

Scottish Community Diet Project

Discussion on Community Retailing

Roundtable Discussion Notes, March 2005

Twenty-three people, many from remote and rural areas, attended this discussion on community retailing. The aim of this half-day session was to explore the issues around taking a more business-like approach when developing or setting up community shops or community food initiatives. Information was presented by Aiden Tyrrell from Communities Scotland on 'Future builders'¹ – a fund for social enterprises. Lucy Gillie, from the Scottish Community Diet Project also presented on 'Minding Their Own Business'² - a forthcoming guide on social enterprise for community food initiatives throughout Scotland. The group were then asked:

"How would you describe your community retailing experience, what support did you seek when you initially started and which business structure do you use?"

Experiences

Participants came from various settings, including: food co-ops, food co-op networks, community shops, community mobile shops and a couple of participants were in roles where they provided support to community retailers. Participants had experienced a variety of roles, including volunteer shop worker, treasurer and paid management. The scale of the community shops and community food initiatives varied hugely, from Island community shops selling a wide range of every day goods, including petrol, hardware as well as food, to food co-ops in Lothian selling fresh fruit and vegetables. Most participants agreed that there had been plenty of ups and downs in the process.

Support

Participants received support from a variety of organisations including: Local Authorities; Highlands and Island Enterprise; the Co-operative Group and Health Boards. Island initiatives tended to get support from their local enterprise companies, whereas urban initiatives tended to have more support from their local NHS boards. Community shops also supported each other. Support was given in various ways, although grants and funding were crucial for setting up and development. Support from the Co-operative group was highlighted – this included accessing the Co-operatives sourcing/supply systems as well as advice.

¹ For information on Communities Scotland regeneration grant scheme, visit their website: www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

² 'Minding their own business' will be available to download free of charge from the Scottish Community Diet Project website: www.dietproject.org.uk or tel: 0141 226 5261 to request a copy.

Structures

The group had or still used a variety of business structures, from properly constituted co-operatives to companies limited by guarantee and recognised charities. Most discussion surrounded how these structures were acquired. Some had been inherited or copied, appropriately or otherwise, from other initiatives.

The second part of this roundtable discussion asked the group to discuss:

‘What two pieces of advice would you give to community food initiatives about the benefits and pitfalls of taking a more business like approach?’

Views on the benefits of taking a more business-like approach

- ?? Less dependent on external organisations/funders
- ?? Community empowerment
- ?? Financial control
- ?? More control/autonomy/freedom
- ?? Volunteers can become paid staff
- ?? Allows long-term vision

Views on the pitfalls of taking a more business-like approach

One of the main concerns was ensuring that taking a business-like approach does not result in a diversion from the initiatives core values - a more business-like organisation may not be the same organisation it started out as. Participants also agreed that dealing with change and increased responsibility can consume much time and energy. There was also a concern that introducing paid workers can lead to a drop in volunteers and that becoming a business can be a problem when working with other organisations, (such as Local Authorities, etc) who may not be not be aware of what a social enterprise is.

The Scottish Community Diet Project noted that it plans to share information gathered from this discussion in the forthcoming guide on social enterprise, ‘Minding Their Own Business’ and to work with local and national partners to identify and develop future work in this field.