

Food & Footprint

Case Study

Empowering Food and Drink Businesses in the Highlands and Islands



Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) is the regional development agency for Scotland's Highlands and Islands, dedicated to fostering a sustainable and inclusive economy. As part of its mission, HIE aims to attract more people to live, work, study, invest, and visit the region.



hie.co.uk/techhub

Through a long-standing partnership with SAC Consulting (as part of SRUC), HIE has been able to tap into expertise and resources that drive innovation in food supply chains, human and animal health, aquaculture, and agriculture. This collaboration has been enhanced by a strategic partnership with SRUC's Rural and Veterinary Innovation Centre (RAVIC), leading to multiple joint initiatives.

The customer challenge

Recognising the need for dedicated support within the food and drink sector, in early 2022, SAC Consulting successfully supported HIE to launch Food and Drink TechHUB, a three-year food and drink business support service which is part of The Northern Innovation Hub*. TechHUB was established to provide hands-on business assistance, technical expertise, and strategic events tailored to supporting a network of food and drink producers and supply chain businesses.

Designed to complement HIE's existing initiatives, the programme sought to foster a culture of innovation, strengthen industry connections, and facilitate business growth across the Highlands Council area. Over 3 years, the initiative worked to support hundreds of SME food and drink businesses by providing expert-led support and

guidance. SAC Consulting tendered for this work and was awarded in 2022 and extended for a further year in 2025.

The core challenge for TechHUB was to equip businesses with the tools and expertise required to introduce high-quality, competitive products to the market. A key focus was placed on encouraging business-to-business collaboration, promoting knowledge-sharing, and enhancing industry-wide competitiveness. To ensure success, SAC Consulting was tasked with designing an accessible and results-driven support service that could empower businesses to innovate and scale effectively.

Our solution

A dynamic support programme was created by the Food & Enterprise team, blending virtual and in-person assistance to reach businesses across the region. The approach was designed to be highly adaptable, ensuring that companies could access the right support at the right time to help with learning, overcoming challenges, exploring new opportunities, and accelerating their growth.

A key component of the programme was that each participating business received an initial one-to-one, 30-minute support call. This



Credit: Tim Winterburn/Highlands and Islands Enterprise

ensured personalised guidance, identified ongoing growth barriers and opportunities, and connected businesses to relevant public and private sector resources for additional support.

Beyond direct engagement with businesses, the programme facilitated networking events, interactive workshops, and webinars that encouraged collaboration and knowledge-sharing among food and drink enterprises. These sessions connected entrepreneurs with industry experts, allowing them to exchange best practice, explore market opportunities, and establish valuable partnerships.

Additionally, innovation clinics offered personalised one-on-one consultations with a panel of experts sharing insights, challenges, solutions and experiences, whilst also helping businesses to cultivate innovation.

Throughout the initiative, expert support covered critical areas such as product development, prototype testing, and scaling. Expertise was provided on packaging and labelling compliance, food safety, shelf-life optimisation, and nutritional analysis.

Sustainability was also a core focus for SAC Consulting, with businesses receiving expert advice on low-carbon practices, net zero strategies, and waste management solutions. The programme also helped businesses to refine their branding, marketing strategies, business planning, and e-commerce capabilities.

Added value

Since launch, the TechHUB programme has successfully engaged with over 150 businesses across the Highland region. Additionally, five common interest groups were formed to allow businesses with shared challenges or sector-specific concerns to work together to find collective solutions and foster mutual growth. Through 28 industry-focused events and webinars, participants have gained insights on critical topics such as packaging, product innovation, circular economy practices, net-zero strategies, and digitalisation. These sessions allow businesses to exchange best practices, address shared challenges, and develop collective solutions, strengthening the sector overall.



Credit: Tim Winterburn/Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Many of the businesses supported by SAC Consulting throughout the programme went on to access new markets, securing opportunities to supply larger retailers and wholesalers. Guidance on technology adoption has helped them to enhance manufacturing efficiencies, whilst expert advice on sustainable packaging solutions has aligned products with evolving environmental expectations. Additionally, support in new product development has enabled businesses to introduce innovative offerings tailored to the Scottish market.

Additionally, with the ability to access the expertise, breadth of knowledge and globally renowned research from the wider SRUC, SAC Consulting delivers unique value to this partnership with HIE.

Our customer says

“Partnering with SAC Consulting to develop and deliver TechHUB has been instrumental in equipping businesses with the tools, expertise, and connections they need to grow and to support their journey towards net zero. The programme has successfully worked to deliver collaboration, sustainability, productivity and competitiveness in the sector. This successful partnership has paved the way for HIE to expand our support and we are proud of the positive impact the project is having on our food and drink industry”

Claire Munro

Senior Project Manager, Northern Innovation Hub, Highlands and Islands Enterprise



Credit: Trevor Martin/Highlands and Islands Enterprise

*The Northern Innovation Hub is delivered by HIE and funded through the Inverness and Highland City-Region Deal