

London Community Feast: Promoting well-being through community-led projects

Tuesday 19th May 2009

Workshop notes: Setting up a Food Co-op

Led by: **Maresa Bossano, London Food Link**

Maresa presented the main elements of the food co-ops toolkit – a new “how to” guide to setting up and running toolkits available at www.foodcoops.org.

10 Ps	Additional notes to the presentation
What is a food co-op?	Most co-ops add a mark-up to the cost price of the produce to cover the running costs.
Key ingredients for success	The more time you can spend planning the co-op the better!
1. People	<p>Think about who your customers are going to be and what their needs are Eg for older people, easy access is important. Heavier veg might be valuable to them as they will have less far to carry them home than if they had to travel to a supermarket. They may want to be able to buy smaller volumes of fruit and veg. People who are 70+ may have special dietary needs – so a mixed bag might not be appropriate for them.</p> <p>Some co-ops prepare the veg before, which can be good for older people with conditions like arthritis. This means you need access to a kitchen that meets food hygiene standards and your volunteers will need basic training. Ensure utensils are clean and hands are washed.</p> <p>For families – offering lunch-box friendly items is good (apples and bananas rather than fruit you have to cut up)</p> <p>Where there is high ethnic diversity you may need to run taster or cooking demos to encourage people to try items they're not familiar with.</p>
2. Planning	Doing a needs assessment before you start the co-op is key. This will help you understand what provision there already is in the way of retailers and existing community projects. Also it might reveal that everyone is actually happily using supermarkets!
3. Produce	<p>Food sourcing It's hard to get local produce in London, but lots of organisations are managing to do it. Also you need to decide whether to source from a local wholesaler, or consider whether a local social enterprise could supply you. Community Food Enterprise (based in Newham, East London) or Greenwich Co-Operative Development Agency (Greenwich CDA) might be able to supply you.</p> <p>Bags and box schemes vs selling loose fruit One decision is choosing whether to sell loose fruit or to sell in bags.</p>

	<p>Advantage of bags / box schemes – if you ask people to order these in advance (and pay in advance) there is very little waste. Also easier for volunteers to collect money.</p> <p>Advantage of loose fruit – more choice for customers, people like to pick their own fruit.</p>
4. Premises	<p>Your venue needs to be accessible. If other things are happening where your food co-op is that will help you get customers. People are disinclined to make a special trip to a community hall to buy fruit and veg.</p> <p>Ideally you should look for a free venue, to keep running costs down. Covering the rent is hard.</p>
5. Practical resources	
6. Procedures and pricing	<p>Instill in your volunteers that it is okay to complain to your supplier if the quality of the fruit and veg is not good enough.</p>
7. Promotion and publicity	
8. Permits and licensing	
9. Policies and principles	
10. Progress	

Barriers

Barrier	Hints and tips
Managing challenges around volunteers	<p>To start a co-op you will need to learn about good volunteer management practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a volunteer programme, that is clear on the benefits to the volunteer and what is expected of them • Listening to volunteers • Rewarding volunteers - ensure you understand employment law if you plan to offer benefits such as vouchers and drinks, as this may create issues around claiming benefits or imply there is an employment relationship. <i>“If a gift is regarded as a ‘perk’ (something that the volunteer gains in exchange for volunteering), this may contribute to the creation of a contract with the volunteers, giving them employment status with the associated rights. Also, it is important not to give gifts that the volunteer can benefit from financially such as money, vouchers, tokens and gifts of appreciable value, as this can affect benefit claims, and may be taxable”</i> (from Volunteering England site, link below) • Qualifications - offer the opportunity for volunteers to get qualifications eg health and hygiene • For tips on saying thank you to volunteers, see here: http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Managing+Volunteers/goodpracticebank/Information/Thankyou.htm <p>For more info, see the Volunteering England resource bank on managing volunteers here: http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Managing+Volunteers/</p>
Choosing the right legal status / structure	<p>The <i>Co-ops UK Governance & Participation software</i> – is a useful tool to help you choose the best legal/governance model. This software costs £20 and is extremely helpful. You answer a set of questions and the model recommends the most effective model on that basis. Contact Greenwich CDA if you would like to go to their offices and use their software.</p>

Influencing buying habits of customers – to get them to buy from the co-op	<p>Having a good promotional plan is key. You will need to promote your project both when it starts and on an on-going basis</p> <p>Need to weigh up what is most effective based on costs, time, staffing needed and resources available e.g.</p> <p>High profile launch</p> <p>Articles in the local press</p> <p>Community newsletters</p> <p>Radio</p> <p>Banners, leaflets and posters</p> <p>Special offers</p> <p>Word of mouth</p> <p>Events</p> <p>Educational activities e.g. taster sessions</p>
Finding the right time to run the co-op	<p>This will really depend on which groups the co-op is aimed at.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mornings can be good, just after the school run • Saturday is not a great day for volunteers • If possible, it's good to run 2 sessions at different times to cater for different groups of people
Creating regular custom	<p>Consider creating a loyalty or membership card (as per the White City food-coop) to make people feel a part of it.</p>

Opportunities

- **Social / community building benefits** of the food co-op - co-ops outside are excellent for making places feel safer and enabling neighbours to meet each other, hence are good for community cohesion. **Co-ops can be a fun place to go!**
- **Discovering skills of** volunteers – working on a food co-op can build confidence and lead to enhanced career opportunities
- **Harnessing the skills and enthusiasm of people with learning disabilities** – an example was given of volunteers with learning disabilities putting fruit and veg bags together.

Further advice / information:

<http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcoops/> - a toolkit will be launched in April at this site on how to start a food co-op

See the [presentation](#) and [notes](#) from our previous food co-ops workshop at the [Wellnet Better Food for All event](#) in Stratford on 17th March 2009.