traditional and contemporary localism when accounting for their preference for local food and argue that this points to the need for a more nuanced account of both rural food systems and the motivations of rural consumers.

In addition, as Treagar (2011) highlights, we need to be aware of the potential adverse effects of alternative food networks—which can include ignoring, or even reinforcing, existing inequalities due to issues of affordability, accessibility, and the feelings of appropriateness or belonging discussed in Section "Research on Food Shopping." Bearing these issues in mind, we wanted to investigate how important alternative food networks were in these communities, as well as other forms of non-market/informal food provision such as home production, bartering, and food sharing (Freathy et al. 2024). A focus on the origins of foods—its localness or otherwise—provided our study with an important way of understanding participants' purchasing decisions. It also highlighted the ways in which supply chains in these areas do not accommodate such wishes, often taking the food that is produced out of the area rather than making it available for local consumers.

Research on Food Shopping

The qualitative social science literature on food shopping is relatively small, fragmentary, and spread across a range of disciplines, including food studies, gender studies, marketing, public health, and the sociology of consumption/everyday life. Existing research has often focused on new ways of shopping, such as online grocery shopping (e.g., Berg and Henriksson 2020) or new groups of consumers, including those who purchase organic food (e.g., Andersen 2011).

Everyday food shopping is still a highly gendered activity: in the UK and many European countries, it is still mostly done by women (Hallsworth 2013), unlike cooking and some aspects of childcare. Qualitative research has shown that participants see choosing and preparing food as an important form of care for other household members (De Vault 1991), and for women with sufficient time and resources it can be an enjoyable activity (Cairns and Johnston 2015:chap 3). Likewise, decisions about where to buy food can also have an emotional component (Williams et al. 2001): in some cases, 'people like to shop among "familiar strangers" in "local places" where they feel at home' (Cairns and Johnston 2015:46). However, this may not be the case in smaller communities where privacy about consumption choices might be more valued (cf. May et al. (2020)'s discussion of rural food bank users).

Sociological discussions of sustainable consumption (Shove and Spurling 2013) and food and eating (Warde 2016) analyze activities like food shopping as routine behaviors shaped by income and taste, as well as by the retail and transport options available to individuals and households (Jackson et al. 2006). Shopping also has to be fitted in alongside other activities like care work, education and paid work. Individuals 'do not simply respond to the availability of food and its price, but develop food practices in the context of the realities of their lives' (Isaacs et al. 2022:7). Available retail outlets (including their stock and opening hours), transport and internet access (for delivery) shape the basic possibilities for food

Table 1. Breakdown of Interviewees

Location	Number of Interviews	Women/Men	Employed/ Retired
Orkney (Stromness)	21	18/3	17/4
Scottish Borders (Selkirk)	12	12/0	11/1
Skye (Uig and Staffin)	18	16/2	11/7
Yorkshire (Pateley Bridge)	23	22/1	17/6
Totals	74	69/5	56/18

shopping, especially in remote and rural areas. This material allows us to begin to think about the relationship between consumption and resilience. For example, in a previous study of food shopping in the Scottish Islands (Marshall, Dawson, and Nisbet 2018:5–6), that informed this research, interviewees described how they had to make round trips ranging from 1.5 to 3.5 hours to shop at a large general supermarket. The long distances meant interviewees planned their food shopping trips carefully to fit in with other commitments and with variable store delivery schedules (see Carolan 2021 for a more detailed discussion). These results show the greater potential for disruption in household food supplies in remote and rural areas.

Methods

The research reported here was conceived as a piece of exploratory qualitative research using semi-structured interviews to investigate how people in these areas shopped for food or otherwise acquired it, and what they thought about the food production taking place in their local area. We aimed to complement other project research by extending our analysis to the end of supply chains and investigating what a resilient food chain means for consumers in remote and rural areas, as well as other food chain actors. We also wanted to make a contribution to the existing literatures on consumption practices, and to inform wider debates about resilience and local food production.

Interviewing People about Their Shopping Habits

We aimed to interview approximately 20 individuals in each of the four case study areas. Table 1 gives the numbers of interviews conducted in each area, and a breakdown according to age and employment status.

We decided to interview consumers in these four locations who lived remotely as well as rurally: our working definition was residence in a community that did not contain a large branch of one of the main UK supermarket chains.[5] Not only would this allow us to understand patterns of food provisioning which might be quite different from those of the majority of UK residents, but it would also give us further insights into the resilience of the longer supply chains on which this group of consumers relies.

[5]There are branches of the Co-op supermarket chain in three of the locations—Kirkwall, Pateley Bridge and Selkirk—but these are relatively small outlets of a type that are found in smaller communities throughout the UK and especially the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

We developed a participant information sheet that provided a brief explanation of the ResULTS project and the food shopping interviews and a consent form (Appendix S1). But, as it turned out, at least three-quarters of the interviews were done by telephone and, in those cases, verbal rather than written consent was obtained.

Guided by the literature outlined in Section "Analytical Framework", we were interested in understanding both the practicalities of food shopping in these areas and interviewees' attitudes to food and food production. The interview schedule was therefore developed around four key topics: where interviewees got their food from; whether they experienced problems in shopping for food; their purchase of locally produced foods; and their opinions on how food shopping had changed in the area or might change in the future. Questions about difficulties in supply were included to elicit material about the resilience (or not) of food supply chains and those about locally produced food to probe attitudes to different methods of agricultural production. Although income is the most important factor influencing individual and household access to food, we did not directly ask about this (although several of them did raise it unprompted).

To identify potential interviewees, we began by approaching existing professional and social contacts of the ResULTS project team members. We then approached contacts in local institutions such as churches, community councils, clubs, The Women's Institute and The Scottish Rural Women's Institute. In this way, it was possible to undertake a few interviews in advance of research trips to each area.

Most of the interviews took place during fieldwork in the case study areas between spring and autumn 2019. During these trips, the first author recruited interviewees and investigated the food retail environment in each area. Some interviews were conducted in the field, but the most successful method of recruitment involved approaching people outside retail outlets and asking them to provide a telephone number if they were willing to be interviewed and phoning them at an agreed time in the next few days. The resulting telephone calls, lasting between 15 and 75 minutes, were audio recorded. However, providing information for contacts to share with potential participants rarely resulted in further interviews. What worked best was asking people directly.

There are limitations in this recruitment method. Because we recruited in the middle of the day, participants are skewed toward those who do not work full-time. Our sample also includes a disproportionate number of middle-aged women—a good source of information, as they are often knowledgeable shoppers—but we also often recruited more confident and educated interviewees, already interested in food and cooking. It was difficult to recruit men—older men often did not know much about food shopping ('you'd have to ask the wife') and younger men were not interested in participating. These results are, therefore, suggestive rather than generalisable and should be supplemented by more extended fieldwork in order to recruit a more diverse range of participants (e.g., younger women, men of all ages, those on lower incomes) and establish whether the findings discussed below apply to these different groups of shoppers.

Findings

This section describes our findings organized by four key themes: rural food shopping and the routines of daily life; the importance of local retailers; the limited availability of locally produced foods; and the buffering role of household food and shopping practices.

'You Tend to Fit Your Shopping in with What You're Doing, Because of the Cost of Fuel and Everything Else': Rural Food Shopping and the Routines of Daily Life

Like the rest of the UK population, our interviewees bought most of their food (see Section "'We All Worry about the Future of Small Shops Locally': The Importance of Local Retailers in Remote and Rural Areas") and the majority of them did a large proportion of their food shopping in supermarkets (cf. Freathy et al. 2024). Their motivations for shopping in larger retail outlets included the cheaper prices and wider range of products available, which appeared to compensate for the increased traveling costs. Many used local and independent retailers sometimes, or for some kinds of food, especially meat, and only a small number said that they rarely or never bought their food from a supermarket.

One of the biggest differences between these shoppers and those who live in urban or less remote areas is the greater distance that these individuals traveled to buy food: average minimum distances to a large supermarket were 14 miles in Orkney, 7 miles in the Scottish Borders, 16 miles in Skye, and 15 miles in Yorkshire. Most people had a smaller retail outlet nearer than this, but for those who lived in very small communities or on a farm, even their local shop was often several miles away. Greater distances meant that almost everyone interviewed traveled by car to the shops: in each area (apart from the Scottish Borders)[6] three or four participants did not use a car to do their shopping. Of this minority, one person used a meal box service supplemented by purchases from local shops,[7] two did their shopping by public transport, and three used online deliveries for most of their food shopping. Only six (out of 74) interviewees claimed to shop largely or entirely from their local shops, so those who routinely avoided shopping in large supermarkets were a very small minority, and in this sample, they largely did so by choice rather than necessity—only one person mentioned not having a car to drive to a supermarket.

Increased distances meant that food shopping was usually planned quite carefully and—especially if interviewees lived remotely—seemed to be undertaken less frequently than by those with easier access to retail outlets. Two thirds of interviewees (49 individuals) organized their food shopping around a big weekly, fortnightly or monthly supermarket shop. This was often supplemented by trips to smaller outlets—sometimes just to 'top up' on staples such as milk and bread, but some estimated that they bought as much as half of their food in small local retailers. The

[6]This may be a result of the smaller number of interviews conducted in this area.

[7]Recipe box services such as Gousto, Hello Fresh and Mindful Chef were not available on Skye and Orkney at this time.

minority who regularly used online delivery services still fitted the first pattern of a large regular order. A fifth of participants (17) did not provide details or claimed to have no routine for food shopping, and 8 interviewees said that they shopped several times a week, including two who shopped for food daily. Some of this last group did their shopping as part of their travel to and from work.

> when we're doing the shop… you make sure you do it all in one go… because as I was saying, it's a twelve-mile round trip to [nearest village] so you have to make sure you've got everything you could possibly… rather than running out of whatever, milk halfway [through the week], bread the next day, you'd be up and down [the road] all the time, and it would all just become too expensive (Yorkshire interviewee 1)

As this interviewee highlights, greater distances mean that shopping trips for those who live remotely involve a significant time or fuel cost, and so were often planned around other activities, including going to work, taking children to school, health appointments and visiting friends or family. Such activities could have a strong influence on when or where food shopping was done: fitting supermarket trips around children's after-school activities or shopping a particular location because it was closer to where they bought their tractor fuel.

> If I was out and about I would make sure there was shopping attached to that… if Tom said would you go to the vets, I wouldn't just go to the vets and come home, I would go and do a shop while I was out…. because we are 20 minutes from the town, it's not just like nipping in for a pint of milk, you wouldn't do that. You organise yourself a bit better (Borders interviewee 4)

One factor that we did not anticipate when developing this research (in 2018–2019) was the growth of online shopping. At the time of conducting the interviews, online deliveries were available in three of the case study areas, and the north of Skye had a partial service where customers picked up their food orders from the local community centre. Partly due to our recruitment methods, few of our interviewees relied solely on this method of food shopping but many of them reported that their neighbors did. Some worried about the effect that such services would have on local independent retailers.

> I think food shopping will all end up online. I think supermarkets will become less and less and they will all become more or less how the Morrison's online shop works… they have warehouses which have all your Morrison's products in… it is just used for the online shopping, and I think when my children have children that is how shopping will be…. There is just not going to be a High Street, everything will be online (Yorkshire interviewee 14)

Another interviewee questioned the economics of online deliveries:

> I don't do online shopping for food because I worry where that's going to lead… People like Tesco, they send over I don't know how many vans a day. I really don't know how their business model works for that because they are sending them from Inverness and that's a heck of a lot of fuel involved… and at the end of the

> day, if they put a few more little shops out of business where will we all be (Skye interviewee 4)

Some interviewees, who regularly shopped online, reported adding items to their orders for older neighbors. However, despite such communal shopping practices, the growth of online food shopping has the potential to increase inequalities in food access by reducing the sales of local shops, and because older and poorer individuals are less likely to have the skills needed to shop online, or be able to afford the delivery charges.[8]

'We All Worry about the Future of Small Shops Locally': The Importance of Local Retailers in Remote and Rural Areas

Despite the dominance of supermarkets, small shops play an important role in food shopping in remote and rural areas. They are often used by older and more isolated people, for whom getting to a supermarket is difficult or not something they have habitually done. Small shops are also valued for non-food goods and services, such as fuel, post offices, and information about community events.

> there's a lot of people that cannot get into Portree… and choose not to use [large supermarket], again for people who don't drive… to go shopping on the bus and then have to bring all your shopping back on the bus is a big deal (Skye interviewee 9)

Part of what makes shopping in local shops (whether or not they are independent retailers or part of a larger chain) in rural areas is the sociability of this activity.

> my mum uses that shop regularly because it's the closest place to where she lives and she and my dad are both retired now and they don't like going to Kirkwall unless they have to, they would consider going to Kirkwall a bit of an effort, so they would do most of their shopping there… and there's the social side of it too, my mother doesn't do Facebook or computers therefore when she needs to know if somethings on, its posters on the door of the shop that tell her what's happening in the community (Orkney interviewee 21)

This sense of sociability is highlighted by the fact that, in these communities, interviewees often had known the people who worked in the local shops for a long time, so shopping became a means of maintaining these social connections.

> I've grown up with the people who run the shops… it's not just a case of nipping to the shops, it's a social thing, you see so many people that you know on the High Street … you're not just going buying your shopping, you're catching up on everyone's news in a nicer way than social media (Yorkshire interviewee 14)

[8]Online ordering and delivering services can be seen as a return to time before supermarkets when a range of delivery vans (butchers, fishmongers and grocers) delivered to rural households, and can be a major benefit to those rural consumers who have the necessary skills and connectivity.

As we were recruiting outside such businesses, it is not surprising that many of my interviewees saw them in such a positive light, but this finding is also supported by previous research (Marshall et al. 2018). Although no-one in this study commented on this, unwanted surveillance—judgment of purchases or circumstances—is potentially a negative side of the very public nature of food shopping in these communities. However, this is a difficult topic that interviewees are unlikely to raise spontaneously in a one-off interview.

Several interviewees also reflected on the ease and convenience of supermarket shopping, and the lower prices in larger retail outlets.

> The problem with Tescos is that it's very convenient, saves you having to go round every shop so I'm not sure we would buy more [locally-produced] fruit and veg unless it was being sold through Tesco… (Orkney interviewee 16)

Local shops increase food access in these areas, particularly for vulnerable groups such as the old and the less mobile, but as highlighted in the quotes above (and others that we could not include) they also provide less-tangible benefits such as social contact and neighborliness. As a sign of how highly valued these benefits can be, when private businesses have not been successful, residents have set up their own community-run shops, for example in Carbost and Armadale in Skye.

'I Don't Think There's Very Much Made on Skye That We Sell': The Limited Availability of Locally Produced Foods

Although interviewees live in agricultural locations, it was often difficult for them to buy locally produced food if they wanted to. Food supply chains and other infrastructure are organized to take products out of the area, rather than making them available for local consumption. Many interviewees expressed regret that due to factors such as cost, availability, or the convenience of supermarket shopping, they were not in a position to buy more locally produced foods: purchasing these kinds of products has become something that many of them aspire to.[9]

As we describe in Section "'You Tend to Fit Your Shopping in with What You're Doing, Because of the Cost of Fuel and Everything Else': Rural Food Shopping and the Routines of Daily Life," our interviewees bought, rather than produced, the majority of their food, and this was true even if they lived on farms. In this respect, they also resemble consumers in the rest of the UK. A small proportion reported other methods of acquiring food—growing fruit and vegetables, keeping chickens for their eggs, fishing or eating their own animals (if they were farmers)—but these were supplementary, rather than anything approaching self-sufficiency (see also Freathy et al. 2024:5). Harsh winters and short growing seasons in northern upland areas makes fruit and vegetable growing challenging, which is perhaps one reason why 'backyard chickens' were the most common form of non-commercial food production mentioned in these interviews.

[9]There was, however, some confusion among interviewees about this category (cf. Ilbery and Maye 2006). Sometimes when I asked about their purchase of 'local food' answers referred to products sold in locally owned businesses (which were produced regionally or nationally).

Tourism is also an important part of the four local economies, and one way in which small retailers can increase sales is by capitalizing on tourists' demand for locally produced foods (Ilbery and Maye 2006). However, the amount of commercially available locally produced food varied noticeably between the four areas. Stromness had the largest number of locally produced staple products—bread, milk, cheese, meat, eggs and some vegetables—available both in independent retailers and the supermarket, illustrating the continuing importance of agriculture to the Islands' economy, and probably a greater need for self-sufficiency as an island. Pateley Bridge had the widest range of locally produced artisanal and/or gourmet products—including ice cream, a range of different cheeses (from Wensleydale to a local version of halloumi), beers, preserves, granola, and salad dressings. This reflects the agricultural heritage of North Yorkshire, the current economic importance of tourism in the regional economy, and, perhaps, proximity to major population centres such as Leeds and Bradford. In the Scottish Borders and Skye, locally produced foods were much less available, and they were often gourmet products aimed at visitors, too expensive for residents working in hospitality on lower than average rural incomes (HEI 2016). In general, locally produced staple foods (meat, milk and cheese, bread and vegetables) if available, were bought by locals, but luxury foods such as ice cream, chocolate, and preserves were bought by tourists. The category of locally produced food interviewees talked about most was meat. Even if they bought most of their food from a supermarket, a significant number reported that they made a point of going to the local butcher to buy their meat. They did this because they thought that the butcher's products tasted better and because they wanted to support local producers—their friends and neighbors—and the local economy (see below). All four case study areas had at least one highly regarded local butcher's shop: in Orkney and Yorkshire, these businesses advertised the names of the farms providing their beef and lamb that week.

> [I shop at the local butchers] because of the welfare and because of the locality… I'm proud to be of that community, to support those farmers, I like to buy it because I know what's gone into it… I know what those guys do… I know how it's produced… and I think it tastes better… know that it's probably been grass fed on the side of a hill rather than [fed barley] in a shed…, these animals actually have a lovely life. (Yorkshire interviewee 2)

Many interviewees described local livestock farming as a high-welfare production system and this was an important consideration in where they chose to shop. Knowing how it was produced was a crucial part of their judgments about the quality of meat. Quality and traceability were so closely related that it was difficult to tease them apart in these short interviews—local farming was a high-quality production method, and so traceability guaranteed a tasty product from well-treated animals.

Interviewees described buying locally produced foods as a way of supporting the local economy. Perhaps because they live on a relatively remote island, respondents from Orkney seemed particularly aware of the economic impact of their purchasing.

> It seems crazy to me not to buy something that's been grown here when you can… the carbon footprint is a factor, definitely for me, but also supporting the jobs up here and the profit stays here and it just makes the place thriving and healthy (Orkney interviewee 8)

Sometimes they linked their preference for locally produced food to broader criticisms of global supply chains:

> I can't be doing with these supermarkets selling, you know, Irish beef and New Zealand lamb when we have got so much round about us… it's more about supporting the people I know… (Borders interviewee 9)

Many had some connection with farming, and were also knowledgeable about the costs of producing food and critical of supermarket pricing policies

> To be honest, you can hardly buy Scottish lamb on Skye and when you do it costs an absolute fortune, four little lamb chops will cost you £7… it's disgraceful isn't it… When you think of the price the poor farmers get for their sheep, it makes you wonder (Skye interviewee 13)

> Another thing that has happened in my lifetime, people are demanding very cheap food… and they don't realise what goes into producing food… I would never shop at [well-known supermarket chain]…. because they do bully the farmers… you can't have competition in a small community, it doesn't work, there aren't enough people (Skye interviewee 14)

This concern with where and how food, and particularly meat, is produced highlights the importance of food labelling, especially information about product origins. But labelling and traceability are not enough: locally produced foods have to be available on retailers' shelves for customers to buy, especially from the large retailers where most people buy most of their food. This research suggests that there may be unmet demand in all four case study areas, particularly for locally produced fruit and vegetables which are difficult to source year-round. However, to make locally produced food more widely available in these areas would require a significant re-orientation of production systems to keep the food produced within that area.

'We're at the Very End of a Food Chain up Here': Planning, Food Storage and Cooking as Household Buffering

As we have outlined above, shopping in remote rural areas usually involves a process of planning trips to larger retail outlets, sometimes combined with more frequent visits to nearer, smaller shops to 'top up' on overlooked items and staple goods such as bread and milk.

The effects of bad weather, reliance on long-distance deliveries (sometimes by sea) and the demands of seasonal work, combined with greater distances from retail outlets, meant that households appear to plan their shopping more carefully than many of those in urban areas. And whilst many interviewees described the increased supply and range of foods provided by supermarkets, they also provided examples of signs of

strain in these supply chains- the ferry not being able to make the crossing to Orkney or increased demand during the tourist season in Skye could lead to supermarkets running out of some products, particularly fruit and vegetables, but also milk and bread.

> the result of bad weather can sometimes be that there's not much in the supermarket… it'll be a couple of days when you can't get broccoli, it's not disaster… you don't panic in quite the same way if you know the ferry's not going to come… there might not be something for a couple of days, maybe we are just more used to it (Orkney interviewee 19)

> you go in [to the local supermarket] and the shelves are bare, it's like the locusts have been, and you can't get fresh fruit and vegetables, you can't get milk or butter or cream or cheese… it's all just gone… you can't go into Portree at two o'clock in the afternoon and expect to find milk and bread, it just isn't going to happen (Skye interviewee 8)

Careful planning of shopping trips is one key way in which our participants managed their household food resources. A second linked method that many respondents used was maintaining a stock of both perishable foods and store cupboard ingredients to guard against running short of food at key times. This careful approach was often contrasted to the more relaxed shopping and eating habits of city dwellers

> I do tend to make sure the freezer is well stocked and I have plenty of tins and packets of things in the cupboard…… you have the ingredients, you may not have the one thing but you can usually work round that… it's different if you live in the town you can always nip to the shops for milk or something… it's not so easy getting down from here… (Orkney interviewee 11)

Interviewees often reported having relatively large quantities of stored food: many maintained one or more freezers plus a store of tinned and dried goods. And several guarded against running out completely.

> I'll buy, maybe, two or three loaves at a time and I'll have two in the freezer so I know I've got spare and when I know I'm on my last one, I'll buy more bread and put it in the freezer and take it out… if I knew my teabags were getting low I always have another bag of teabags, and today I knew my coffee was running low so I bought another jar of coffee. I never run out, I always have that one spare in the cupboard (Borders interviewee 4)

These stores function as a precaution both against being unable to get to shops, especially in winter if bad weather is forecast, and against those shops running out of specific items.

> I was brought up with a rationing post-war mentality and my store cupboard is always stocked so that if we were snowed in for a month, I would be able to feed the whole family. (Orkney interviewee 21)

Many respondents also reported cooking 'from scratch' (including baking) relatively often. This can be another precaution against shortages since it increases the range and number of meals that can be provided from a restricted selection of basic ingredients, maximizing the storage potential of pantries, fridges and freezers.

> People are very resilient here, you know, because we all bake our own food we can survive, it's not hardship. (Borders interviewee 2)

> [in case of bad weather] we just had to make do with what we had… I always keep supplies in in the wintertime… potatoes, meat in the fridge, flour for baking… you could always bake up something… cereals for soups and things (Skye interviewee 1)

Given the moral value attached to home-cooked meals and the dubious status of convenience foods and 'ready meals' (Jackson et al. 2018), it is not surprising that many respondents claimed that they prepared most of their meals 'from scratch' and rarely ate convenience foods. However, these higher levels of home cooking can also be understood as a response to the narrower range of ready prepared foodstuffs available in rural areas—including takeaways/delivery services—and, perhaps, lower wages, combined with higher living costs.

These precautionary activities are complemented by a range of inter-household activities—including shopping for elderly relatives and neighbours—that also seemed to be more pronounced in these areas.

> everybody looks after everybody else… if they wanted any shopping, or they couldn't get out, somebody else would do it… we might be nosy but we look after each other (Yorkshire interviewee 22)

All these techniques are used to maintain food supplies when you live a long way from a supermarket. They can protect households from potential shortages due to their remote location and associated supply chain problems.

Discussion

These findings illustrate the greater complexity and fragility of these rural food systems (Bruce et al. 2021) and, in particular, the challenges faced by residents of these communities who can be unusually dependent on long and sometimes unreliable supermarket supply chains for the bulk of their food purchases.[10] Contrary to ideals about the possibilities of rural self-production, our interviewees had very similar shopping habits to the rest of the UK population—they drove to supermarkets and purchased the majority of their food from them. However, the greater distances that both they and their food often had to travel resulted in restricted choices and a shortage of fresh produce at periods of peak demand or in bad weather. Moreover, interviewees' discussions about the need to carefully plan food

[10]This increased dependence derives from the relatively small number of retail outlets in a given area and the lack of alternatives, like takeaways and food delivery services that are now a prominent feature of urban areas in the UK.

shopping highlight a greater vulnerability to transport poverty (Simcock et al. 2021) among inhabitants of remote and rural areas, due to the cost of fuel and scarcity of public transport.

Many interviewees were also similar to the rest of the population in their desire to consume more locally produced foods. However, we found little evidence of alternative food networks being used, and this may be because interviewees were acquiring such foods in more informal ways that we did not capture (Massengale and Hendrickson 2024). When discussing their reasons for wanting to buy locally produced foods, most interviewees gave arguments in line with 'traditional' forms of localism (McEntee 2010)—to support their neighbors and the local economy—but some combined these with more 'contemporary' concerns about the environmental and social impacts of supermarket practices, especially long supply chains (Massengale and Hendrickson 2024). Despite living in food producing areas of the UK, it was difficult for many of them to buy locally produced foods, particularly fruit and vegetables. The food that is produced in these areas is mostly taken away for processing and distribution to larger markets. As a result, they lack the necessary infrastructure for local production—abattoirs, market spaces, polytunnels, and small-scale storage and processing facilities (Neumann and Sharpe 2023:11). However, there appears to be an unmet demand for locally produced food within these communities and its supply could improve the resilience of rural food systems, but that will require significant changes.

Practices such as carefully planned food shopping, maintaining extensive food stores and cooking from basic ingredients can be thought of as a form of 'buffering'—precautions taken by individuals and households to guard against uncertainties in food supplies. These activities are usually carried out by women and, as well requiring increased food shopping labour, also rely on them having the cooking skills and extra time needed to plan and prepare meals without convenience foods, as well as sufficient household resources to afford the necessary fuel. Several interviewees also reported shopping for elderly relatives and neighbors, which is another form of care that enhances food security beyond the household. These consumption practices increase food provisioning capacity and mitigate many of the risks of disrupted food supplies, improving the resilience of fragile food systems in these areas.[11]

One way of understanding these buffering (or mitigation) practices is as forms of care (cf. Dowler et al. 2009). At the individual and household level, food-related care for family members and elderly neighbors is relatively straightforward to identify, and a mundane part of many (women's) domestic roles. However, the services provided by local shops and the desire to purchase local foods also contain important caring elements: providing a wide range of services to community members, or buying meat produced by your neighbors are forms of care for members of the wider community. In highlighting practices of care like this, we need to be very careful not to romanticize rural communities—as Carolan (2023:1055) argues we always need to be aware of who and what is cared for and how (and who or what is not cared for). Investigating practices around shopping and food provisioning as

[11]Interviewees also referred to community level initiatives such as bus or taxi services to take older and less mobile individuals into larger town for shopping, foodbanks to provide emergency food parcels, and the establishment community owned village shops to replace failing businesses.

gendered forms of care is one fruitful way in which this research could be developed in future studies. Further studies involving researchers embedded in remote and rural communities to recruit a more diverse range of participants could provide more detailed information about food provisioning within households. This could tell us who provides these kinds of care and whether these practices are widespread in rural communities or restricted to particular income and age groups.

This 'buffering' against potential food shortages shows parallels with reported behavior of urban consumers during the first UK COVID-19 lock down (March to July 2020). Government restrictions highlighted the fragility of food systems and the vulnerability of certain groups to shortages and hunger (Ahmed et al. 2020; Clapp and Moseley 2020). Warned about the possibility of food shortages and with most catering businesses closed, UK consumers bought increased quantities of store cupboard staples like pasta and flour (Benker 2021). Anecdotal evidence highlights a range of other food behaviors adopted by urban consumers -fewer shopping trips, shopping for vulnerable neighbors and relatives, and cooking more 'from scratch'. Such behavior was more possible for affluent individuals but it illustrates a set of practices available to some when food supplies become uncertain.

However effective these practices are in improving the resilience of households and communities, they are not enough to fully address the fragility of rural food systems. Using Doherty et al.'s (2019) typology, they are largely absorptive and adaptive but not transformative. Complex social networks of care can make these communities resilient but, as both consumers and producers, they lack the capacity to make radical changes to food supply chains. This is particularly true of those who are disadvantaged due to low incomes, lack of transport, or poor internet access.

Improved retail provision is one obvious way of reducing the fragility of these remote and rural food systems, but that risks increasing reliance on a small number of national retail chains (Freathy et al. 2024). Another complementary but more radical approach is to invest in the development of shorter supply chains. Whereas much focus has been placed on shortening supply chains in urban areas, the supply chains in many rural areas are even longer than those in urban areas. However, appropriate infrastructure to support local food production, training in new skills (Knickel et al. 2018) and a revised regulatory regime for small-scale operations could contribute to the increased resilience and sustainability of rural food systems.

Conclusion

In order for the Scottish Government to become a Good Food Nation, and for all governments in the UK to improve food security, food access for residents of remote and rural communities must be addressed. This research has described the practices of mostly female food shoppers in remote and rural areas of the UK and has demonstrated some of the constraints that they face, as well as the ways in which they manage these constraints. We found that despite stereotypes of rural self-provisioning and even when living in food-producing areas, our interviewees, much like the rest of the UK population, bought most of their food from supermarkets. They also wanted to buy more locally produced foods—particularly meat—because they thought it was better quality and they wanted to support local livestock farmers (who were often

friends and neighbors). But they were often unable to do so as supermarket supply chains are designed to take food produced in these areas away from the area.

However, unlike the rest of the UK population our interviewees often had to drive long distances to do their food shopping and sometimes faced uncertain supplies when they got to the supermarket. Many of them adopted a range of what we have labeled 'buffering' practices—careful planning of their shopping, maintaining food stores, cooking 'from scratch' and shopping for others in order to minimize the possibility of food shortage. These practices appear to make an important contribution to household and community food security in these areas. More research is required to establish the extent of this contribution, and investigate how much of it is carried out as part of the largely female, and often unpaid, work of caring for individuals and communities. But, in considering these consumption-oriented strategies as part of food system resilience, we also need to avoid promoting solutions that rely on unpaid caring labour to mitigate food system problems. Other supply-side solutions such as improved retail provision, and better support for local food production (and other small food businesses) should also be considered.

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Data Availability Statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [IF] upon reasonable request.

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