

Getting started

How to recruit and support members

This section is adapted from
Organisational structures for local food enterprises, section 2 Developing an organisation

A new business needs money in the bank. Similarly, local groups and community activity needs ‘social capital’ (relationships of trust and mutual support), which the community can use.

In strong communities people know each other - there is a sense of belonging, there are exchanges with mutual benefit, social organisations, networks, partnerships, norms, co-operation, friendships, shared plans, trust, and a sense of being able to change things together. People feel some sense of ownership about what is happening, they feel like they have a part in it and they engage with what is happening. Using social capital tends to increase it.

A community group might consider how to generate social capital.

Where to begin?

1 Find people to join the group

Once you are committed to setting up a new group, you may need to find a handful of other people to get the group started with you. Word of mouth often works best and the organisations listed below may be able to provide some useful contacts. Some areas have a local food link organisation, which may be

able to tell you about existing community food groups. Look at www.soilassociation.org/library to find your nearest local food link organisation. Whilst you are researching for people to join you in beginning a new group, you could establish whether there is already a group in place to address the issue you want to work on.

2 Specify aims

Soil Association groups all sign a local group agreement which outlines the relationship between the Soil Association and the group, and must have a constitution with the principle object being that the group agrees to and supports the values and principles of the Soil Association. However you may also have a particular purpose for the group.

If you don't know where you are trying to go, you won't know how to get there, so begin by deciding the purpose of your group. It will help to be specific about what you aim to do, before you invite a lot of people to join you or else you will get in a muddle together: eg "To eat and enjoy organic food together"; "To establish a local organic food co-op"; "To raise awareness of and campaign for sustainable food and farming".

When you have an idea about the kind of group you would like to be, you can think about how to establish such a group.

3 Hear people and use participatory planning processes

When forming a new local group, it is worthwhile hearing from people who will be affected, and arranging for them to hear each other too. Why have they *really* come to the group, what do they need, what do they believe in? You could ask people to interview each other - ask each other open questions, listen carefully to what each person says, and ask the reasons why in order to identify underlying reasons.

In this way, the group will be able to understand each other, work with people's enthusiasms, and address real needs.

There is a growing body of expertise in participatory community planning, and a number of tools can be used to help people contribute in meetings. The toolkit *Organisational structures for local food enterprises*, available from the Soil Association, describes some ways of involving the community (see section 5.3). If you do not have experience of these in your group, it may be worth seeking the advice of a facilitator or community development worker.

4 Agree values and objectives

At an early stage, it can be good to agree principles and values that the group will work to. For example "We believe that all people should have access to healthy food", or "We believe that food should be produced in a way that supports biodiversity".

The group will need to then agree clearly what it is trying to achieve. If objectives are specific it is clear whether or not they have been met, eg "We will supply 30 low-income households with a weekly box of local organic vegetables" rather than "We will tackle food poverty". The objectives need to be realistic and achievable.

5 Agree roles with power and responsibility

Unless the group is very small, it will probably be more efficient to define particular roles so that everybody knows who is doing what.

The roles can be defined to suit the group. They might include decision-makers, a core group, a wider consultation group such as members, an activist or catalyst, someone to keep track of money, a respected visionary who holds the principles, work groups such as weeding gangs, an events organiser, a community developer, etc.

At the same time, it will help to consider decision-making processes. Who controls the money? When do the core group have to refer to the members? Will decisions be taken by vote or consensus? Does everyone have an equal vote on every issue? Are decision-makers elected?

Responsibilities and power/resources need to go together in a role. For example, if a worker is employed for one day per week with no budget, they cannot be given sole responsibility for delivering every harebrained whim proposed by the members!

6 Make an action plan

After agreeing and prioritising objectives, you will need an action plan. Who will do what by when, what resources are needed, and how will these be found? After writing an action plan, check whether you would actually meet your objectives if you completed everything in your plan. Also check that everything in it is the most efficient way of meeting your objectives.

7 Ongoing participation and exchange

If people participate, they can have a part in making the project work. It is wise to arrange for a variety of ongoing opportunities for participation and exchange with members of your group and with members of the community you serve or belong to. These could include facilitated public meetings, social events, interviews, informal conversations, phone calls, formal consultation events, and so on. It may be revealing to ask some questions that allow people to give a wider view of the project as well as exact questions, eg "What effect do you think the project has in the area?" and "What issues should the project address?" as well as "Are the vegetables too expensive?"

8 Tracking progress, adapting and learning

There is always room for improvement, adaptations and corrections. Making good decisions for the future requires having useful information to work from and careful thought. It is good practice to monitor activities of your project, evaluate what you discover, learn and change.

9 Getting established

Once a new group has undertaken most of the steps above it will probably need to consider insurance, fundraising, office space, training, incorporation, business planning and so on. There are sources of advice on some of these topics included in this action pack and further sections of *Organisational structures for local food enterprises*, available from the Soil Association.

Illustration: The first year of Stroud Community Supported Agriculture Project

Stroud CSA began with a proposal from a charismatic individual to set up a community to support a particular struggling farm. He proposed a vision and a set of principles to a public meeting. [*Specify aims*] At the public meeting, there were also talks from the farmer and from the Soil Association who explained what a CSA is and gave examples from elsewhere. Several people came forward and introduced themselves as having an interest in making the project work. [*Find people to work with you*]

There were more open meetings at which people gave their opinions and tried to begin the work. [*Hear people and use participatory planning processes*]. The farm had some urgent needs. There were several inconclusive discussions about whether the land should be organic or biodynamic, and whether a community group could possibly alter the economics of a farm etc. Some people tried to take immediate action. For example, a group of volunteers redecorated the dairy... which has never since been used. Somebody wrote an ambitious prospectus... which has since been re-done. The meetings were at times confused and frustrating. The running costs, such as room hire, were paid for by passing round a hat.

At the next well-chaired meeting a set of principles for the project was agreed by everyone in attendance. [*Agree values*] They were not exactly the same as the ones proposed by the initial activist. Everyone signed up to them. Since the whole group was having long-winded discussions, it broke into a number of volunteer workgroups, who took on responsibility for different tasks such as publicity, administration etc. With the approval of the whole group, one person from each of these groups formed a 'core group' which was given authority to develop the project on behalf of the wider group. [*Agree roles with power and responsibility*].

The core group debated and eventually worded some clear objectives, which were approved by the larger group. [*Agree objectives and set an action plan*]. Volunteers from the core group and the wider group undertook the work to deliver the objectives. About six months after the first meeting 60 people signed a membership agreement, started paying a subscription and employed a vegetable grower to produce vegetables for the members.

The scheme has grown steadily and has had to adapt. The original farm does not easily accommodate the community group's plans, the original farmer is leaving, and the community group now wants to control its own farm and will look for its own land. [*Tracking progress, adapting and learning*].

After one year there were already regular structured open meetings, farm workdays, core group meetings, and a number of new friendships emerged. [*Ongoing participation and exchange*]. The project is seeking to incorporate as a community enterprise, and is writing a business plan from which it will be able to fundraise. The vegetable grower has an employment contract with the core group. The group is still in need of a treasurer, and depends heavily upon seven volunteers. Work is planned towards an agreed long-term vision to run a 100acre mixed farm – still often spurred on by the original activist.