

# Producing but not consuming? Food provisioning in remote and rural areas of the UK

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## Introduction

Recent increases in food prices and debates about strains on food systems due to climate change have renewed concern about UK food security (e.g. DEFRA 2021). Most attention, however, is on whole national populations and disadvantaged urban communities. Less attention has been paid to complex patterns of food provisioning in remote and rural areas.

The Resilience in Uplands Livestock Systems (ResULTS) project examined the resilience of the food systems in four upland farming areas of the UK: North Yorkshire, the Scottish Borders, Orkney, and Isle of Skye. Beef cattle and sheep rearing are an important part of agricultural production in these areas and the project considered the activities of both producers and consumers. Here we focus on the consumers.

## Methods

This was a small-scale exploratory study. We used qualitative 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 areas.

Location	Number of interviews	Women/Men
Orkney (Stromness)	21	18/3
Scottish Borders (Selkirk)	12	12/0
Skye (Uigg and Staffin)	18	16/2
Yorkshire (Pateley Bridge)	23	22/1
Total	74	69/5

Table 1. Interviewees by location and gender

## Results

### Theoretical framework

We draw on sociological approaches to food shopping, studies of consumer attitudes to local foods, and a broader literature on how to define resilience as related to food systems.

Key points from these literatures were:

1. Food shopping is a highly routine activity still largely carried out by women as part of caring for family members (de Vault 1991).
2. Previous research in the Scottish Islands (Marshall et al., 2018) describes how long distances to supermarket require carefully planned shopping trips that fit in with work and childcare.
3. Consumers understand the purchase of locally produced foods via short supply chains as a way of caring for rural economies and people (Dowler et al. 2009).
4. Consumption practices are an understudied and so less understood aspect of food system resilience (Doherty et al., 2019).



### Thematic analysis

Four key themes emerged from our interviews:

#### **Mass retail and the routines of daily life**

Greater distances to supermarkets, small shops and other facilities shape the routines of rural food shopping. Many interviewees combined food shopping with other activities requiring a car trip.

#### **The importance of local retailers**

Small shops and local retailers were valued as they provide a range of services in remote and rural areas, particularly for older people: 'We all worry about the future of small shops locally' (Interview 11, Skye).

#### **Limited availability of locally-produced foods**

The situation varied across the four areas but in general, with the exception of meat, locally produced foods (especially fruit and veg) were not widely available.

#### **Techniques of household 'buffering'**

Rural households use techniques such as carefully planned food shopping, extended food stores and cooking 'from scratch' to protect themselves against potential shortages: 'We're at the very end of a food chain up here' (Interview 18, Orkney).

## Discussion

Our interviews reflect several points discussed in the literature:

- Despite living in agricultural areas, residents of the case study communities (like the rest of the UK population) purchase the majority of their food from supermarkets.
- Living at distance from retail outlets and at the end of lengthy supply chains increases their vulnerability to disruptions in supply. It can also mean increased prices and reduced choice.
- Individuals adopted a range of strategies to maintain food supplies despite disruption. Several also described shopping for elderly relatives and neighbours.
- Interviewees wanted to buy locally produced foods, but, with the exception of meat (beef and lamb), these were often not available and not affordable for those on lower incomes.

These findings highlight ways in which consumption practices can enhance the resilience of fragile food systems in remote and rural areas. However, they also show how supply chains often take food that is produced in these areas away to larger markets, and lack the necessary infrastructure for local production (e.g. abattoirs) despite an unmet demand for such food within these communities.

## References

This research was part of the ResULTs project: <http://upland-resilience.org/>

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