Personal Response to the Becoming a Good Food nation Discussion Document by David Atkinson.

I comment on the document as someone who has been involved in issues related to food production and food and agricultural policy since the mid 1960’s. Recently I was involved in the production of Recipe for Success and was part of the Leadership Forum from 2007 until its conclusion in 2010. Most recently I was responsible for producing for Eco Congregation Scotland a discussion document called “Why Worry About Food” which aims to provide a basis for community groups who wish to discuss issues related to food security and many of the issues identified in the Scottish Governments Discussion Paper.

I felt that it would be of value were I to comment on what I would regard as being unfinished business from the 2007/8 exercise and on the achievements and disadvantages arising from how the previous exercise was structured.

The work of the 2007 Food Forum was divided into 5 work streams. I chaired Work Stream 5, which dealt with issues linked to affordability, access and security. All of these remain key areas for the current discussion. In our report, as part of the overall exercise we said, “At a personal level national food security does not guarantee either access or affordability. There is evidence that the rises in the price of food ha a major impact on the proportion of the population who can be classed as food poor.” We suggested the importance of Food Sovereignty and access to sufficient safe, healthy and sustainable food as a key driver in a cross cutting Government approach to policy. Delivering this we suggested needed Government, including local government, private and voluntary sectors to work together, essentially that co-ordination of much current activity would help. We identified that there was significant scope for Scotland to produce much more of what it consumes but that doing this would need the adoption of new drivers. Moving land from cereal production towards horticulture, which would impact, on the Scottish diet, would need a changed market structure and modified incentives. I would suggest that many of the issues with which the Forum discussed remain issues upon which there is still a need for action.
The 2007 Leadership Forum produced two documents recipe for Success and The Leadership Forums report. These were different in emphasis. It will be important that any new Food Commission should revisit the comments of the 2007 Forum. Recommendations from the Forum of particular relevance include the importance of food policy embracing not just economic success but also health, well-being and social issues. The Forum emphasised the need for a radical approach to be taken to food security including novel approaches to both increasing and diversifying Scottish production. Food security was seen as being intimately linked to energy security and pricing. This was a particular issue for the food poor. Recipe for Success and the report of the Forum thus differed principally in the different emphasis they placed upon health and social issues relative to the economic case for food business in Scotland. Its good to see the more health and social aspects of food getting emphasis in the discussion document.

However the forerunner to the Forum “The Future of Food In Scotland” also prioritised diet and nutrition, access to food and food production but these failed to be fully explored in Recipe for Success as a consequence of the pressure to emphasise Economic Growth in the sector. The Economics of Scotland matter and its right that they are recognised as a major priority in question 9. However becoming a good food nation requires much more than this. Getting the people of Scotland to se food as part of their identity in the same way as is the case in France or in Italy will need a different approach and routes from producer to consumer which go beyond the supermarket route. Braiding is a key concept, which is based upon their being a number of routes to achieve the same objective. Putting this is place matters to the good food nation concept.

We are aware that there have been major changes since these reports but I am struck by the similarity of the key issues. The final recommendation for the Leadership Forum related to Leadership and the need for an independent advocacy on food to maintain food as a key policy and societal driver. If the Food Commission could become this, that would be achieving one of the previous Forums key objectives.
The previous Forum had two iterations. The 2007 group consisted of around a dozen people, those asked to lead work streams or themes and champions who were responsible for seeing that cross cutting areas such as health or the Scottish Whisky industry were not neglected. As this Forum was comprised of named individuals who were constant throughout the exercise it worked well.

Following the publication of Recipe for Success the majority of the initial group were added to by a larger number of others with the aim of making Recipe for Success work. Most of the new members were drawn for organisations concerned with food issues. This broadened the make up of the group in a valuable way by bringing in additional expertise. This was its strength. The new structure also had major weaknesses. The majority of Forum members had not been involved in devising Recipe for Success and so had a lesser commitment to getting it to work. Because many represented organisation it was not uncommon for an organisation to be represented by several individuals during the course of the discussions, which blunted continuity and focus. While the discussions of the initial forum were the product of the Forum the evaluation criteria for round 2 were provided by civil servants based on current government models. This had a significant impact on commitment.

The previous approach worked and achieved much but it would I think help if such considerations were to be taken into account in the construction of the new Food Commission. The Forum always had the aspiration to have an event focussed on the food poor. It never managed this. It would be hoped that the new Commission would be able to actively engage with this sector.

David Atkinson