

FRUITS OF THE FOREST

**The desirabilities, possibilities and
practicalities of a Waltham Forest
Local Food Scheme**

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Summary of Report

This report aims to explore the desirabilities, possibilities and practicalities of a Waltham Forest Local Food Scheme. In doing so, it will first make the case for local food schemes, in general and for the London Borough of Waltham Forest in particular. The benefits – social, environmental, health, economic and cultural - will be briefly noted, as will the extent to which greater awareness of these benefits has led to increasing interest in healthy, sustainable and local food nationwide.

The report will then focus on the main areas of existing local food production in Waltham Forest, efforts to promote local food, plus existing and potential demand from local people. The question of how a local food scheme would operate is then addressed. Various models of distribution, and of organisational structure, are considered in the light of specific local circumstances, and some recommendations made

The issue of organic certification is raised, and an alternative local certification symbol counterposed. Legal ramifications of a local food scheme are given due consideration. In concluding, some suggestions are made for those wishing to further pursue the project of a Waltham Forest Local Food Scheme.

1. Introduction: Local Food Schemes and their Benefits

To begin with, it is necessary to hone the definition of “local food economy”, “local food schemes” and other references to “local food” to be encountered below. The Soil Association have developed the following definition of a sustainable local food economy:

“A system of producing and trading, primarily of organic and sustainable forms of food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas”(1).

Within this definition lies the answer to the question “why local food?”, which has become more and more obvious in recent times. Environmentally, as climate change hots up, the massive pollution created by “food miles” appears not as necessity but the reverse. The more so when it entails a “coals to Newcastle” scenario (e.g. New Zealand apples being transported twelve thousand miles to Britain, an apple growing nation climatically and historically) or “food swapping”: in 1998, for example, Britain imported 61,000 tonnes of poultry meat from the Netherlands, at the same time as exporting 31,000 tonnes of poultry meat to the Dutch(2). Locally grown spring onions bought through a home delivery box scheme create 300 times less carbon dioxide emissions than those flown from Mexico and transported home from a supermarket in a car(3).

On a broader, or perhaps deeper, environmental theme, the absence of local food growing erodes peoples’ sense of connection with their immediate environment, the earth they stand on. “The act of putting into your mouth what the earth has grown is perhaps your most direct interaction with the earth”, as Frances Moore Lappe had it. If nothing you put in your mouth is the product of the earth you physically inhabit, is this not the most direct alienation from your surroundings? It is not necessary for our population to enter the ranks of the semi-peasantry to gain culturally from a local food *identity*. The champagne growing region of France, and the champagne Rhubarb Triangle of Wakefield, exist because of real local distinctiveness, in climate, geography and custom, to which the people of those regions can find a sense of meaning in the face of cultural and horticultural monoculture.

Local Food versus Regional Food

But allegiance to a rhubarb leaf is not much better than allegiance to a flag, unless local food schemes are about democratic control over local food production. Local food initiatives need to meet these social goals of participation, bottom up planning and meeting community needs: they should be, and often are, not about “Buying British” but about helping your neighbour. Herein lies the difference between *regional food*, such as Somerset cider or Jersey potatoes, which may benefit the stated region’s peoples in terms of culture and identity, but whose mode and method of production may be as capitalist and industrial as for any other commodity produced in the area or beyond. Furthermore, regional food is consumed anywhere and everywhere, local food is always consumed locally.

To this extent, the New Economics Foundation reckon that spending ten pounds in a local organic box scheme results in a #25.90 investment in the local economy, whereas the same expenditure at a supermarket results in only #14 local investment(4). For all the supposed efforts at “regeneration”, planners show little interest in such figures, which suggest that genuine efforts to stimulate the local economy may be most effective if they reject, rather than reward, the overtures of big food business.

Healthwise, community food projects can encourage involvement and interest in healthy food. Higher nutritional levels are found in food the fresher it is, and local food schemes should by and large be in a position to offer the freshest possible food. An orientation towards organic production results in less chemical residues. Local food schemes can address the issues of restricted access to quality food by reaching neighbourhoods and in *food deserts*: (“areas of cities where cheap nutritious food is virtually unobtainable (to those without cars)”) more effectively and affordably than larger stores.

2. The Current State of Play

The apparently insatiable demand for organic food is well documented: according to the Soil Association, organic food sales in the UK have been increasing by 25 – 40% per annum over recent years. On the downside, organic food is widely regarded as “expensive”, and some 70% of it is imported. Interest in local produce is growing simultaneously: the number of Farmers Markets, where local producers sell their goods, increasing from 1 in 1998 to over 300 now(5). Currently, ten of these are in London.

There are over 300 organic “box” delivery schemes, generating #30 million a year(6). Other local food schemes, such as farm gate sales, Community Supported Agriculture, community gardens and orchards, have similarly increased in number, profile and popularity in recent years.

Waltham Forest boasts 36 allotment sites, populated by nearly 2,000 plot holders, in a borough of some 230,000(7). This may be regarded as a healthy food growing community. On top of this, many people grow food in their gardens. Allotment and garden surpluses do crop up, in the “gift economy”, in the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) and in local stores and on the *OrganicLea* market stall (of which more later). Colin Bowen, of Higham Hill Community Allotments, recounts how their site was inundated with enquiries about the availability of produce to purchase after a show of produce at their Open Day. Cursory research by the author and colleagues, of organic allotment gardeners, found attitudes towards the notion of distributing allotment surpluses vary from the enthusiastic to the cynical.

Jam Without the Traffic

At community fairs and fetes in the borough, one can find a great array of homemade pickles, preserves and baked goods. There are at least a couple of surplus-producing beekeepers, who quickly shift honey locally through word-of-mouth networks, one also

selling through a health food shop in Chingord. Parts of Epping Forest lie within, and border, the borough, and here professionals and amateurs gather culinary mushrooms on a significant scale: the forest also has reservoirs of wild food such as sloes, hazelnuts and ransoms, largely unexploited, (mercifully so for the few “in the know”). On a commercial scale, the ethnically diverse borough boasts a plethora of different food preparers – bakers and caterers, and a microbrewery based in the William IV pub in Leyton. The Vegetarian Cafe, based inside the Hornbeam Environment Centre on Hoe Street, have a particular commitment to using organic and local produce where practicable. Whilst much of this report is concerned with the cultivation and distribution of fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs, the aforementioned existing enterprises and resources should all have a role to play if Waltham Forest Local Food Scheme (WFLFS) is to achieve real success in bringing the flailing strands of local food together.

Modern Histories: OrganicLea and WFLFS

OrganicLea Community Growers were founded in Waltham Forest in 2001 with the expressed aim of stimulating the local sustainable food economy. Since then, they have reclaimed part of a threatened allotment site, and organically grown vegetables, fruit and herbs which are split amongst the volunteer workers, the surplus being marketed locally. OrganicLea is a conscious effort at *collective gardening*, believing this way of working can better yield social gains of learning, participation, co-operation, de-alienation and equality.

OrganicLea have articulated the need for sustainable transport to be a consideration in local food schemes, using pedal power to a certain extent. They have also tapped into the ideas of local food identity by publicly promoting the notion of the “Lea Valley food growing heritage”, tracing the food growing roots of both the region and its recent emigrant citizens. Of the produce that is marketed, OrganicLea operate a small bike delivery scheme, but focus their efforts on market stalls, as these provide a contact point with the wider community. In the harvest season of 2002 they operated a stall on a regular basis outside the Hornbeam Environment Centre and Vegetarian Cafe, along with other community stalls selling homemade preserves, bric-a-brac, fair trade and recycled goods.

It was through these “mini markets” that the notion of WFLFS began to be formulated. The vegetable stall attracted some interest but OrganicLea, as small voluntary growers, were unable to supply the range and volume of produce demanded. Furthermore, on a number of occasions, OrganicLea retailed home produce that was donated by gardeners with gluts – clearly this indicated a demand coupled with a potential supply.

Members of OrganicLea, the Hornbeam Environment Centre and Higham Hill Community Allotments Association, discussed the concept of WFLFS and formed an embryonic working group. At the time of writing, this group is preparing a survey to gauge opinion towards local food production amongst potential customers and participants in Waltham Forest. This report is also part of the effort to focus minds on a WFLFS.

3. Models of Local Food Distribution

From a producer side, Waltham Forest apparently does not provide the most fertile ground for a local food scheme. It is a highly urbanised area with no existing commercial growers. On the other hand, these factors are also potential strengths. There are a huge number of bellies needing daily feeding: creating and reaching a market should be a relatively minor issue. The lack of big commercial players allows for the development of a co-operative network of small growers whose prime concern is not profit or competition. Thus WFLFS will have the kind of homegrown, community-based feel and substance which is both its purpose and its “selling point”.

As outlined above, even despite the area’s comparative disadvantage, there is a significant level of food production, gathering and preparation. WFLFS would necessarily begin life as a small scale operation, but one which attempts to pool some of the multiplicity of local food efforts into an established, organised and reliable distribution outlet.

At the very simplest level, there are two ways to provide people with local food: either they come and get it, or we get it to them. These two scenarios shall be examined in ore depth below.

Come And Get It

Given the decentralised nature of food production in Waltham Forest, “farm gate” sales should be ruled out as a marketing strategy. This leaves us to consider some form of shop or market stall. One possibility would be to use existing retail outlets. The most obvious of these would be *Second Nature*, the only independent wholefood shop in the borough that stocks fresh organic produce. On the plus side, this is an apparently convenient option: someone else is responsible for the selling, space, storage, promotion and overheads, leaving WFLFS to concentrate solely on collecting and transporting the goods.

On the down side, however, producers will miss out on a substantial portion of income by employing a “middle man”. Perhaps more importantly, the whole notion of *direct selling* also goes out of the window. One of the great strengths of local food schemes can be the way they reconnect producers and consumers, two groups normally divide by layers and layers of mediation. When the producer knows the people they are producing for, and the customer knows the people who made what they consume, the food gains a whole new qualitative dimension, one that brings both groups of people back This is a phenomena used to explain in part the success of farmers markets.

Going to Market

The forecourt of the Hornbeam Environment Centre, close to the busy Bakers Arms junction, has hosted occasional community stalls for many years, giving away

information and selling goods. As previously mentioned, OrganicLea held regular stalls there in 2002, along with other stalls selling some home produce. In size, the forecourt affords room for a number of stalls. The Centre may be expected to charge a rent at some point, but this is likely to be relatively low. OrganicLea's experience of the location last year suggests that, whilst there is much potential passing trade, it is "on a limb" from Walthamstow market, where most people go to acquire fresh food. Almost rigid regularity of market stalls is required, then, as people are less likely to make a special trip if they are unsure if: a) the market is running that day; and b) they can easily access alternative fresh food outlets nearby, if the stall is not running, or does not stock everything they need.

It has been mentioned already that the Vegetarian Cafe, inside Hornbeam, has at present a positive attitude toward local produce. A marketing strategy based primarily around supplying the cafe would have the same strengths and weaknesses as that of marketing through a retailer (see above). However, given the proximity, the Cafe could serve as a useful supplementary outlet. Perhaps unsold stock could be offered cheaply at the end of the day; the current proprietor has expressed a keenness in stocking a small range of fresh local produce for sale over the counter.

Perhaps the ideal forum for WFLFS would be as a stall at a farmers market. Farmers market stalls are staffed by the producers, who (in the case of London) produce a maximum of eighty miles from the city boundary. People attending farmers markets are often already convinced of the importance of supporting the local food economy, and the ultra-local WFLFS would surely be very well received. Unlike the OrganicLea stall, it would matter little if WFLFS stocked a limited range of goods one week: customers could simply move on to the next stall. It is not even so much a problem whether WFLFS can make set weekly appearances or not: the show will go on.

In 2001/2002 London Farmers Markets Limited (LFM) were in negotiation with London Borough of Waltham Forest's Markets Department, over the possibility of a farmers market running on a Sunday on Walthamstow High Street. Clearly LFM felt there were good prospects for a farmers market in Walthamstow. On the surface, this may be surprising, as the vast majority of London farmers markets operate in fairly affluent districts. Waltham Forest is a predominantly working class borough, but perhaps LFM noted the recent influx of professionals to the area, and the proximity of Stoke Newington, a centre for the "green pound". Presumably the fact that the High Street boasts the longest market in Europe six days a week, bearing testimony to a strong market culture, was also taken into account.

Whatever, negotiations fell through. Putting together some of the pieces, LFM felt the council tried to be too controlling and ultimately lacked the will; on the council side, things were complicated by objections from local residents, and the sub-contracting of market management. LFM remain interested in finding a site in Walthamstow, and will be visiting the Hornbeam site when it next hosts a range of stalls (spring/summer 2003). This site is much smaller than other farmers markets. But perhaps there is mileage in a mini market, with for example three growers from the south east selling their wares

alongside WFLFS. There is the possibility of expansion into the yard and warehouse of the adjacent Forest Recycling Project.

Given the “honeypot” effect of Walthamstow market, there will always be the suggestion that the obvious place for a local food stall is not outside of, but within, the market set up. There are many advantages of this location, notably its centrality and popularity. Possible disadvantages include the cost of stall hire: thirty pounds a day on Saturday, but falling to eighteen pounds on (less busy) Mondays. One would hope a lower price could be negotiated. On the subject of cost, the vast amounts of very cheap fresh food available on the market may make a local produce stall appear relatively expensive, even drive its prices down. But the argument can be made that many people are prepared to pay more for better quality and organic food.

From May 2003 Growing Communities plan to run a weekly farmers market at their base, The Old Fire Station in Stoke Newington. Growing Communities have been operating an organic box scheme, supplied in part from their community gardens in Hackney. They have linked up with East Anglia Food Link, and presumably it will be an attractive market in an area that will be quite responsive to the idea of local organic food (and willing to pay well for it). Stoke Newington is close enough to Waltham Forest, and there’s no reason for the term “local” to peter out at, what are after all, arbitrary authority boundaries. However, there is a logic to having a “borough-wide” vision, if only because it is the dominant perception.

WFLFS also needs to work out whether it is about generating a basic income for producers, or enabling local working class communities to access quality food. The two things are not necessarily incompatible. But a proposition like Stoke Newington Farmers Market may score highly on the income generation side but not so high on the other criteria. This is notwithstanding the fact that Growing Communities have a very progressive attitude towards food access, and WFLFS itself could enact numerous measures to address this.

Bringing It All Back Home

If WFLFS were to decide its primary goal was to channel its ultra-healthy food into deprived communities, it should funnel its efforts into the mobile food projects which continue to exist at an ideas stage in the borough. Newham Food Access Partnership have, over a couple of years, established a number of food co-ops, with the intention of making fresh food affordable and accessible to those living in deserts.

NFAP transport fruit and veg in a large van, from New Spitalfields market to schools and other neighbourhood centres. Currently they are discussing, with Jowanna Lewis of *Global Action Plan*, over the possibility of establishing a mobile food shop/co-op, working title *Flying Carrot*, with similar aims, in Waltham Forest. Even were this not to take off, NFAP have expressed an enthusiasm for distributing local food.

Such a proposition is attractive, but how would gardeners feel if their lovingly grown carrots were mixed in with machine-produced versions from Lincolnshire prairies, the recipients not appreciating their value? would gardeners be paid the artificially low wholesale rate for their efforts? As with any distribution that is not direct, it is essential that the customer is made to realise what they have in their hands is the product of Waltham Forest earth, grown by hand in harmony with Waltham Forest nature.

Vegebox schemes grew in prominence throughout the 1990s. They began as a means by which small scale organic growers could market directly to committed customers, who would accept, and often enjoy, the seasonal variation, or lack of it. For example, a five pound box would contain whatever the grower had in supply, though there might be an agreement whereby the grower promised a certain number of different kinds of vegetable, or allowed the customer to opt out of cabbage if they really hated it. Boxes would either be dropped off at houses a set day each week, or a number dropped at one house for collection by customers from the nearby area.

The theory, then, is that boxes are filled with whatever comes through to the WFLFS packing house, and delivered at a fixed price to a loyal clientele. The practice may be slightly more complicated. Paul Jennings, a Buckinghamshire grower, relates how box schemes often have high customer turnover and are vastly complicated by individual requirements: “no onions”; ‘fortnight only’; ‘on holiday for six weeks’; ‘double box for Christmas’”. This would be further complex if WFLFS were to involve goods other than seasonal veg, e.g. honey, home baked items. Paul Jennings has been won over to farmers markets: “not only are [they] great fun...the customer buys only what he or she will use, and you ensure that you get a fair price for everything”(8). Box schemes may be a form of direct selling, but they rely on customers’ commitment, whereas markets allow the agnostics to be drawn in, have a little nibble, and return to bite off as much as they wish. In other words, they may be more accessible to a wider range of communities than box schemes.

Of Eggs and Baskets?

Is WFLFS required to stick to one marketing method? This remains for further discussion. Clearly, there is a case for some complementary/supplementary approaches: for example, were Vegetarian Cafe or Flying Carrot to offer to buy up any post-market surpluses at a discount price, this could prove useful. Similarly, selling produce at an organic premium at Stoke Newington farmers market could subsidise efforts to provide affordable organics to working class people more locally. Better still, grants could be sought to provide the same subsidy. There is always a danger, of course, of spreading energy and goods too thinly, and running a number of schemes which end up competing with each other for scarce produce.

4. Towards Local Identity and Certification

The need to develop a strong WFLFS identity or “brand” is paramount if marketing is to be indirect, but not unimportant if WFLFS is to occupy different baskets, or indeed, only

the one. Such an identity must convince consumers that the produce is homegrown locally, and “ultra-organic”. Organic certification has become prohibitively expensive for small-scale producers. Soil Association now offers a scheme where up to ten producers can obtain a group certification. But should WFLFS insist on organic standards for all its producers? In an urban area, where organic gardeners grow cheek by jowl with agro-chemical plots, is such a certification realistic? indeed, is independent monitoring and the attendant bureaucracy desirable at all? Independent assessment serves to mediate between producer and consumer. Local food schemes should by definition involve unmediated interaction between the groups. In short, WFLFS will need its own “label”.

Waltham Forest Wholesome Food

One way in which a local certification scheme could be run, simply and effectively, is through the Wholesome Food Association (WFA). This is a national scheme, born as a direct response to the escalating cost of organic certification. The WFA serves as an umbrella scheme for a network of independent, local groups. For twenty five pounds a local group can join the WFA, and use the WFA symbol as an indication of sustainably grown food.

Unlike the certification bodies, there is no great manual of regulations to wade through. Rather than costly assessment by professionals, good practice is ensured by the “Open Gate” policy. Deliciously simple, this policy invites any consumer of the produce to visit the land from whence it came, and watch it being worked. WFA believe that this method is “at least as effective as certification schemes”(9), which rely solely on annual inspection. By encouraging producers and customers to get to know each other, the WFA scheme can furthermore be instrumental in helping to rebuild communities at a social, as well as economic, level.

All that is required is for a bunch of people in Waltham Forest to form a local WFA group. This would ideally be composed of at least one representative from the following interest groups – growers, processors, caterers/ retailers, and customers. Perhaps numbers ought to be balanced (or even, skewed?) Participation by, for example, representatives of health workers, nutritionists, the education system, environment/recycling organisations, different ethnic/cultural communities and different dietary groups /communities (e.g. vegan, ital, kosher etc.) would make the group and the scheme even more vibrant (sometimes explosively so!)

Perhaps, in addition to the bottom line Open Gate policy, a WF homegrown food charter might be drawn up, giving the customer certain guarantees, and growers/ processors certain guidance, as to the environmental practices one is to expect to find being employed on venturing through the Open Gate.

Nationally, there is discussion within the Permaculture Association (UK) about developing a “permaganic” label which would both go beyond organic standards in terms of sustainability (e.g. by requiring local production and community/social yields) and be

geared towards surplus-producing subsistence gardeners. Any future WFA local group would do well to join this discussion and help move it forward.

Once up and running, the WFA scheme should more or less run itself, as it ultimately stands or falls on the direct relationship between customers and producers. Presumably though, members of the local group would be required to meet on an infrequent basis to discuss the scheme's development, and once a year to elect new members: this Annual General Meeting should by rights simply be an excuse for gastronomical celebration.

5. Some Suggested Structures for WFLFS

So far, we have dealt with the nitty gritty of how WFLFS might approach the question of getting local produce to local people, how local people might be better convinced to get local produce, and how activists can use the whole trip as a justification for indulging in the transient sensory pleasures of the tongue. What is missing so far is any idea as to how a motley band of radish fanciers and piccalilli pickers are to run a slick marketing system.

We're not even going to deal with the question of how all the diffuse produce gets pooled. Perhaps there's a case for employing someone to co-ordinate all this, or rotating responsibility amongst the members of WFA group. Whatever else, the most sustainable and sensible principle is one of decentralisation.

By this logic, WFLFS is decentralised into various groups. These may be geographically defined – i.e. a particular area (e.g. Highams Park local food producers) or allotment association; or sectoral e.g. Waltham Forest jam makers. The point is that each sub-group self-organises itself to ensure that all its produce for that week gets to Point A at Hour B the morning of distribution (Point A may be the point of sale itself, or could be a neighbourhood collection “centre”, from which a WFLFS van/ electric float/ human or horse powered vehicle will collect). Furthermore, in the case of direct selling, each sub-group needs to have at least one representative available to interact with customers, someone who knows who produced each item, where, what variety it is and the stories behind it.

The Selling Point

There exists already a well-established network of hundreds of home produce co-operative markets. These are the Womens Institute (WI) Country Markets. WI Country Markets are run from community centres, church halls and other public spaces on a regular basis (e.g. weekly or monthly). Members sell homemade pickles, preserves, crafts and textiles, ready meals, fruit, veg and plants. Different markets function differently but operate on the same basic principles. Presented below is an outline of how the only WI Country Market in London, at Barnes, does its business:

Barnes WI Country Market is twenty years old, and takes place every Friday 10 –12 a.m. at a local community centre on Barnes High Street, who charge a small rent. At a December market there were six producers selling their wares. This number increases in

the summer. Available were ready made curries, cakes, jams, honey, chutneys, breads and woollen goods. Fruit and veg are sold in season. Generally, the producer staffs their section of the stall, though occasionally they may also cover for someone who is marketing their goods in absentia.

Barnes operates a “docket” system, whereby customers choose items, stallholders write down their choices and the price on dockets, the final total is payed at the till, after which the customer collects their purchases. This is considered to be the most effective method in terms of overall running. At the end of each month, producers’ sales are tallied up. and their takings given out less 10 % for rent, audit and other costs to the market co-op as a whole. Any surplus at the end of the year is split all ways as a Christmas bonus.

Regular customers can place orders, even request delivery and credit. By the treasurers’ estimate, at Barnes 80% of customers are “regulars”, the rest passing trade.

Essentially then, WI Country Markets are marketing co-ops which allow hobby producers to generate a small private income. WFLFS could join the national WI Country Markets. Membership of the national body would have the advantages of insurance cover and membership of the Registry of Friendly Societies (and with it a “legal status”). Alternatively, a marketing co-operative could be launched independently, but along similar lines, to the Country Markets. This would require more work and more funds, but greater autonomy , and some may feel direct association with the WI is undesirable.

6. Legal Considerations

Environmental Health do make inspections of every household that prepares food for the WI market. They are apparently “understanding” although this quality may be variable according to different officers. On these and other grounds a communal kitchen space for food preparation for WFLFS might prove a good idea – the space could be a school kitchen at the weekend, for example, or the Vegetarian Cafe on an evening it is closed.

Allotment gardeners will not be able to look forward to Environmental Health Officers making routine inspections of their pumpkin patches. There are, however, legal question marks hovering above the notion of allotment gardeners selling produce for money. This generates some nervousness amongst gardeners and council allotment officers alike, Waltham Forest being no exception. Below are some of the relevant facts about the law on allotment sales.

Kale Not For Sale ?

Since the initial Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, legislation on allotments has reiterated that allotment ploholders must be, first and foremost, growing for themselves and their families. However, small scale sale of surpluses has long been accepted as within the law, and as recently as 1998, the UK government stated:

“The present legislation already enables some limited commercial activity to take place on allotments, but primary legislation would be required to allow commercial use to be greater than an ancillary use”. (10)

There have been strong moves lately for new primary legislation governing allotment use, legislation that recognises the role allotments can play in sustainability, health, community cohesion, education etc., and accordingly broadens out the somewhat narrow and outdated rules about what can't be done on allotments. For example, a place for various forms of community and collective gardening are being sought. The potential for community growing businesses is also on the agenda. Noone wants to see McAllotments, but surely there is sense, particularly in the case of unwanted plots, in allowing not-for-profit enterprises to keep allotments worked, provide employment and, of course, bring local food out to the wider population.

The 1998 UK Government Select Committee Fifth Report on Allotments stated:

“We recommend that the main restrictions on the use of allotments should be replaced, in particular decisions over:

- the uses to which plots may be put, particularly with regard to flower growing;
- commercial use with regard to site shops and the sale of surplus produce;
- the keeping of livestock.” (11)

Furthermore, the Local Government Association noted that:

“it is likely that some local authorities and allotment societies are operating relaxed versions of these restrictions”. (12)

It is indeed a general truth that different local authorities enforce the letter of allotment law to wildly differing degrees, and that they are generally given much autonomy to do so. It may be argued that a new allotment act as recommended by the Select Committee would be desirable to clarify the situation. Realistically, though, it may be some time before we such an act. But in any case, the point has been made that allotment *surpluses* can legally be marketed. Sales “from the gate” are also prohibited, but again WFLFS is not proposing pick-your-own allotment farms, but transporting produce to a central site where it can be made accessible to residents of the borough.

Certainly there are no shortages of highly praised allotment sales schemes, unhindered by local councils and ignored by Crimewatch. For example Bristol Local Food Links, Cambridge Allotments Network (who promote allotments through a stall at Cambridge Farmers Market), Peasants Collective in Bradford and, closer to home, OrganicLea. OrganicLea were offered their site in Chingford after circulating a proposal for a “community market gardens”, explicitly seeking to sell produce, albeit on a non-profit making basis.

One common theme of these schemes is their community-based, collective nature. It has been suggested by Helen Lowther, Waltham Forest's allotment officer, that a sure way of

avoiding any legal ambiguity would be for allotment associations to retain sales income generated by their members. The latter would then, it is hoped, have a say in how these funds were spent, to everyone's benefit.

However, this may remove the incentive for some people to participate in the scheme. WFLFS has the potential to assist low income groups not only to access finest quality food, but also to make what could be a vital slither of money out of the honest, decent work of growing food by hand.

At Barnes WI Country Market, the treasurer defined the stallholders as "people making a bit of pocket money out of their hobby". As mentioned earlier, allotment produce is sold in season. This is seen as perfectly legitimate and legal. The market serves as a co-operative and a community resource, thus going some way to meeting the "community/collective" requirement. And finally, the Country Market merely provides a means through which people can exchange local produce for money: it is not itself responsible or liable for any breach of regulations by its stallholders. In this vein, WFLFS should certainly spend some time mulling over how income is to be redistributed, but ultimately the groups who sell through WFLFS will exercise significant autonomy, in this and many other matters. To demand that WFLFS tightly police its members is unrealistic for an essentially voluntary organisation, and undesirable for an initiative that is essentially co-operative.

Conclusions

It is clear that a WFLFS would have wide-reaching and multiple benefits – social, environmental, health, economic and cultural - for producers, consumers and the people of the borough as a whole. Moreover, despite the growing interest in local food, urban and suburban local food schemes have barely moved beyond small isolated efforts. A broad initiative as considered in this report would be ground-breaking nationally. Yet Waltham Forest boasts much of the prerequisite environment, structures, groups and culture to put itself on the map by embarking on such a project.

Were groups and individuals within the borough to take further steps towards realising a WFLFS, much discussion will be needed to thrash out an initial strategy. The report has outlined some of the arena for debate, and posed tentative suggestions as to how WFLFS might go forward in terms of pooling, marketing, distribution and decision making. These merely represent starting points for discussion: ultimately any strategy will depend on the strengths, weaknesses and priorities of those involved in making things happen.

As with many such projects, success will depend on the striking of a balance between talking and doing. It is vital that time is spent courting and encouraging the participation of a broad range of stakeholders. Obvious targets might include gardeners, council departments and health workers, but food having such universal relevance, virtually every community, statutory and voluntary organisation is worthy of approach. At the same time, it is important to quickly move to the implementation phase, as an excess of planning and discussion often results in a loss of interest and support.

Thus, an initial working group might draw up a “One Year Plan”, beginning with consultation, leading into a high profile day seminar involving as many stakeholders as possible. Here, agendas are set, decisions made, and a wider more representative working group should take the project through to initiation.

Finally, it is to be hoped that this report is worth the paper it is written on, even if, as is quite possible, many of the ideas and proposals remain unrealised. The report sought to build up a picture of a WFLFS, not from nothing, but from foundations and currents that exist and are operational. At the very least it is hoped that some of the thousands of people involved locally (and less locally), in “organic” local food production, processing, consumption and advocacy, may regard this report as food for thought.

References

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