

E. Lothian food coops as social enterprises: Welfed

Facilitated by Angela Moohan, West Lothian Food and Health Development

The workshop began with an introduction about Lothian Food Coops.

A brief history of **Lothian Food Co-ops**:

2004: A loose network of five food co-ops in West Lothian was formed, with each co-op selling between £20 and £150 of produce a week. The co-ops began working towards the ideal of using one supplier, pooling resources and collectively buying a van.

2005: The co-ops received £60,000 in funding, including £10,000 from the council. While two of the co-ops closed, the remaining three continued to work towards the vision of sharing a van.

2006: The co-ops received £50,000 in funding from the RDA (Regional Development Agency). The number of co-ops in the group had grown to twelve, they were able to buy the van, and developed links with two local farms.

2007: An additional driver was employed, a larger warehouse was used due to the diverse range of suppliers and the increasing number of co-ops involved in the scheme – 14 co-ops were up and running, with another four about to open. Growth over the past few years has been massive. A new ‘return’ system has been adopted to encourage co-ops to experiment with new products, or to expand. Welfed delivers slightly more than the co-op orders, and if the co-op can’t sell the food, they can return the food. This has been met with great success, leading to a 300% growth in turnover since the scheme began. A major problem faced is keeping volunteers active, and giving them something back out of it. It has been recognised that it is important for the co-ops to stay independent. Welfed should be more involved in public procurement, for example to support co-ops to get access to schools.

Some of the co-ops in the group:

Stoneyburn

Stoneyburn is a rural community with a population of around 2500. Originally a women’s group took up the idea of starting a food co-op. They involved the wider community and the newly-formed ‘food co-op group’ set up the co-op in June ’06. Today it is open two days a week. The barriers it faced included self-doubt and the fear of taking on too much responsibility. It was an unincorporated body, so to protect itself became a company limited by guarantee. Its plans for the near future are to open a healthy café and a greengrocer.

Addiewell and **Fouldhouse** co-ops are also members of Welfed.

Ideas for the future

Welfed is working towards buying a chiller, acquiring space for a storeroom & preparation room. It also plans to produce value added goods like fruit salads and smoothies.

The importance of local

A quarter of the produce is local, including all the root vegetables in winter. One of the local farms which Welfed works with has designated two fields exclusively for the use of the food co-ops. Welfed employs two farmers (one full-time, one part-time), plans to start using polytunnels, and will be producing its own salads and berries this summer.

Basket survey

A comparison between co-op and supermarket food of the same quality has revealed that the co-ops can be a third cheaper.

The workshop addressed better ways to reach a local community.

A brainstorming session came up with lots of ideas:

- Don't overplay the 'health' aspect
- Know and involve your customers (find out what they want: cost/health/local/social)
- Highlight community links and opportunities to *learn* how to cook with produce
- Provide placemats with recipes (Community Food and Health Scotland has done something similar)
- Examine what resources are available for free?
- Be professional and eye catching
- Explore a travelling food co-op: developing the village feel, word-of-mouth growth.
- Provide money-off vouchers
- Develop materials such as newsletters and microwave recipes
- Devise "vegetable of the month" and a list of recipes in a ring binder
- Run a drama/gala event with buffet