

Scottish Community Diet Project

Developing Effective Community Business Skills within Scotland's Community Food Projects

Roundtable Discussion Notes, November 2002

Although '*business with a small 'b' means different things to different people*', the participants at this round table discussion agreed that applying good community business skills within community food activity is vital for project growth, development, sustainability and effectiveness. Bringing together participants with wide ranging experience in community food work, food retail and community business generated an interesting exchange of ideas and helped identify potential areas for future action at local, regional and national levels.

Definition: What support currently exists?

The group began by identifying some of the existing support for business skills development already available to community food projects. Local community enterprise schemes¹ were important sources of step by step and jargon-free information and training for groups involved in, or thinking about setting up a community enterprise such as a food project. Inverness and Nairn Enterprise, for example, have devised in response to the needs of local community groups an on-line training resource (www.communitytoolkit.org.uk/), which includes information on developing business skills as well as advice sheets, management training and local guidance.

The Scottish Co-op has also produced a range of helpful resources for groups including its community food discount card² and its Co-operative Retailing Manual³. Further Education Colleges also have strong links in many areas with community food projects and provide customised courses to meet their specific training needs in business skills development.

Gaps: What is needed?

Significant gaps in business skills, however, remain as many community food projects struggle to access the existing help and support available for their paid and unpaid work force. A skills gap has been identified in a range of areas including in bookkeeping, accounting, Internet training, computer skills, and handling money. Skills in negotiation, buying, project management, marketing and making successful funding applications were also lacking in some projects, especially amongst first time managers, or staff with low confidence as a result of years of unemployment or having few training opportunities.

¹ To find out where your local enterprise company is, contact the Scottish Enterprise Network Helpline Tel: 0845 607 8787 or visit www.scottish-enterprise.com/sedotcom_home/about_se/lecs.htm

² For more information, please Tel: 0161 827 5879 or Email: communityfood@co-op.co.uk

³ The manual can be printed off from www.co-op.co.uk. To request a paper copy, please Tel: 0161 827 5879 or Email: communityfood@co-op.co.uk

Future Action: What can we do?

To assess what skills exist and do not yet exist within any project, a 'skills audit' or needs assessment should be undertaken at regular intervals by all paid and unpaid staff – not just once in the lifetime of a project as skill needs constantly change. Building on the project's strengths was also highlighted to be important – communities have expertise in many arenas from knowing what will work or not in their own area to local needs and priorities. Focusing on weaknesses alone could be disempowering and further lower morale, so a balance should be struck while 'taking stock'.

Once skill gaps are identified, finding out how to effectively fill them is the next step. Working in partnership with the private sector has been beneficial for some community food projects – Lloyds TBB, and Marks and Spencer were some of the examples from around the table. Scottish Business in the Community (www.sbcscot.com/index.htm) offers a number of opportunities for people working in companies to get involved with community projects and exchange skills and experience through its Development Assignment Programme.⁴ Scottish Business in the Community also operates a Senior Executives Programme to encourage retired business executives to share their expertise with community projects, and for community projects to share their expertise with them.⁵ Scottish Enterprise is also offering a wide range of new training and development opportunities to community projects.⁶ Another example of potential support involves the Scottish Health at Work Award Scheme (SHAW). For an organisation or company aiming to achieve gold standard in the SHAW awards, it must '*demonstrate active participation in a local or national health campaign, or demonstrate active commitment to the health of the local community*'⁷ This potentially could be with a local community food project if a suitable opportunity came about that was mutually beneficial to all parties.

Other forms of support include buddy or mentor schemes where new projects learn from the experiences of existing, more established projects by being matched up from an early stage. Food Business Mentoring Scotland also exists to provide practical assistance to food businesses in Scotland by partnering smaller companies with larger ones in non-competing sectors to provide guidance and support without charge. To find out more about the potential

⁴ For examples of case studies, visit: www.sbcscot.com/involved_dap.htm or Tel: 0131 442 2020

⁵ For more information, visit: http://www.sbcscot.com/involved_senexec.htm or Tel: 0131 442 2020

⁶ For more information about Services to the Community, call the helpline Tel: 0845 607 8787.

⁷ To find out more, visit: www.shaw.uk.com or Tel: 01224 551444. Email: shaw@health-promotions.com

opportunities for community food projects, contact Rona Sutherland Tel: 01360 850521.

Partnership working can also effectively take place with statutory agencies such as NHS Boards or Local Authorities over longer periods of time. Staff seconded to and from community projects can also be an effective opportunity for work force development.

While opportunities seem to abound for communities to benefit from the skills of other sectors, communities first need to know how to access these opportunities and what it will involve for them. 'Sticking plaster' approaches to solving problems and feeling used then dropped are the real concerns of some community food projects. As learning should be a two-way process, the new skills attained from working with others should be sustainable and for the long-term growth of the project. Some members of the group were concerned that short bursts of support from the business community or private sector were flawed in that the support would largely only be short-term.

Short-term funding as well as short-term support was also identified as a reason for community food projects not being able to develop their full business potential. Longer term funding up to 20 or 30 years was called for matched by an increase in trust by funders.

In terms of action that could be taken as a follow up to this discussion, sharing existing good practice was identified as an important starting point. The Scottish Community Diet Project (SCDP) with the help of food projects around Scotland could assist this process by profiling case studies of effective business skills development in the SCDP Fare Choice newsletter, and in the production of a special edition newsletter dedicated solely to the topic of business skills for community food projects.

A longer-term option could also be the production of a more detailed toolkit or resource document for community food projects wishing to develop their business skills. Ideally this would be done in partnership with others with experience in the community business, food retail and community food work. More details to follow shortly.

If you have any further ideas to add to this discussion and action framework, please get in touch with Lizanne Hume at the SCDP. Tel: 0141 226 5261 or Email: lhume@scotconsumer.org.uk