



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Evaluation of the Community Food Co-operative Programme in Wales

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 22/2012

In March 2010, BMG Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake an evaluation of the Community Food Co-operative Programme in Wales. The Community Food Co-operative Programme aims to increase access to, and consumption of, fresh fruit and vegetables among people in Wales and to support local producers in rural and urban Wales. The programme is supported by the Rural Regeneration Unit and funded by the Welsh Government, and is currently delivered via almost 300 fruit and vegetable bag schemes which are run by volunteers.

Using a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the evaluation examined take-up and consumption, the effectiveness of the delivery model and the impact of the programme on participants, volunteers, suppliers and the wider community.

The evaluation approach

The research adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to capture evidence from a range of different stakeholders (managers, development workers, volunteers and customers) alongside a review of monitoring data. The approach included:

- desk based review of programme documentation and initial evaluation;
- qualitative discussions with the RRU Manager and Welsh Produce Manager;
- qualitative discussions with six Food Development Workers (FDWs);
- qualitative telephone interviews with 39 suppliers;
- a telephone survey of 156 Food Co-op volunteers;
- a postal self-completion survey of 266 food customers representing 39 food co-ops; and
- a review of monitoring data on bag sales and customers.

Dadansodi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

The Community Food Co-operative Programme

The Community Food Co-operative programme began in 2004 as a small pilot in two areas in Wales. At the time the data was collected (Spring 2011) there were 276 food co-ops across Wales (115 of which are in Communities First areas, with 42% of all food co-ops being in Communities First areas), and the programme was on target to reach 315 by March 2011.

The community food co-ops are run from a range of community and schools venues by a team of volunteers, with support from the Rural Regeneration Unit's General Manager, Welsh Produce Manager and six regional Food Development Workers. The programme has an annual running cost of £500,000. Community food co-ops supply bagged vegetables, fruit and salad for a fixed price, which customers order and pay for a week in advance. Some community food co-ops also provide additional produce such as eggs, meat and fish, depending on demand. The programme has 75 direct suppliers, which includes growers,

wholesalers and local shops. On average, 1,429 volunteers across Wales give up their time each week to help to run the community food co-ops. Assuming the co-ops are open on average for 45 weeks each year and each volunteer gives an average of two and half hours of their time for each of these weeks, this equates to over 160,763 volunteer hours per year.

By March 2011, the community food co-ops had a total average of just over 4,420 customers per week across all 276 community food co-ops, with a range of around 10 customers per week for the smaller ones to over 30 for a few of the larger and more established co-ops.

Based on figures for February to March 2011, the average number of bags being sold in a week is 6,800. At an average cost of £3 per bag this equates to approximately £20,400 of sales per week. Assuming co-ops run for an average of 45 weeks a year this is generating over £918,000 of income to Welsh businesses, meaning that for every £1 spent,

approximately £1.84 is being generated.

The Role of the Rural Regeneration Unit

The Rural Regeneration Unit provides a General Manager, a Welsh Produce Manager and six Food Development Workers to support the food co-operatives programme. A significant role is identifying and developing new sites for community food co-ops and establishing and maintaining relationships with volunteers, suppliers and local community groups and organisations. Intensive support from Food Development Workers in the early set-up stages was particularly important.

Notable challenges were encountered in identifying suitable, free, venues for community food co-ops, with volunteers often needing support from Food Development Workers to find appropriate sites and negotiate access.

Beyond the initial face-to-face support, telephone contact was

maintained with community food co-ops, with the most common issue to resolve being access to additional bags for customers to take the produce home in. This was often felt to be not the best use of Food Development Workers' time and required an alternative solution. Ensuring the co-op volunteers understood the importance of the cost-neutral operating model for the food-ops was also an ongoing task. Ad-hoc requests for support tended to be around supplier issues that the volunteers were unable to resolve themselves (for example, ongoing quality problems or a new supplier needed), or around support with promotional/marketing activities.

Food Development Workers would welcome more time to develop and expand new co-ops, particularly schools-based venues and others that had the potential to engage with families with children.

The Food Co-operative Volunteers' Perspective

Community food co-ops rely on volunteers to run them. A

telephone survey of 156 'lead' volunteers and qualitative discussions with volunteers during visits to six different community food co-ops qualitative work was undertaken to explore their experiences and views.

Most volunteers are female, aged 40 or over. Just over three fifths are in work and a fifth retired with the remainder not working/caring for dependants. Volunteers tended to have been involved for some time, and planned to continue to do so. In almost all cases, they would recommend being a volunteer to others. Nevertheless, many noted challenges in recruiting and retaining other volunteers and customers, as well as occasionally dealing with supply issues.

The main reasons for becoming involved related to wanting to benefit the community, to encourage healthy eating and to support the local food industry. For schools based co-ops, helping to support Healthy Schools activities was particularly important, as well as other factors such as Eco schools and supporting the Estyn inspection framework. Volunteers perceived that the community food

co-ops have resulted in increases in fruit and vegetable consumption and more local produce bought. Additional (and generally unanticipated) positive outcomes for volunteers included learning something new, meeting new people and gaining new skills (linking in some cases to raised employability). Volunteers also felt that the community food co-ops offered excellent value for money as well as promoting healthy eating and supporting the local community.

The majority of community food co-ops represented did not run alongside other activities, suggesting there is some scope for them to do so, particularly when based in community settings. Where provided, examples of other parallel activities included adult learning, tea/coffee, health activities, credit unions and lunch clubs.

In terms of sustaining community food co-ops, volunteers had worked hard to encourage customer retention through promotional leaflets/posters, giving information on healthy diets and

recipes and so forth. Volunteers suggested a need for more support on how to advertise and promote co-ops.

Support from Food Development Workers was viewed very positively, although given the very high levels of satisfaction with the availability and intensity of support there may be an over-reliance in some cases.

The Food Co-operative Customers' Perspective

A short self-completion postal survey was distributed to 39 larger community food co-ops (with 20+ customers a week) in July and August (excluding schools, due to the time of year) and 266 customers returned completed questionnaires (covering 39 schemes, across, all regions). Most co-op customers are female (four fifths) and are either working full time or retired (around two fifths in each case).

Customers identified a range of motivations for using community food co-ops, with supporting local communities and providing access

to cheap fresh fruit and vegetables being the main motivations for most customers. The fact that produce is sourced from local businesses and farmers were also important reasons for customers using the community food co-ops.

Most customers (four fifths) said that they eat more healthily since using the co-op and three quarters say that their families also eat more healthily. Buying produce from the community food co-ops has resulted in two thirds of customers cooking more meals for scratch. Customer loyalty is high - virtually all respondents reported that they would use the co-op again. Poor quality produce was cited as the main reason that could lead to customers removing their custom from co-ops. However, volunteer perceptions about reasons why customers stop using community food co-ops centred on personal reasons such as moving out of the area and poor health rather than anything directly linked to the food co-ops themselves.

The Food Co-operative Suppliers' Perspective

Over 75 suppliers have been involved in the food co-op programme, and 41 of these were interviewed (including two who are no longer part of the programme). The suppliers vary in size from very large organisations with annual turnovers into the millions of pounds to smaller, independent suppliers receiving revenue of around £30K annually. Most suppliers advised that working with co-ops was only a very small element of their trade, typically through supplying between one and five co-ops. Only a few said that it represented over 10 per cent of their business, supplying 10 or more co-ops. However, a few of these larger suppliers work with over 50 co-ops. Suppliers found out about the programme from a range of sources including through the Rural Regeneration Unit (including through the outreach work of the Welsh Produce Manager), co-op volunteers contacting suppliers Communities First co-ordinators and word-of-mouth from other suppliers.

The types of produce supplied to co-ops varied depending on the price and availability of produce that was available with suppliers stating that they have aimed to provide best value. All of the suppliers sourced a proportion of their produce from third party suppliers, and around a third of suppliers also produced their own fruit and vegetables. Suppliers reported that the proportion of produce that is sourced from Wales tends to be very low since there is a limited range of produce grown in Wales, particularly fruit.

Suppliers can manage demand from the co-ops, and suggested that more customers would be a distinct advantage.

Overview of outcomes

Almost 4,500 customers are buying bags of fruit, vegetables or salad from community food co-ops each week. Volunteers, customers and their families are eating more fresh fruit and vegetables as a result of the community food co-ops. Local community engagement and social interaction was increased through buying produce from the community food co-ops, and from

becoming involved as a volunteer. As well as supporting local activity, volunteers also reported benefits to themselves, including developing their employability skills.

The programme has also enabled community food co-ops to link in with other activities (such as healthy schools, education and social events) and has brought new activities and opportunities to community venues. Communities themselves benefited through increase sales of local produce and the introduction of new suppliers such as meat and fish. Schools-based co-ops in particular were supporting literacy, numeracy and enterprise skills among pupils. The community food co-ops are generating over £918,000 of business each year, through the sale of 6,800 bags on average each week. Although it was a small area of business for some suppliers, for others it was (or had the potential to become) much larger.

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, the evidence

indicates that the community food co-ops have successfully enhanced the provision of fresh fruit and vegetables to communities at a local level, providing good value, low-cost access to quality produce, sourced locally where possible, and the benefits are far in excess of the input in terms of programme running costs. However, the benefits of the community food co-ops extend far beyond increasing access to and consumption of fruit and vegetables to raising the profile and capacity of the community, building social networks and cohesion, and increasing knowledge of healthy food as well as providing new opportunities to develop education and skills. Recommendations for continued success include:

- Continuing the key roles of the RRU Manager and the Welsh Produce Manager who liaise between the different stakeholders, support the Food Development Workers and suppliers as well as playing key strategic roles in development and sustainability.
- Ensuring that the Food

Development Worker role is concentrated on initial start-up support and working in the regional areas to identify suitable venues and suppliers, establish networks and assess demand. Whilst hands-on start-up support is crucial in getting new Co-ops off the ground, once established, additional support should, where possible, be provided remotely (for example online or through guidance material) or at arms-length to encourage self-sufficiency.

- Wider recognition of the benefits of the community food co-ops which extend beyond health and well-being. They have the potential to make a significant contribution to other policy areas such as community cohesion, economy and business, as well as transport, education and the environment.
- Expanding the diversity of the customer profile to include more families, younger people and working adults. Work needs to be done to develop this, to encourage and facilitate wider

access, for example through more schools provision; linking with libraries, leisure centres and existing community-based groups; and differing opening hours (i.e. increasing availability in the evenings and at weekends). Food cooperatives could even be established in the workplace and promoted via targeted programmes such as Change 4 Life.

- Further recognition of the substantial contribution that volunteers make. This could be emphasised by, for example, rewarding contributions, accrediting training and linking in to other volunteer networks, locally and across the UK.
- Greater facilitation of volunteer interaction between co-ops to enable the sharing of good practice, advice on commonly experienced problems and to provide general peer support. This could be done through volunteer get-togethers, web forums (such as Twitter, Facebook groups) and more local and regional newsletters.

- Providing more help to volunteers on promotion and marketing to ensure that their co-ops are sustained, in terms of customers, suppliers and volunteers. There is a clear need to strengthen practical support available (for example, materials) as well as developing and maintaining skills. The promotion of community food co-ops needs to emphasise the benefits beyond better access, healthier living and low cost. They also include, for example, supporting local businesses, promoting ethical trade and reducing food miles. Help could be available through a dedicated volunteer portal via the RRU website as well as via the volunteer handbook (currently under development).
- Consideration of a (free) membership scheme to gather more information on its customer base, which may in turn inform future food co-op development.
- Expansion of produce available - where pilots have provided produce beyond fruit and

vegetables to customers, these have proved to be successful – demand is there – and it is recommended that these are continued.

- Some work needs to be done around managing consumer expectations and consideration given to handling and storing some perishables within cooperative venues.

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ISBN 978 0 7504 7615 7