

# CASESTUDY: GROWING LOCAL FOOD IN UIST – FROM LOCAL ACTION TO POLICY CHANGE

## KEY INSIGHTS

- ✓ Island food insecurity is compounded by specific island challenges, including supply chain interruptions, transportation premiums, and less choice of fresh produce and quality nutritious food in stores.
- ✓ Many island stores are defined as convenience stores on the basis 'that there is a bigger store a mile or so up the road', when in an island context it may be the *only* shop. Such stores carry more highly processed convenience foods, limiting the offer of healthier options, and are on average 25%+ more expensive.
- ✓ In the context of Scotland becoming a Good Food Nation, it is vital to embed the realities of what a Right to Food looks like for island communities and to progressively realise such a right for these communities.
- ✓ A focus on the Right to Food is very different from traditional development strategies for the food and drink sector which focus on boosting business income through the export of high value products.
- ✓ The current climate and biodiversity emergencies demand that we rebuild sustainable local food economies and reduce our reliance on global food systems, which are particularly precarious for islands.
- ✓ Local food economies contribute to a circular economy, and have many more positive externalities on community, health and the environment. For example, local produce has a higher nutritional value than produce delivered through long supply chains. The Scottish Government spends half of its budget on health. Access to nutritious food that delivers better health outcomes is a critical health intervention.
- ✓ There are many local assets, including fishing, crofting and sustainable practices, dynamic local enterprises, strong community organisations and cohesion, that can contribute to deliver a Right to Food.
- ✓ Rebuilding sustainable and vibrant local food economies requires multi-pronged and integrated strategies. This casestudy of Tagsa Uibhist demonstrates how this can be developed in practice within local communities. It shows how effective local community action can be that is deeply rooted in local experience and understanding, and how much such rooted action can positively influence national policy to realise, in practice on the ground, policy objectives like those in the Good Food Nation Act.

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*As a community-based charity whose aim is to promote health and wellbeing in Uist, Tagsa Uibhist is deeply concerned that many families in Uist cannot afford basic food items to keep them healthy and well. We are working to challenge local food poverty and insecurity through a range of diverse initiatives, including developing a sustainable and vibrant local food economy and engaging in extensive policy advocacy. All our initiatives involve asserting the fact that food insecurity must be tackled in terms of human rights and dignity. In all our work we follow the [Dignity Principles](#) as set out by Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Community.*

*Tagsa Uibhist is helping to elevate those with a lived island experience to shape government policy, legislation and to have an equal and substantial role in shaping a Good Food Nation for all. We participate at local and national government events, consultations and forums and give a platform to those who are being affected by food insecurity to tell their stories so that legislation is meeting people where they are at and is truly elevating low-income families out of food poverty.*

Alex MacKenzie, Local Food Development Manager, Tagsa Uibhist

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## CASESTUDY

Families in Uist are finding it increasingly difficult to get access to, and afford, sufficient nutritious food. The experience of food poverty has been steadily impacting more and more households as a result of several factors: the spike in food inflation, rises in fuel and energy costs, supply chain problems in getting food from the mainland to Uist, long distances between shops, the lack of public transport and the long-standing 'island premium' which means that people pay more for their food in Uist. The Uist and Barra Foodbank has reported that more and more families are compelled to use their services, with many experiencing shame and the fear of stigma.

*The Food Standards Agency describes food poverty as occurring 'where the constraints are such that it is not possible for individuals or households to consume a nutritionally adequate diet'. At a national level food insecurity is mainly driven by low income, insecure work, and inadequate social security provision. This is compounded by the specific challenges faced by island communities. Tagsa's research shows that food costs in Uist are 28% higher than on the mainland and the availability of fresh produce is far more limited and unreliable. Families are forced to eat what they can afford and what happens to be in stock, rather than what they need and prefer.*

Alex Mackenzie, Local Food Development Manager, Tagsa Uibhist

Tagsa Uibhist is a long-established and highly regarded local community organisation, delivering care to the elderly, as well as community transport and other services. Over more than a decade it has developed local horticulture, with polytunnels, community gardens and therapeutic services. In recent years it has built on these foundations to rapidly expand its action on local food, through a multi-pronged and integrated approach.

Tagsa's Local Food Development Programme contributes to reducing food insecurity by developing a sustainable and vibrant local food economy, focused on the needs of local people rather than on exporting highly priced products, and by advocating for equity in food availability and cost. Investing in local food development involves increasing opportunities for local people to buy locally grown produce, supporting growers to grow food for their own consumption and for local sale, encouraging local crofters to grow, raise and supply locally rather than 'exporting' off island, providing infrastructure and making market linkages with shops, restaurants and hotels.



Tagsa is currently delivering a range of local food initiatives to improve access to affordable nutritious food, support well-being, and create a more resilient food system with reduced food miles and emissions.

- **Community Gardens, Community Allotment Group, and outreach support** to encourage more people to grow locally, linked with opportunities to gain horticultural qualifications at community partner Cothrom.
- **NeighbourFood**: weekly online collection service in Uist linking local producers with potential customers.
- **Local Food Markets**: four markets held in 2023 generated close to £10k for the local economy and proved that there is substantial demand for local produce within the community. Five markets are planned from June to October 2024, as well as two food festivals. Tagsa will be buying food market equipment to rent out to producers so that they can sell and display more produce at the markets.
- **Biadh Blasta Uibhist** (ready meals on wheels using locally reared and grown produce – see box)
- Support to the **Uist and Barra Foodbank**. As well as providing fresh food to the local foodbank, Tagsa is working with the Foodbank to set up a community fridge service where surplus food is available to all.
- A **Uist Refillery**, launching in 2024, aims to stock staple produce and dry goods to reduce packaging waste and offer cost savings on essential store cupboard goods. There are also plans for a mobile refillery.

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*Biadh Blasta Uibhist is an innovative home-grown meals-on-wheels project, designed to meet the nutritional needs of vulnerable community members while also assisting carers by providing high quality ready-made meals. The pilot project in the winter of 2023-24 delivered over 500 ready-meals to individuals who are being cared for at home. The meals were prepared by the local bakery using local Uist lamb, venison, salmon, potatoes, onions, carrots, etc., boosting the local economy and using zero-emission vehicles.*

*The next stage of this project will increase the number of meals to 1360 and reach beyond Tagsa’s own care clients by also targeting carers in low-income households, including those referred by other agencies. Consultation with unpaid carers showed that the provision of ready-made, healthy meals would be very helpful both financially and in terms of the time needed to prepare good meals.*

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## KEY ELEMENTS OF TAGSA’S MULTI-PRONGED AND INTEGRATED LOCAL FOOD STRATEGY

### Developing a sustainable & vibrant local food economy

*e.g. community growing, local food markets, enabling local market linkages, training in horticulture, refillery, etc.*

### Local targeted interventions

*e.g. ready meals on wheels using locally reared and grown produce delivered to care clients and carers; support for local Foodbank*

### Local policy development

*e.g. the Western Isles Food Partnership to transform local food production and consumption into a more sustainable system*

### Influencing key market actors

*e.g. asking the Co-op to re-classify their island shops as supermarkets not convenience stores to give priority to healthier food products rather than highly processed convenience foods*

### National policy advocacy

*e.g. campaigning for the Right to Food to be realised at a local level, for an island uplift payment, and for the implementation of the Good Food Nation Act.*

Tagsa is actively pursuing its long-term goal of creating a Uist Community Food Hub to create a welcoming community space where people grow, cook, eat and share food together and as an incubator site for training and knowledge to create a resilient local food system that benefits everyone in the community. Architectural designs for the environmental building are already in place.

## INFLUENCING POLICY AND MARKETS

The extensive local activities Tagsa is delivering around local food development reflect the actions of a strong and dynamic community organisation. But Tagsa goes well beyond this by building on its deep understanding and experience of local food systems to influence and change national markets and policies.

The direct relevance of effective community action on the ground to deliver on Scottish Government legislation and policy is obvious from this casestudy, especially the National Performance Standards (including on health), the Good Food Nation Act, the Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill, Community Wealth Building, a circular economy, and responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

In August 2023 Tagsa, in partnership with Nourish Scotland, published a report, *Our Right to Food: Uist and Barra*, based on local research conducted by local people to look at the affordability and accessibility of basic fruit and vegetable items in Uist and Barra.

On the back of this research, Tagsa are taking an advocacy role within Uist to improve access to good nutritious food. Through the extensive community-based research Tagsa has become a credible voice to advocate, promote and investigate actions that improve the availability and affordability of a wider variety of healthy staple produce.

Tagsa has presented their findings to Scottish Government, the local council Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, NHS Western Isles and to a wide range of public bodies with the view to addressing the food insecurity challenges that exist on the islands which are impacting significantly on low-income households.

*"It's been very helpful in having a properly scoped out example for illustrating the challenges island/rural communities face in accessing adequate foods. By way of example, with there being work done on the forthcoming Human Rights Bill, I'll continue to refer to this. In addition, I'm aware of plans for the Healthy Living Programme to do some work on the islands. I'll be keen to see how this work and your engagement with the Co-op goes."*

Senior Policy Adviser, Scottish Government

Tagsa is campaigning:

- ✓ for an island uplift payment particularly catering to the most vulnerable people in the community – the elderly and children.
- ✓ with their community researchers for the re-classification of the island Co-op shops to become supermarkets as opposed to convenience stores. This would give priority to healthier food products and not to top branded goods and highly processed convenience foods which have a higher fat, salt and sugar content. Stocking own brand, value ranges as well as family sizes would ease the cost of essential goods.

Tagsa Uibhist is also leading on the development of a Western Isles Food Partnership. This seeks to take a whole food systems approach involving regional and national organisations represented in the Outer Hebrides with the goal of achieving a Sustainable Food Places award for the Western Isles. The Partnership will bring together key stakeholders, - from the local authority, health board and public sector establishments to food growers, retailers, and the hospitality sector, - to transform local food production and consumption into a more sustainable system.



*“The research findings evidenced that people living in Uist and Barra are disproportionately more disadvantaged in terms of affording and gaining access to basic fruit and vegetable items. Less than half of the shopping list items were easily accessible and furthermore the total basket cost was 28% more expensive than a Tesco Online shop. These findings were in stark contrast to other rural mainland communities and evidenced worrying trends on the dietary inequalities for island communities: communities who rely heavily on long food supply chains challenged by ferry problems and the rising cost of fuel, agricultural inputs, food and living costs.*

*There is a strong call, by our community researchers, for immediate and progressive action by national and regional authorities to address these difficulties in a meaningful way. Action which promotes a truly dignified island food system; one where everyone is food secure, with access to adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, without the need of emergency food aid. It is one where the right to food is understood as a matter of justice rather than charity and allows for a Good Food Nation in which every community’s health and well-being is paramount and no-one is left behind. Our island communities demand nothing less because, of course, a right to food is a right for all.”*

from Executive Summary of *Our Right to Food: Uist and Barra*



## LINKS FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Tagsa Uibhist: <https://www.tagsa.co.uk/> and <https://www.tagsa.co.uk/how-we-help/uist-local-food-development/>

*Our Right to Food: Uist and Barra* Report: <https://www.tagsa.co.uk/how-we-help/our-right-to-food/>

Nourish Scotland: <https://www.nourishscotland.org/> and <https://www.nourishscotland.org/projects/our-right-to-food/>

The Poverty Truth Community: <https://www.facebook.com/PovertyTruthCommunity/>

Uist and Barra Foodbank: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Uistandbarrafoodbank/>

Cothrom: <http://www.cothrom.net/>

