



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Official Response

SUBJECT: **Becoming a Good Food Nation**
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Introduction

The Scottish Government has published a discussion document setting out its ambition that Scotland should become a 'Good Food Nation'.

"Scotland should become a Good Food Nation, a Land of Food and Drink not only in what we as a nation produce but also in what we buy, serve and eat. The Scottish Government wants food to be a key part of what makes the people of Scotland proud of their country – food which is both tasty to eat and nutritious, fresh and environmentally sustainable."

The discussion document covers a range of issues on which we could comment. These include issues of great importance such as the health and environmental impact of food and diet in Scotland; the role of the supermarkets; catering in institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons; and how we create a sound and sustainable good food economy. However we identify one issue as being of the greatest importance at the present time: the continued existence of food poverty in Scotland.

Food Poverty

The Church of Scotland supports the idea of a good food nation but we believe that the continued existence of widespread food poverty makes this aspiration seem a distant prospect. We choose to focus on this because we believe that this is the most pressing and urgent barrier to Scotland becoming a Good Food Nation. It is striking that the discussion document, which makes much of the advances since the "Recipe for Success" policy was launched in 2009, makes no mention of the most

obvious and significant development in these five years – the growth of food banks, now in danger of becoming embedded in our communities.

The Church of Scotland has a long standing commitment to the wellbeing of people in Scotland. Churches have always played a role in relieving poverty, a role that continues to this day. The Church also has a growing concern about our care for the earth; particularly in response to the challenge of climate change.

Food and agriculture bring together these themes and provides in Scotland in 2014 one of the biggest policy challenges for government, church and others: the continued existence of food poverty in a land of agricultural and economic wealth. As the report Good Food Nation makes clear Scotland has successful and profitable food and farming industries; but in both urban and rural Scotland food poverty has been growing.

The Church has been called up on to help relieve this problem, and congregations across the country from different denominations have been involved in establishing and running food banks. This has become the biggest charitable effort by churches in the past decade.

Food Banks

We recognise the commitment of those involved in running Scotland's food banks and commend the work of those (from churches, faith communities and others) who are responding to this need by becoming involved in food banks; but we are concerned and appalled that there should be a need for food banks at all, and apparently a still-growing need.

Food banks represent a huge market failure – an economic and political failure that brings little credit to food and agriculture businesses, to government at all levels, or to Scotland as a nation. No aspiring good food nation can ignore the scandal they represent.

The major changes required to eliminate the need for food banks are partly matters of economic strategy and of the welfare benefits system; but there are also changes needed to Scotland's food economy, to the development of food projects, and to food production and food retailing if we are to ensure that everyone in Scotland has access to healthy food at affordable prices.

Food banks cannot be a long term solution to food poverty in Scotland; but there may be ways in which the groundswell of community responses to food poverty which they represent can be harnessed to develop more sustainable, local, community-based responses which have a major part to play alongside the structural changes needed to eliminate food poverty.

We believe that this outcome (the elimination of food poverty) should be the principal aim of Scottish Government food policy, and therefore that the proposed Scottish Food Commission be given this challenge as its first objective.

We comment on individual questions raised in the discussion document below.

Consultation questions

The Government seeks responses to the following specific questions:

1. How important do you think it is that we aim to be a Good Food Nation?

We share the Cabinet Secretary's concern about the "Scottish paradox": a country with a rich and fruitful environment, top quality produce but with a painfully bad diet for many, poor health indicators compared to countries of similar wealth and with shocking examples of food poverty.

We are pleased that many sectors of the food and drink industry are thriving and that Scotland has a reputation for quality produce that includes seafood, meat, shortbread and whisky. But this is scarcely comfort for those who are in food poverty and we are concerned that Good Food Nation does not discuss food poverty in Scotland and the dramatic and unwelcome rise in the need for food banks. This is a significant omission and undermines the credibility of the proposals.

The aim is not credible without a clear commitment to tackling food poverty as a starting point.

2. How would we know when we had got there? What would success look like?

A Good Food Nation would be one in which people in communities across Scotland have access to nourishing, affordable food. Key indicators of success would be the elimination of the need for food banks, and a growth in lively and diverse community-based food projects.

3. Do you agree with the proposed vision? How would you improve it?

As already stated, unless the vision embraces the challenge of tackling food poverty it will lack credibility. Building on the energy of community initiatives, bringing strategies of community empowerment and sustainability together with anti-poverty strategy, has to be the core. (We welcome the acknowledgement of the work of the Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership¹ as one example of the potential here)

4. How would your life be better? What does being a Good Food Nation mean in your locality?

5. Are there any other essential steps we need to take before setting out on this journey?

6. How do you think a Food Commission could best help?

We agree that a Scottish Food Commission could be helpful but its remit, purpose and accountability must be clear. We would be concerned if it were simply a quango designed to promote food production or sales and if its membership was drawn primarily from these sectors. We suggest that it should focus first and foremost on the question of how everyone in Scotland can eat well; and what steps need to be taken by government, the health service, education, and the food industry to bring this about.

¹ Good Food Nation, p12

Membership of the Commission will be important. It must include representatives from community groups, particularly those communities where the risk of food poverty is highest and its remit should require it to develop policy and recommendations with these communities in mind. It must not simply be a vehicle to promote Scottish agriculture and food industries in their present form; rather it should challenge both to help find solutions to food poverty.

7. In what areas should indicators be set to check we are on track towards our goals?

As stated above, key indicators of success would be the elimination of the demand/need for food banks, and a growth in lively and diverse community-based food projects.

8. What are your views on the different approaches that could be taken to help us become a Good Food Nation?

Beyond those already stated, we would see it as important to get strategies of health, carbon reduction and tackling poverty working together. We would note that few outcomes in any of these areas are mentioned in the chapters on the "success story".

Land reform is a further agenda which needs to be brought within this strategy.

9. Do you agree with the proposed initial focus on:

- Food in the public sector
- A children's food policy
- Local food
- Good food choices and
- Continued economic growth?

All but the last bullet point are sensible priority areas, and we recognise the success of projects in these areas already. However there is a need to pull together these themes and relate them to the vision in a more structured way. We suggest that this is by focusing on those communities where the risk of food poverty is greatest and where action under the proposed themes is targeted.

We know that more affluent areas with lower levels of food poverty tend to have healthier diets and better health outcomes. Starting by ensuring all have access to good, affordable food may be expected to have an impact on diet and on health inequalities. For these reasons an approach primarily targeted towards tackling food poverty is most likely to be effective.

We are not convinced that continuing economic growth in its own right is a worthwhile objective or a desirable outcome. Continued economic growth can lead to greater consumption, larger carbon footprints and more waste; as a driver, it may reinforce and increase inequality. It would be better to focus on those with greatest need and ask how can the food economy help meet their needs. It may be that this will require some market interventions: a free market in food will not necessarily bring about a desirable or sustainable outcome.

In terms of the focus on “good food choices”, it is noticeable that “long-lasting behavioural change” is needed from “farmers, fishermen, food processors and producers, public bodies, caterers in all their guises and communities as a whole” with little or no specifics as to what these changes are to be. We are also puzzled as to the meaning of “an approach based on celebration and class neutrality”²

10. Which other areas would you prioritise?

Geographically it is worth considering a focus on the most deprived areas (though food poverty is also present, if more hidden, in rural areas where it is linked to retail and travel costs).

11. What other steps toward achieving a Good Food Nation would you recommend?

Scottish agriculture receives substantial payments from the Common Agricultural Policy and other sources. We are not convinced that these funds are well aligned to the objective of becoming a Good Food Nation. It would be useful for the proposed Scottish Food Commission to be set the task of scrutinising the allocation of payments and preparing recommendations to realign payments to help bring about the aspiration of a good food nation.

12. What else should be considered?

13. What steps do you plan to take to help Scotland on the journey toward becoming a Good Food Nation – in the next month and in the next 12 months?

Churches and congregations across Scotland are involved in both food projects and food banks. This is one of the principal areas of our charitable activity. In 2014 there were 17 food bank projects in the area of the Presbytery of Glasgow alone. Congregations and other partners will continue to provide immediate help to those that need it but the Church of Scotland is equally concerned to find ways to help people move beyond food banks to develop food projects that could help move towards the aspiration of a good food nation.

We wish to work with the Scottish Government and other partners to help support congregations and communities in this journey. As a start we are planning a conference for early 2015 on the theme ‘Beyond Foodbanks’ to help explore these issues.

² Good Food Nation, p23