



Building a Sustainable Community Food Hub

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Introduction

This paper is one of several published by the Food Supply and Distribution project, which is investigating community-led approaches to building more robust and sustainable food systems. The project is run by Sustain as part of the Lottery-funded Making Local Food Work programme. We are working with local community partners throughout England, exploring ways of providing healthier and more sustainable food to their community.¹

Case Study: Cropshare: distribution of surplus produce from allotments

OrganicLea is a community-based not-for-profit food growing co-operative in the Lea Valley in Walthamstow, in East London. It runs a community allotment site where a group of volunteers grow a wide range of organic vegetables, fruit and herbs. Salads and seedlings are grown in a glasshouse plant nursery, which provides regular volunteering opportunities and open days where people can come to learn and join in the work. It also provides training in organic food growing.

OrganicLea is a partner organisation in the Making Local Food Work programme. From its base at the Hornbeam Centre in Walthamstow, it is developing a wide range of food related initiatives. These include a box scheme, a fruit and vegetable stall, a Food Centre and a community café. Surplus from OrganicLea's growing sites is sold through these schemes, supplemented with organic produce from a co-operative of East Anglian growers.

Is it legal and is it right?

There are 35 allotment sites in Waltham Forest, the London borough where OrganicLea is based. From their own experience, OrganicLea knew that most allotments produce surplus crops and that much of this gets wasted. They wondered how they could tap into this surplus, stop it being wasted and instead distribute this ultra local produce through their stall and box scheme.

Initial contacts with allotment growers indicated that they were very concerned to ensure that their allotments would not be turned into commercial growing spaces. Being growers themselves OrganicLea understood these concerns. Because staff were viewed by allotment holders as "one of us", OrganicLea was able to build trust around the aims of the project and assuage their concerns.

Another concern of the allotment holders was around the legality of the scheme. OrganicLea conducted research into allotment law and issued a paper in 2007, reviewing the legal situation (see: <http://www.organiclea.org.uk/sellingallotmentproduce.pdf>). This document was invaluable in discussions with the allotment holders who did not have the capacity to do the research themselves, but needed to be reassured that what they were embarking on was legal. Despite the provisions of the law, OrganicLea found that some individual tenancy agreements did not allow the sale of any produce whether surplus or not.

By June 2009, over half of the allotment sites in the borough had been contacted by OrganicLea and initial discussions had taken place about them joining the scheme – now called Cropshare. There are currently five allotment holders regularly supplying the stall and box scheme.

1. For more information about the context for this paper please go to page 6

Certification

It was clear that it was unrealistic to expect Cropshare participants to be certified as organic due to the costs and bureaucracy involved. However, some form of regulation of the way the crops were grown was necessary if they were not to conflict with OrganicLea's principles of producing low-input food. All Cropshare members therefore have to meet the Wholesome Food Association Guidelines, described as "a low-cost, 'grassroots' alternative to organic certification for people who are growing or producing food for sale in their local region". (see: <http://www.wholesome-food.org.uk/> for more details).

Crops grown with pride

The Cropshare growers take pride in their produce and OrganicLea has reported that their customers seek out this ultra-local produce, recognising that it is something unique that they are unable to get from other outlets.

The need for nurturing

Educating and assessing Cropshare members for the Wholesome Foods criteria and getting them to support the processes for delivering the crops were both areas that required considerable development time. It was critical that the Cropshare growers were able to deliver their produce at times which meant they could be sold on to customers when produce was at its freshest. Getting this to happen required flexibility and negotiation on the part of both the growers and OrganicLea.

Cropshare members growing ethnic produce unfamiliar in the UK also needed to understand that whilst some crops might be very well known to them, OrganicLea staff and customers might not recognise them and would therefore require information about what the crop was and how to use it.

Some growers also looked to OrganicLea for advice on what to grow and as a conduit for sharing information with other growers. This work was an important part of engaging the growers in the work of the Food Centre and making them feel involved, but also required a significant time commitment on the part of OrganicLea staff. For example, the development worker spent a lot of time discussing organic options for overcoming the ever-present problem of slugs!

The amount of produce bought through the scheme and the cost involved in both nurturing the growers and processing the produce means that Cropshare is unlikely to become financially self-sustaining. OrganicLea believes the scheme will take up less staff time as it grows but that grant funding will always be required to pay for a development worker to build new contacts and nurture the growers. Nevertheless, OrganicLea considers that this investment is worthwhile as Cropshare has a number of important social and environmental benefits which makes it a critical element of their work to engage different members of their local community with their food.

Social and environmental benefits

OrganicLea reports that the benefits of Cropshare are wide ranging, summarised as follows:

- Building confidence in the growers by valuing what they do and paying them a fair price for it. This is understood by OrganicLea to be “part of the cultural shift that needs to happen in our relationship with the people who grow our food on whatever scale”;
- Engaging a group of people in the work of the Food Centre who might not otherwise get involved in other activities at the Food Centre;
- Providing support and advice to growers on how to make food growing more sustainable;
- Providing consumers with ultra-local food that has a very short field-to-fork journey. Seeing what is being grown by other people on their doorstep may also encourage consumers to have a go at growing themselves;
- Supplying diverse crops used in ethnic cooking which are either unavailable or expensive to buy at other outlets.

Cropshare produce on OrganicLea's stall



Photo copyright: OrganicLea

Acknowledgements: thanks to OrganicLea for supplying data, photographs and information for this case study.

The context of this paper

What is a community food hub?

One of the ideas that the Food Supply and Distribution projects aims to investigate is whether a series of community based local food hubs could address the problems of distribution from small-scale suppliers to small outlets and individual customers. There is particular interest in how these activities could serve the needs of low-income consumers, for whom market failures often result in poor provision of healthy and sustainable food.

Through the Making Local Food Work programme, Sustain and our project partners have been exploring the idea of a local food hub through practical application and research. It is clear that one of the reasons the supermarket regional distribution model works is because of the economies of scale they are able to achieve. A community based hub working with small volumes is unable to do this. It seems therefore that these hubs may need to do more than just distribute food in order to be sustainable.

Our work is exploring a more diversified model for a food hub which involves a number of different elements (like petals on a flower), some social, some environmental and some commercial that work together to create a vibrant, robust and sustainable social enterprise.

This is based on the idea that a hub is an intermediary which, by pooling together producers or consumers, adds value to the exchange of goods and promotes the development of a local supply chain. This added value may be gained through economies of scale, social value, educational work or other services. In other words, the pure function of distribution is only one element of the hub.

This paper, explores one element or “petal” that our community partners have been developing.

