What does local food mean to you?

Report of Findings

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Introduction

This report sets out the findings of ‘What does local food mean to you?’, a research project conducted in 2012/13 by the University of Leicester’s Cultural Production and Consumption Research Group.

The concept of ‘local food’ is a timely one. In September 2012, the Leicester City Council (2012) released its Climate Change Programme of Action. Local food was a focal point for many of the initiatives, which sought to increase the amount of food under local production as part of the Council’s wider goals of building strong local economies and communities, and
healthy citizens and environments. These initiatives included developing a local food and drink charter for businesses, promoting local food through the twice yearly food and drink festivals, organizing a competition for local schools to encourage growing and cooking food, and supporting other local food growing projects. Looking beyond Leicester, local food is increasingly central to many countries’ food security and environmental sustainability policies, to place branding and regional development strategies around the world, and to consumers’ desires for quality, freshness, and authenticity (e.g. Dupuis et al 2006; Feagan 2007; Hollows et al 2013; Kniazeva 2005; Sassatelli & Scott 2001; Sims 2009; Tovey 2009).

But what does the term ‘local food’ mean? However central local food may be to strategies intended to promote economic and social wellbeing, it is nevertheless a murky term. Indeed, research gives us good reasons to not take the term for granted:

- First, research suggests that while consumers are interested in product pedigree (e.g. knowing if a food is locally grown), there is nevertheless considerable confusion and scepticism with regard to food and origin labelling (Eden et al 2008; Mintel 2008, 2011). In other words, consumers might be interested in local food and think of it as a ‘good thing’, but they don’t necessarily trust claims about which foods are local, nor regard local food as relevant for them.
- Second, research on the making of markets for local, artisanal and ‘authentic’ food and drink products suggests that the meaning and marketing of some foods as local are highly contingent accomplishments (e.g. Jordan 2007; Paxson 2010; Smith Maguire 2013). Food producers and sellers draw on a number of different—and potentially conflicting—parameters (Sassatelli & Arfini 2013) in making judgements about what counts as local food, including:
  - production parameters (local food might be defined by the source of the raw materials, the origins of the knowledge of how to grow/make/prepare the food, the location of production or purchase, and/or some other dimension of the food’s journey to the consumer’s table);
  - spatial parameters (some, or all part(s) of the entire commodity chain and network of procurement must be local in order for a food to be ‘local’);
  - emotional parameters (different feelings—such as trust, nostalgia, pleasure—certify a food as ‘local’ in the experience of consuming it, sometimes irrespective of production or spatial parameters).

In other words, ‘local food’ doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone. This was the starting point for the research project ‘What does local food mean to you?’

The researchers interviewed a convenience sample of individuals at the annual Leicester Market Winter Food and Craft Festival, and at a monthly Leicester Farmers Market. Our goal was to bring together a diverse range of voices: respondents included local food enthusiasts,
those who occasionally include local food in their food purchases, and those who have no or almost no involvement with local food.

The research found that:
- local food is a common, though not predominant, part of many people’s food practices;
- local food has a stock of common meanings, which are largely positive;
- a positive perception of local food does not necessarily lead to purchasing local food;
- the foods that are identified as ‘local’ vary widely;
- people have different perceptions of supermarkets, both as the antithesis of and point of access for local food;
- the link between buying and growing local food is complex and in need of further investigation.

Findings

Our findings suggest that local food already has a presence in many people’s everyday lives:
- people intentionally choose local over non-local alternatives: see section 1, below.
- people are finding ways to access local food—buying it, growing it, consuming it: see sections 2, 3 and 4.
- there are a number of meanings and motivations commonly associated with local food: see section 5.
- people identify common obstacles to using local food: see section 6.

These findings present opportunities for further development of the promotion and distribution of local food; nevertheless, our findings also suggest a number of challenges.

1. Making a point of choosing local food

The majority of our respondents—62%—said that they make a point of choosing local over non-local alternatives for at least one kind of food, at least occasionally.

Q. ‘Do you ever make a point of choosing local over non-local alternatives?’
- respondents in their 30s or older were more likely to answer ‘yes’ than younger respondents;
- women were more likely to answer ‘yes’ than men.
People’s commitment to buying local food varied widely. The ‘local’ dimension was one of several qualities that consumers looked for, and choosing local alternatives was a decision tempered by a range of factors, including competing preferences (e.g., for organic foods), and concerns about ease of access and relative cost. Most commonly, people struck a balance between preferences and possibilities.

What people had to say...

Q. ‘Do you ever make a point of choosing local over non-local alternatives?’

- ‘Yes I do, but only if and when I can find local products in the supermarket.’ (woman, 50s)
- ‘To be honest, although I do buy local, I tend to pay more attention to whether a product is organic.’ (woman, 40s)
- ‘Not really, I don’t give it that much thought. Maybe I should consider it more but I tend to buy based on looks, price and sell-by dates. I like how M&S have started putting not only the country of origin but where in Britain, and the name of the farmer. That makes you more aware.’ (woman, 40s)

About 15% of the sample (19 respondents) had a high level of involvement with local food. For them, local foods were deemed always preferable to non-local versions, and they regularly bought and ate local food (including that which they’d grown themselves).

What people had to say...

- A couple in their 60s, who shop at farmers markets ‘as often as possible’ try to ‘almost always’ buy local pork pies and honey, rather than non-local versions. For the locally made pork pies: ‘They taste better. [The local butcher], they’re the only ones who know how to make it properly. We’ve tried the supermarket ones, and the pastry wasn’t right.’ For the honey: ‘Honey from local bees is better for you. It’s the pollen that you’re used to. At least, this is what we’re told. The question is, whether it’s true. It’s good to have a healthy scepticism.’

Most (16 of the 19) of those with a high involvement with local food were also local food sceptics, who expressed uncertainty, distrust or caution around the accuracy of the term ‘local food’, be it on food labels, in the marketplace generally (and in supermarkets specifically), or in our interview questions. For such consumers, trusted claims to localness were likely to come from personal contacts, such as those provided through repeated patronage of the same farm shops. In such cases, personal guarantees of localness are preferable to generic labels or—as we see below in section 2—to the location of purchase.
In summary, we found that:

- over 60% of our respondents made a point of choosing local foods at least occasionally;
- localness was only one of the criteria people used in selecting foods;
- the desire for local foods was balanced with other considerations, such as organic production, convenience and cost;
- there was a minority of high-involvement consumers, who go out of their way to find local foods rather than buy non-local versions;
- high-involvement local food consumers were more likely to be local food sceptics.

(For a discussion of those who never choose local over non-local foods, and issues of cost and convenience, see section 6.)

2. Points of access to local food—buying local

Farmers markets are the most common point of access for buying local foods.

Q. ‘Where do you buy local food?’ Most common responses:

- markets (48 responses)
- local shops (26)
- local butchers (18)
- farm shops (15).

As the above list suggests, local food is linked in people’s minds with local businesses.

Nearly a third of UK families shop at a farmers markets at least once a year (Manley 2010: 13). Of our respondents, over half—58%—said they shop at farmers markets regularly or occasionally:

How often do you shop at farmers markets?

With regard to ease of access, we gathered data at the Leicester Market Winter Food and Craft Festival, and the Leicester Farmers Market (on Humberstone Gate): both are in the city.
centre and readily accessible via bus and train—especially for those 68% of our respondents who live in Leicester. Nevertheless, access to local food did emerge as a challenge for some of our respondents—as we discuss in section 6.

Absent in the points of access was any mention of community gardens, Community Assisted Agriculture (CSA) schemes or Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS). Such programmes exist in the local area (e.g. Community Harvest Whetstone, Ashby Parva Growers Association; see http://www.ruralcc.org.uk/ccc-case-studies.html), but appear to have limited visibility and public awareness.

Nevertheless, location of purchase didn’t necessarily guarantee in the minds of consumers that the food was, indeed, local. For example, some Leicester Market consumers expressed reservations about the localness of the food for sale.

What people had to say...

- ‘I come to the Leicester Market especially for local stuff.’ (woman, 20s)
- ‘Leicester Market doesn’t always seem to be about 'locally grown' food. I’m not really sure that it’s any different to the supermarket stuff. I liked going to our farm shop, because then you really feel you know where it’s coming from.’ (couple, 50s)
- ‘I’ve bought fruit and veg from Leicester Market, but I’m not really sure if their produce itself was local.’ (man, 80s)

Unlike at the Leicester Market, respondents had more confidence in the localness of the food when there was direct access to the food producer—as is often the case at farmers markets.

Finally, it is worth noting that supermarkets were mentioned by 8 different respondents as their source of local food. However, more common was the view of supermarket food as the opposite of local food, and/or supermarkets as the opposite of locally-owned businesses.

What people had to say...

- [Buying from market traders] is better than the supermarket. It supports the traders and they have better, ‘more real’ products.’ (couple, 70s)
- ‘Yes I like to buy fruit and veg when possible locally. It’s better than importing it, and we should do more to help. But I find meats in the farm shop are too expensive in comparison to the supermarket, so that is only an occasional treat.’ (woman, 50s)
- ‘I prefer visiting the Leicester Market over the supermarket. It’s a more interactive experience.’ (man, 20s)
In summary, we found that:

- farmers markets were a common point of access for local food;
- local food was closely linked in people’s practices and perceptions with locally-owned businesses and local markets (farmers markets, local shops, local butchers, farm shops);
- the Leicester Market was strongly identified with local business, but not with local food;
- there was no apparent awareness of alternative, community-based points of access to local food, such as CSA or community garden projects;
- supermarkets may be a source of local food, but more generally were seen as ‘the other’ (e.g. non-local food, non-local business).

3. Points of access to local food—growing local

Nearly half of our respondents—46%—grow at least one form of food for personal consumption.³

Of those that grow their own food, the vast majority do so at home only (41 people), with fewer having an allotment (13) or growing both at home and at an allotment (3). The involvement with growing food ranged from very small-scale—such as only growing herbs—to far more intensive, with 17 people growing 4 or more specific crops.

Q. ‘Do you grow any of your own food?’

- respondents in their 20s and 30s were least likely to grow some of their own food;
- respondents in their 60s were the most active in growing their own food—16 of the 19 respondents in this age group were growing food at home and/or at an allotment garden.

Many of the younger respondents were university students, whose short-term residence and lack of space likely contribute to their low levels of involvement with growing food. Nevertheless, as with food growing programmes at local primary and secondary schools, there is scope for Higher Education institutions and their accommodation services to facilitate food growing by temporary student populations.

Those that grow at least some of their own food were more likely to also buy local food, and to shop at farmers markets, suggesting that these practices are linked and mutually reinforcing. Further research could explore the nature of the link between these practices, and how programmes to encourage food growing might feed into the promotion of local food buying, and vice versa. However, while these practices may be linked, the meanings of bought and grown local food are typically regarded as different, as we note in section 4.
In summary, we found that:

- there was a broad base of low-level involvement with growing food;
- growing at home was the most common place for involvement;
- younger adults were the least involved group, perhaps linked to lack of permanent residence;
- there was a link between growing food and buying local food, suggesting that these practices are mutually reinforcing (even if their outcomes are regarded as different—see section 4).

4. **What local foods are people consuming?**

We asked people to tell us what local foods they’d consumed in the past six months. People’s answers ranged widely, from honey and sausages, to olives and ‘Leicester food.’

Q. ‘What local foods have you consumed in the last six months?’ The five most frequently mentioned specific items were:

- pork/meat pies (24 mentions)
- honey (14)
- eggs (13)
- sausages (12)
- Indian curry (10).

As the list above suggests, people explicitly identify local food in the form of purchased food—both unprepared (e.g. raw vegetables) and prepared (e.g. honey, pork pies). What received little mention was own-grown food, despite the fact that nearly half of the respondents grow at least one form of food.

From the responses, the four most common general categories of local food consumed were fruit and vegetables; meat, fish, poultry, game (including pork and meat pies); baked goods and prepared food (including Indian curries); and cheese:

**Local foods consumed in the past 6 months**

- fruit and vegetables (30%)
- meats (28%)
- baked/prepared food (13%)
- cheese (11%)
These general categories are not straightforward: responses highlighted that ‘local’ might mean grown or produced locally (as it was for the majority of responses), but it might also mean bought locally, such as bananas (mentioned twice) and olives (mentioned once).

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that people are consciously consuming local foods: they can point to specific food and drink items when asked what local foods they have consumed. This suggests that for most people, localness ‘stands out’ as a specific and desired product quality.

In summary, we found that:
- the meaning of what counts as local food cannot be taken for granted, given the diversity of foods mentioned by respondents;
- local fruit, vegetable and meat products were common types of local food consumed;
- local food was largely associated with bought (prepared or unprepared) food;
- people do not typically think of own-grown food as ‘local food’ when asked what local foods they have consumed.

5. **Local food: meanings and motivations**

To get a better flavour of people’s engagement with local food—what people thought about it, and their reasons for choosing it—we asked two, related questions. The first question concerned the idealized meanings people associate with local food, from which three main themes emerged: specific places or people; specific foods; material qualities of local food. The second question concerned the everyday motivations around local food, from which two main themes emerged: the material qualities of local food (echoing the idealized meanings), and the consequential properties of local food (e.g. supporting the local economy).

**Q.** When I say ‘local food’, what sort of images or words come to mind?  

1. 108 responses (39%) referred to a **specific location or person**, typically with reference to where the food was grown/produced, or where it was bought. Of these, the most frequent responses were ‘from Leicestershire’ (13 responses), ‘markets’ (10), ‘locally grown’ (10). For example:
   - A young boy with his parents says, ‘I like eggs from Granny’s shop, and they come from a chicken on Bob’s farm. I don’t know the chicken’s name.’ His mother explains: ‘He probably wouldn’t be able to tell you the name of the supermarket we buy 90% of our food from, but I like the fact that he knows the eggs come from Bob’s chicken.’ (couple, 30s)
2. 98 responses (35%) referred to a specific food item, of which the most frequently mentioned were pork pies (18 responses), Indian curries (12), cheese (11), and vegetables (11). For example:
   • ‘For me, I think of produce that is grown locally; food that is made locally, even if it is something like curry.’ (woman, 30s)

3. 56 responses (20%) referred to material qualities of the food itself. This was most frequently found in references to ‘fresh’ (11 responses), ‘organic’ (9) and ‘quality’ (6).

Besides these three main themes, there were also five references to the representative properties of local food (e.g. it represents local culture—as the woman above noted with regard to curry—or reminds people of their childhood), and four to the consequential properties of local food (e.g. it’s good for local businesses and the environment to buy locally). For example:
   • 'It reminds me of my childhood, especially pork pies. There was a family butchers, just down the road from us. That’s where we would get our pork pies. But they’ve now closed. They wanted to retire and couldn’t find anyone to take it on as a going concern and maintain the same level of quality. That’s the other thing I think of: quality.' (woman, 60s)

While these representative and consequential properties were a minor theme in people’s idealized meanings of local food, they were at the forefront of their stated motivations for actually choosing local foods, as we found with the next question.

Q. What are the reasons, when you specifically choose to buy a local food product (rather than a non-local alternative)?

1. 64 responses (39%) referred to the material qualities of the food—especially notions of taste (21 responses), freshness (16), quality (15). For example:
   • ‘I like to buy local when I can because the quality always seems higher.’ (man, 50s)
   • ‘I think local food tastes better. It has more flavour than that plastic supermarket stuff.’ (man, 60s)

2. 45 responses (27%) referred to the consequential properties of local food. Of these, 25 referred specifically to supporting the local economy; 13 to the environmental or ethical consequences of local food, and 7 to the health consequences of local food (for example, in relation to a suggested link between eating local honey and alleviating allergies). For example:
• ‘It’s nice to support local producers.’ (woman, 40s)
• ‘I like to support small scale people rather than big companies.’ (woman, 40s)
• ‘I also think about food miles and the impact that buying non-local may have on the environment; or the environmental impact on the places these [non-local] products come from.’ (woman, 40s)
• ‘It’s better for the environment. When products have to travel from abroad, the impact on the environment and on people is damaging.’ (woman, 50s)

Responses to these two questions also included a few mentions of cost—interesting, with both positive and negative perceptions. From the idealized point of view, the phrase ‘local food’ brought to mind terms like ‘expensive’ and ‘high end’ for four people; whereas, seven people said they choose local over non-local food products because they are cheaper (and five because the local was more convenient than the non-local alternatives).

In summary, we found that:
⇒ the ideal meanings of local food tended to revolve around specific places and people, specific food items, and specific material properties such as freshness;
⇒ the stated reasons for choosing local food tended to revolve around specific material properties such as freshness, and the social consequences of choosing local food;
⇒ more emphasis was placed on local, economic consequences of choosing local food (supporting local businesses) than on environmental or health consequences;
⇒ people have conflicting perceptions of the costs and convenience of local food; for some, the phrase ‘local food’ equates with expensive (as we note below, in section 6).

6. **Obstacles to local food**

The meaning of local food comes not only from its positive associations, but also from the obstacles with which people associate the term and experience their food practices. With that in mind, we asked people their reasons for not buying local food (be that for some or all food purchases). As has been found in previous, Leicestershire-based research on local food (CPRE 2011), access was commonly noted as an obstacle for participating in local food systems, primarily in terms of convenience and cost.

**Reasons for not buying local food:**

• 36 responses (49%) made reference to convenience, primarily in terms of the perception of the superior convenience of supermarkets (rather than—for only 2 responses—an explicit difficulty with physically accessing local food)
• 23 responses (32%) made reference to cost, either in terms of the perception that local food is too expensive (9 responses) or that supermarket products are cheaper
For our respondents, ‘local food’ can simultaneously have both positive and negative connotations: an association with good quality and, at the same, something that is out-of-reach. For example, we spoke to a woman in her 40s who associated the phrase ‘local food’ with ‘fresh’ and ‘organic.’ In her work as a cook, she uses local food: ‘Yes, I work for a company, and they buy in local produce and meat.’ [do you notice a difference?] ‘Oh yeah, the quality is definitely better. It last longer.’ Nevertheless, she never buys local food for herself: she sees supermarkets as offering cheaper and more convenient options.

Besides cost and convenience, other respondents made reference to a lack of information—such as on food labels, or concerning the location of local food retailers.

What people had to say...

- ‘We get our fruit and veg from the [Leicester] Market, but not all of this is local. You used to be able to get seasonable apples, plums and so on, but now the market doesn’t sell English apples and plums. I’ve complained to the [Leicester Market] manager before about it.’ (man, 70s)
- ‘Yes, it’s nice to get [local food] when it’s available, but it’s about being aware when it’s available. Like, we didn’t know this market was on. It was a fluke we stopped by. We also aren’t always sure of whether things are local when they are sold in markets like this.’ (woman of a couple, 50s)
- ‘The truth is, most local shops are gone; you can hardly find a local butcher in my area.’ (man, 60s)
- ‘We shop at farmers markets as often as possible—but only when we know they’re on. But that’s the biggest problem: it’s not knowing when they’re on.’ (man of a couple, 60s)

Finally, in addition to people’s perceptions of convenience, cost and lack of information, our research highlighted a further obstacle that is largely invisible to consumers, yet structures their practices and attitudes in ways that pose major challenges to local food becoming a significant component of people’s food provisioning: the assumption that local food means bought food.

This association of local food with something purchased was noted in section 4, but is perhaps best exemplified by the following. Over a third of our sample (47 people) said that they never make a point of choosing local food—and of these, 13 grow their own food, either at home or in an allotment garden. Own-grown isn’t perceived as ‘local food’. For example, a man in his late 60s who is a (non-food) market stallholder disavowed any...
interest or involvement with local food, and insisted that he buys everything from the supermarket for convenience and cost factors. And yet, ‘Yes, we have an allotment. We grow potatoes, beans, cabbages – anything we need really. Salads, we have some carrots in now too.’ But as far as he is concerned: ‘That’s just my food, not local food.’

Not only is local food associated with bought food, but also with particular buying practices. As discussed above, local food is closely linked in people’s minds with local businesses— with the local butcher and farmers market, rather than with the supermarket. However, food retailing in the UK is heavily dominated by the large grocery chains, such as Tesco (which, alone, accounts for a third of UK milk sales), while the number of independent food retailers (fruiterers, butchers, bakers, and so on) has been in long-term decline since the late 1960s (Manley 2010: 92). Thus, local food and its purchase are regarded in opposition to mainstream food and food retailing. For example, one respondent, a woman in her 40s—herself a market stallholder and a self-described local food enthusiast—saw local food as a political protest against capitalism: ‘I really dislike corporate influence on environment so try to extract myself from that capitalist process wherever possible.’

The overwhelming association of local food with local shops helps to frame local food as the alternative rather than the (potential) norm. This mind-set reinforces the dominant food system, and dilutes potential consumer pressure on supermarkets from adjusting their business models and supply chains to accommodate local and season food producers. At the same time, the overwhelming association of local food with bought food helps to frame local food as a choice that gets made in the market, rather than an opportunity for individuals to participate in their food provision. This mind-set blocks potential participants—who may or may not already be growing their own food—from seeing themselves as stakeholders in the local food system.

In summary, we found that:

- Visible obstacles that inhibit people’s involvement with local food include perceptions of cost and convenience: local food is often seen as more expensive and less accessible.
- Visible obstacles also include a lack of information: people don’t have access to, or don’t feel confident in, the information about where food is from and/or where local food can be bought.
- Established food practices and perceptions link local food with bought food, and with small-scale, local businesses; while these associations give local food tangible meaning in people’s minds and practices, they also inhibit a more inclusive perception of who is a stakeholder and participant in local food, and a more challenging vision for the mainstream food system.
Recommendations

In asking ‘What does local food mean to you?,’ this research makes clear that local food is situated at the intersection of multiple meanings and motivations. Some of these established meanings create opportunities for local food initiatives: there is a broad base of low level involvement and a common set of positive associations to build on and leverage. At the same time, some of the perceptions and practices around local food pose obstacles to growing local food systems. More could be done to link up growing and buying to make the idea of participation in local food more inclusive and in order to widen the population of stakeholders.

Actions to increase participation (as growers and/or buyers) in local food might include:

- addressing the negative perceptions of cost by re-educating public perception, through like-for-like shopping basket price comparisons, clearly sign-posted in packaging/at the place of purchase, for those locally produced/sourced foods that can compete on price.
- addressing the negative perceptions of cost by emphasizing added value, through better story-telling, clearly sign posted in packaging/at the place of purchase, for locally produced/sourced foods.
- addressing negative perceptions of convenience by making locally grown and produced food more readily accessible and more visible (e.g. facilitating multiple small markets throughout Leicester City Council; growing space for student population).
- addressing the lack of information through better promotion of events (e.g. 12 of the 98 respondents at the Food Festival explicitly noted that they had stumbled across the event while walking in the town centre on the day; a further 3 had originally come for the tree lighting and discovered the food only as an unintended consequence).
- addressing the lack of information through better sign-posting of local food (e.g. adopting the provenance-oriented signage of the Farmers Market for (a portion of) the Leicester Market more generally).
- leveraging the strong local brand awareness of Leicester Market as a food retail site through the inclusion of (some) specifically local food products and producers.
- building on the broad general interest in local food through better promotion of awareness of CSA projects and other alternative points of access for local food.
- courting high involvement local food consumers by mobilizing forms of personal trust, such as interactions with specific, individual producers and thereby addressing reasons for local food scepticism.
- challenging the wider local food system, including major retailers, to include local producers and produce.
Description of the research

The report contains findings from standardized interview research carried out in 2012/13 in Leicester, UK, with 125 people on two different occasions: the Leicester Market Winter Food and Craft Festival (n=98) and the February Leicester Farmers Market (n=27). Data collection was carried out by the Cultural Production and Consumption Research Group of the Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, using a team-based research method for capturing large, one-off events (Kilker 2009).

Summary of the respondents:

- Female: 56%; Male: 44%
- 20s and younger: 20%; 30s-50s: 56%; 60s and older: 24%
- Resident of Leicester: 68%
- Resident of Leicestershire: 92%
- 6 years or longer residency in current location: 75%; 1-5 years: 20%
- ABC1 Occupations: 78%; C2 and below: 22%

The research was carried out by Jessica Bain, Yijin Chen, Jennifer Cole, Sarah Gong, Julian Matthews, Jennifer Smith Maguire, Ian Taylor, Maria Touri, Natasha Whiteman.

Works cited


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Notes

1 Out of a total of 123 different responses to the question ‘where do you buy your local food from?,’ with respondents potentially giving more than one response.
2 Out of a total of 45 who answered the question.
3 58 (46%) of 125 total respondents.
4 Based on a total of 329 different responses.
5 Based on a total of 329 different responses.
6 Based on a total of 277 different responses.
7 Based on a total of 166 different responses.
8 Based on a total of 73 different responses.
9 Of n=63 (data missing or invalid for remainder).
10 N = 125.