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EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY FOOD CO-OPS PILOT IN WALES

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**Uned Ymchwil Cynhwysiad Cymdeithasol
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Abstract

In the UK and other major economies in the world there are concerns about the impact of poor diet on ill health and the main causes of mortality. Furthermore these impacts are not evenly distributed and widening inequalities in health are strongly correlated with socio-economic inequalities.

The Welsh Assembly Government's *Food and Well Being Strategy* has a stated commitment to tackling inequalities in health and the community food co-operatives pilot, funded by the Assembly's Inequalities in Health Fund, fits with objectives that relate to reducing local barriers to the uptake of healthy diets particularly within low income groups.

The model used for the co-ops originates from one developed by the Rural Regeneration Unit based in Cumbria that also managed the pilot in Wales, discussed here. The pilot funded two Food Development Workers who connected volunteers, in the pilot areas, to local suppliers of fruit and vegetables. Bags of pre-ordered produce would be sold to local people at a local community venue at £2 a bag.

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of this pilot using a 'theories of change' approach to assess how programme objective resonated with people living in different geographical communities with access to a range of public sector, voluntary and community based resources. Findings from the evaluation provided insights into how the food co-ops worked, the difficulties they encountered and solutions they developed, the benefits to individuals, communities and suppliers, and provided recommendations as to how the programme should develop beyond the pilot phase

Keywords: Community food initiatives, food poverty, inequalities in health, community regeneration, evaluation.

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NOTE ON CODING OF NAMES

All quotes in the report have been coded to link to case studies and responder type. First number refers to the case study, the letter (A = agency representative, C = customer, V = volunteer and S = supplier) refers to respondent type and the final number refers to a particular respondent in the case study and respondent type. Thus 6A1 was the first agency representative interviewed in case study 6.

No real names have been used in this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: INCLUDING CONCLUSIONS AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Background to pilot

- The Community Food Co-operatives pilot was funded by the Inequalities in Health Fund for two years commencing in April 2004. The pilot areas identified were North Wales and South East Wales to ensure that a diversity of rural and urban areas were covered including a significant proportion of the South Wales Valleys
- The initiative is managed by the Rural Regeneration Unit, based in Cumbria, who employs two Food Development Workers in Wales.
- The key aim of the initiative in Wales is ‘to connect farmers and communities, cutting down the distribution chain and returning a healthier diet and lifestyle to the communities and viable trade to the farmer.’ However, given the time needed to develop the producer led supply system the main focus of this evaluation has been on the way in which community food co-ops currently operate with supply currently spread between farmers and wholesalers.
- The food co-ops work by linking local volunteers, who run the food co-ops, to a local supplier, who is a grower and/or local wholesaler. A simple payment and delivery system is agreed which enables the volunteers to order and pay weekly in advance for the fruit and vegetable bags. Customers then collect their fruit and vegetables at an agreed venue during food co-op opening times and place their orders (and pay) for the following week. The cost of produce bags are the same across food co-ops, with separate bags of fruit, vegetables and salad selling at £2 each. Some co-ops offer a smaller mixed vegetable stew pack for £1, and excess fruit or vegetables may also be sold separately on the day.

Evaluation methods

- The study was theoretically informed by ‘theories of change’ and ‘realistic’ forms of evaluation. This is to ensure that there is some understanding generated as to how and why interventions operate in relation to different contexts and subject and, a result, produce different outcomes. Evaluations of

this kind emphasize the need to demonstrate what works, for whom and in what circumstances.

- Qualitative data was undertaken using a case study approach. In totally twelve case studies were conducted using 125 semi-structured interviewees with volunteers, linked agency/community workers, customers and growers, observational techniques and some documentary analysis. Local profiles from 2005 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) and Neighbourhood Statistics of Lower Level Super Output Areas were also used to add to the qualitative profiles of the areas in which the case studies were based.

Summary of findings and recommendations

- *Importance of location*

In order for food co-ops to realise their full potential, certain conditions must be met. Our findings suggest that optimum development of food co-ops takes place where adequate consideration has been given to issues of location, venue, accommodation and facilities. Food co-ops are ideally located in areas of greatest need. That is in areas of disadvantage where facilities are poor and access to fresh produce is limited. Notwithstanding this, it is crucial that the co-ops themselves are visible and accessible to local residents, that they are located in a socially acceptable area/accommodation and there is adequate space for receiving, packing and selling produce.

- *Social benefits of food co-ops*

Over and above their function of providing affordable, fresh, local produce, food co-ops provide an opportunity for customers to socialise with each other and with volunteers. Where the accommodation is shared with other community agencies/interventions, customers and volunteers are exposed to a range of community activities. For some volunteers and customers the co-op is the springboard into greater community involvement/re-integration. Our findings suggest that this may be an especially important function of co-ops in areas of social disadvantage. The process of community engagement/re-engagement is facilitated most in those co-ops which have the facilities to provide refreshment/meeting areas. Such areas are valued highly by volunteers and customers.

- *Working with other agencies*

The successful development and sustainability of co-ops is dependent in large measure upon the extent to which they are networked into a broad range of community interventions/programmes. Contact with outside agencies is important to sustain the momentum and morale of those associated with the co-ops and offers mutual practical support. Many co-ops benefited particularly from working in tandem with other agencies, often accommodated within the same premises. However it should be noted that the advantages offered by support of other agencies may, in some cases, be offset by the tendency for co-ops to become over-dependent upon others. This may militate against their sustainability in the long term. Notwithstanding this, in order to optimise sustainability of food co-ops, the identification of agencies/organisations that might potentially support the work of the co-ops, including local statutory/voluntary/business stakeholders, is recommended.

- *Valuing the work of volunteers*

The commitment and hard work of volunteers is key to the successful development and sustainability of food co-ops. Volunteers are difficult to recruit and attrition is high. Volunteers tend to leave when a) that they do not feel valued/supported in their role b) they do not perceive themselves to be offering a good service. In order to ensure volunteers perceive themselves to be valued/supported a number of issues should be addressed. The conditions in which volunteers work must be acceptable. They should be supported by clear line management and their working environment should be appropriate and safe. In addition, the issue of reimbursement of volunteers' 'out of pocket expenses' should be addressed. Mechanisms to support the development, maintenance and promotion of food co-op volunteer peer support systems across geographical areas, such as steering groups or consortiums should be put in place. Moreover, twinning/networking between co-ops should be facilitated. Additionally, strategies to develop and support for, liaison with and communication between volunteers might be usefully facilitated through the establishment of web-sites and production of newsletters. Such mechanisms will enable the sharing of information, including examples of good practice, funding opportunities and training relevant to the running of the co-ops (if required). Appropriate training resources

might include, for example, business skills and how to run educational events, such as cook and eat sessions, and farm to fork visits.

- *The need to develop realistic strategies to respond to customer demand*

A major source of concern to volunteers in this study was the quality of produce supplied by some suppliers. Volunteers were most concerned where they perceived the quality of produce to be poor. Many volunteers interpreted customer dissatisfaction with produce as a personal failure, and customer satisfaction as a personal success. The seriousness with which customer satisfaction was treated by volunteers is a reflection of their commitment to the co-ops. Volunteers went to great lengths to address customer requirements, even where these were not strictly within their gift. For example, the 'payment in advance rule' was waved in some cases in order to establish customer trust. Volunteers might deliver out of area and size of bags and their content was an ongoing source of discussion. Findings of this study highlight the importance of listening to volunteers and supporting them in the introduction of appropriate strategies to improve the service.

- *Recruiting volunteers*

Recruitment of volunteers was a problem for many co-ops. Many volunteers became involved through their prior experience of food co-ops, through contact/volunteering with other agencies (especially where these were housed in the same premises) and through visiting the co-ops as customers. In order to optimise recruitment it is important to identify and venues suitable for promoting the food co-op ethos, and where new volunteers may be enlisted. These might include, for example, health centres, social services departments, luncheon clubs, libraries, community centres, playgroups, nurseries, GP practices, hospitals, child health clinics, local authority offices, and relevant voluntary organisations, such as Women's Aid and Age Concern.

- *Promoting the work of the food co-ops*

The evaluation suggested that in some areas, food co-ops are perceived generally as a subsidised resource available only to people on low income. Despite local advertising efforts promoted by volunteers, food co-ops found it difficult to overcome this image and attract new customers. Areas of disadvantage (in which many of the co-ops are

located) are indexed by poor nutrition knowledge and practices. Those associated with food co-ops found this a major barrier to expanding the customer base. In addition, understanding about the ecological benefits of food co-ops was not widespread. Given that local promotion of the co-ops appears to be having limited success it is recommended food co-ops are promoted at national level and linked in with other relevant health promotion initiatives such as the 'five a day,' strategy. Promotion of strategies at national level could tie in with local endeavours and provide details of the location of food co-ops, and the service which they provide. As part of this strategy local food co-ops might be encouraged to collaborate with other local initiatives working to a broader health agenda, increase promotion at the local level and seek funding for this endeavour.

- *Early warning system to ensure good quality produce*

Customer retention is a function largely of produce price and quality. Where produce quality deteriorates in either the short or long term, co-op customers are inevitably forfeited. Once lost, customers are difficult to regain, even where the problem is addressed satisfactorily by, for example, changing suppliers. Equally, potential customers are deterred from using co-ops where they develop a reputation for supplying inferior produce. It is therefore recommended that an early warning system is implemented to detect first symptoms of deterioration in food co-op produce. It is important that such a system would be premised on development work to determine benchmarks of quality and identify the points at which produce is designated sub-standard. This development work should involve suppliers, volunteers and customers in the joint determination of what constitutes an acceptable standard of produce

- *Building on what customers value*

The vast majority of customers are satisfied with the service provided by food co-ops. While price and quality are key to customer satisfaction other issues are also important in their evaluation of the service. Customers value the convenient location of co-ops and the opportunity they offer to socialise with other customers and volunteers. For the most part customers like the variety of produce supplied by the co-ops which enables them to try new produce and develop their culinary skills. While many customers said that fresh produce had always been an important part of their

diet, the majority said they now ate more, different types of produce and used different methods of preparation. Information and advice about preparation of food (including recipe cards and cook and eat sessions) were popular with customers for this reason and they should be extended.

- *Building in realistic and achievable changes to meet local need*

Choice of produce was an issue for some customers who prefer to select the type of vegetables which they consume. This was particularly noticeable among women cooking for spouses and children who were difficult to appease. This issue might be one addressed in the development work around produce quality recommended above. The amount of produce in co-op bags was also described by study participants as an issue for single and older people, who were deterred by the prospect of wastage. Some co-ops were addressing this issue by promoting the use of smaller 'singles' bags. Finally, the issue of produce delivery was raised by both volunteers and customers. Certainly some older and/or physically challenged residents find it difficult to visit co-ops. Many co-ops do have informal mechanisms (relying on the good will and transport of volunteers or agency workers) to deliver to individuals and to venues where customers meet for other purposes (e.g. mothers and toddlers groups). However issues relating to transport, petrol and insurance, might be more effectively addressed in a systematic way to the satisfaction of those providing the service.

- *Further work needed to develop producer networks*

Conditions under which produce is supplied to coops differ between each project and regionally. Whereas, for example, in North Wales, one supplier, supplies produce to multiple co-ops, many different suppliers service other areas. Also, whereas in the North 50% of produce is grown by the supplier, in other regions it is more likely to be sourced from wholesalers. Because of the exigencies of supply the appointment of a worker to develop and support the supply of produce to community food co-ops, and support business opportunities for local growers, is welcomed. We recommend that this role should be evaluated in due course.

- *The need for local scoping to maximise opportunities for local links*

Our findings have a range of implications for the development and implementation of new co-ops as well as promoting good practise in existing co-ops. These: include

identification of appropriate location, venue and accommodation; support of volunteers; promotion of the co-op locally and nationally; networking with other community agency/endeavours; addressing customer needs; quality control and attending to other issues of supply. We also recommend that in addition to risk assessment activity, local scoping exercises should be conducted to identify and advise on potential local food partnerships with agencies such as schools (in relation, for example, to the free breakfast clubs, after school clubs and healthy tuck shops), sheltered accommodation and homeless units.

Recommendations for further evaluation

- The evaluation of this pilot has highlighted the difficulties in evaluating initiatives of this kind. For example minimal monitoring data is collected by volunteers and they differ in the extent to which they are prepared to do more than keep a record of customers and orders. Secondly any evaluation that requires a control area may be impossible as the interest in food co-ops has built a momentum of its own and it will not be possible to guarantee that any area could act as a control. Thirdly the reach of the food co-ops extend beyond those of customers. Any evaluation needs to take into account its diffusion into other areas of community and institutional life. Evaluation from a baseline in time also has disadvantages as customer profiles are very different from set up to the point at which numbers level off. It is also important to track not only how individuals change but how food co-ops change in relation to their communities. Further discussion about evaluation approaches to best capture changes at individual and community levels is needed.
- One practical recommendation which could inform the development of future evaluation and be of value to the food co-ops themselves, would be to provide membership to all customers from their first order. This could provide very minimal contact and household details which could be used by food co-ops in any future promotions or events and as a basis for a potential sample for both qualitative and/or quantitative data collection. Strict ethical procedures would need to be adhered to, to ensure data protection requirement, and it is strongly

advised that the feasibility of undertaking this, with possible incentives, is tested.

- In order to conduct a better picture of behaviour change amongst groups most at risk it will be necessary to establish whether individuals benefiting from the co-op are at baseline eating the minimal nutritional requirements regarding fruit and vegetables or not. It was clear that most of the customers the researchers interviewed felt that they already ate sufficient fruit and vegetables but we were not able to confirm this against agreed minimal levels of healthy consumption.
- It will be important that any future evaluation also captures broad outcomes that were valued by the pilot respondents. For instance the development of social capital, of support networks and of skills and knowledge were all considered to be impacts that were as, if not more, important than changes in healthy eating.
- Finally this evaluation has indicated the need for research which looks, not at the impact of any single initiative, but of the synergy between the variety of community and school based activities that are operating in Wales at this time. Whilst each initiative is subject to its own evaluation there is no literature which explores the combined effects of these initiatives and how they a) impact at a local level, b) shape relationships between local people and statutory agencies and c) how these relationships in turn impact on local receptivity to policy implementation. Such research could provide valuable insights which would be of value to a number of divisions across the Welsh Assembly Government as well as to policy makers working within local government.

1 Introduction

Background to the community food co-ops pilot

- 1.1 In the UK and other major economies in the world there are concerns about the impact of poor diet on ill health and the main causes of mortality. Furthermore these impacts are not evenly distributed and widening inequalities health are strongly correlated with socio-economic inequalities. It has been argued that community-based food initiatives can decrease social isolation, provide a sense of self-worth and well being, increase levels of skill and training and enable people to take more control of factors affecting their health and welfare.¹ Food-co-ops have an explicit economic remit to provide access to affordable food in order to benefit both consumer and traders.
- 1.3 The Community Food Co-operative Pilot is based on a similar initiative developed in Cumbria, currently run by the Rural Regeneration Unit and initially funded by the local Health Action Zone. The initiative drew the interest of both the Food and Market Development Division and the Health Promotion Division (now Public Health Improvement Division) in the Welsh Assembly Government as it supported Assembly priorities and strategies across both Divisions. The Food and Market Development Division was primarily interested in the supply side of the initiative which aims to link producers to local consumers. The Welsh Assembly Government's Food and Well Being Strategy² also has a stated commitment to tackling inequalities in health and the Food Co-operatives pilot, mainly targeted in Communities First areas, fits with objectives that relate to reducing local barriers to the uptake of healthy diets particularly within low income groups. In terms of the choice of organisation to run the pilot it was felt that the Rural Regeneration Unit were

¹ Dowler E, Turner S, Dobson B (2001) *Poverty Bites: Food, Health and Poor Families*. London: Child Poverty Action Group

² Welsh Assembly Government and Food Standards Agency (2003) Food and Well Being: reducing inequalities through a nutrition strategy for Wales
<http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/foodandwellbeing.pdf>

the only ones with the practical experience out in the field, to support food co-ops on that scale.

- 1.3 The pilot was funded by the Inequalities in Health Fund for two years commencing in April 2004. The pilot areas identified were North Wales and South East Wales to ensure that a diversity of rural and urban areas were covered including a significant proportion of the South Wales Valleys which suffers a disproportionate burden of low income and poor health in Wales. However, these boundaries were not strict, which resulted in both Food Development Workers supporting a wider area than originally envisaged. Seventy-five percent of the co-operatives set up were expected to be in Communities First areas. This provided some flexibility to work with small communities who may be isolated and deprived but because of ward boundaries do not fall within these areas.
- 1.4 Two key differences in Wales to the model developed in Cumbria were:
 - The role of the Food Development Workers in the two pilot areas was simply to set up food co-operatives, encouraging them to develop links to local educational projects where possible. In Cumbria the Food Development Workers also had a role in developing educational projects themselves.
 - The Welsh pilot is solely focused on fruit and vegetables since one of the aims is to support the 5-a-day campaign. In Cumbria there was also a remit to support, where possible, the supply of other food products such as dairy products, fish and meat.
- 1.5 The experience of the parent initiative was felt to be invaluable to the development of the pilot in Wales. In particular they were able to suggest approaches that were likely or unlikely to work based on previous experience. A key learning outcome of the Cumbrian initiative was that the process had to be simple, particularly in the initial stages, to show that it could work, with little effort and at little or no cost.

- 1.6 Another key lesson that was inherited from the parent initiative was the need to win support from potential suppliers. Suppliers would preferably be farmers but could be wholesalers if there were no local producers or they were unwilling to get involved. In particular the parent initiative was supported by auctioneers who were able to introduce the Food Development Worker to local suppliers as a starting point to developing relationships of trust with farmers. The time invested in developing trust and acceptance with farmers and other suppliers was considerable. In Wales the Welsh Development Agency has developed a database of suppliers, which is likely to be an important resource for the Food Development Workers. Unfortunately this has only recently been made available and its value in supporting the development of the food co-op had not been assessed. It will be a key recommendation that the supply side development will need to be strengthened and evaluated.

Management and organisation

- 1.7 The model developed for co-ops was designed to be simple. Local volunteers are linked to a supplier, who is a grower and/or local wholesaler. A simple payment and delivery system is agreed by the supplier and co-op which enables the volunteers to order and pay weekly in advance for the fruit and vegetable bags. Customers then collect their fruit and vegetables at an agreed venue during co-op opening times and place their orders (and pay) for the following week. The cost of produce bags are the same across food co-ops, with separate bags of fruit, vegetables and salad selling at £2 each. Some co-ops offer a smaller mixed vegetable stew pack for £1, and excess fruit or vegetables may also be sold separately on the day. Sales from the excess provide a small but useful budget.
- 1.8 The pilot is managed by the Rural Regeneration Unit, who employs the two Food Development Workers in Wales. A steering group meets four times a year and includes representatives from the Welsh Assembly Government (Public Health Improvement Division, Public Health Strategy Division and Food and Market Development Division), the Rural Regeneration Unit, the Wales Co-op Centre, the Welsh Development Agency and two representatives

from food co-ops in North and South Wales that existed before the pilot was initiated. On top of the formal meetings members of the steering group would contact each other on an ad hoc basis where there was a need for troubleshooting. The management structure was loose enough to provide support and advice at any time. The most serious set back has been the loss of the South Wales Food Development Worker following a personal episode which meant that she could not continue. Her role was subsequently supported from Cumbria by the manager of the pilot and her support worker. It is largely due to the robust nature of the model that the food co-operatives have continued to operate with new co-ops developing without the need for the on-going local support of a dedicated Food Development Worker.

- 1.9 The role of the Food Development Workers is diverse. Tasks include
- raising awareness of the pilot scheme
 - presentations to local groups on how to run a food co-operative and highlighting the benefits of the scheme
 - conducting local risk assessments to ensure that the food co-operatives do not threaten the viability of local businesses
 - identifying and involving local producers and suppliers
 - making links with other local groups and agencies at community, Local Authority and Local Health Board levels
 - supporting in organising, and attending, the launch of food co-operatives
 - supporting the early development and running of the food co-operatives,
 - providing advice and support on an on-going basis to local groups.

Pilot Aims

- 1.10 The key focus of the pilot was to ‘supply, from locally produced sources as far as possible, quality affordable fruit and vegetable to disadvantaged communities through the development of sustainable local food distribution networks’ in North and South East Wales’. This provided an opportunity to test the initiative in two very different geographical areas.

- 1.11 The main aim was ‘to connect farmers and communities, cutting down the distribution chain and returning a healthier diet and lifestyle to the communities and viable trade to the farmer.’
- 1.12 However early interviews with stakeholders involved in the set up of the co-ops highlighted that the development of the supply networks would take time, possibly beyond the timeframe of the pilot and the focus of the evaluation was largely on how the co-ops worked in practice and the extent to which they impacted on the communities they served – particularly in terms of changes in consumption of fruit and vegetables.
- 1.13 It should be highlighted that a key target was that 26 co-ops should be set up by the end of the pilot. At the time of writing this evaluation 77 co-ops have been set up in the pilot areas.

2 Evaluation Methods

Theoretical Approach

- 2.1 The study was theoretically informed by ‘theories of change’ and ‘realistic’ forms of evaluation. The rationale for using theories of change was the understanding that interventions implemented in one context may not resonate with subjects in another context in the same way³, and that learning from the evaluation should most usefully focus on what works, for whom and in what circumstances⁴. It was thus anticipated that the development of the programme would benefit most from an in-depth analysis of the relationship between programme objectives and mechanisms and how these translated into the way in which individual projects operated on the ground.
- 2.2 While individual case study co-ops were underpinned by the same simple model, the diversity of projects and the contexts of their implementation varied in several ways. First, they differed in relation to local exigencies. That is, communities differed in relation to their geographical location, their socio-economic designations and their local economies. Second, they varied in respect of the types of support available and accessed, the extent of their dependencies on outside agencies (at inception and after) and the network relationships which they developed. Third, the relationships between co-ops and produce suppliers differed as a function of, the nature and size of enterprise and commitment to co-ops. Fourth, co-ops differed in their approaches to engagement with local people and (in particular) the relationship between volunteers and customers).
- 2.3 The diversity of projects was found to have implications for the ways in which their aims and objectives were translated into practice. It informed the different ways in which co-ops developed and adapted at the local level

³ Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage.

⁴ Hills, D (2004) *Evaluation of community level interventions for health improvement: a review of the evidence in the UK*. London: Health Development Agency

according to the particular contexts they inhabited. While many of the strategies which co-ops developed were employed across projects, each was underpinned by the experiences encountered variously by individual co-ops. It is only through detailed examination of what happened where and how (and for what reasons) that a greater understanding was possible about the barriers and facilitators to successful implementation and long term survival of co-ops. Given that this was a pilot project the evaluation has furnished important insights which will assist in the future clarification and refinement of the programme to ensure future roll-out is most likely to reach its stated objectives.

Methods

- 2.4 Theoretical approaches go hand in hand with methods of investigation. In order to realise a theories of change approach, a combination of qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and observation) were employed.
- 2.5 The study design employed an impact and process evaluation. Impact evaluation is typically used for interventions already in place, so that the outcomes can be assessed. Data informing outcome analysis included the data collected data collected by the RRU from the pilot food co-ops, information on supply and demand for produce provided by co-ops, interviews with suppliers and co-op participants.
- 2.6 Process evaluation was informed by a case study approach. The case studies employed a range of qualitative methods and generated rich descriptive data representing different key elements of the overall programme.
- 2.7 In the initial stages of the evaluation a literature review was undertaken on food co-operatives and their role in improving health particularly in disadvantaged communities. This review which drew on research and grey literature helped to inform the development of semi-structured interviews schedules to be used in interviews with key stake holders, representatives from other agencies workers involved with co-ops, co-op volunteers, customers and co-op suppliers.

Data collection

Interviews with key stakeholders and development workers

2.8. Semi-structured interviews and documents were used to explore the setting up of the project, the development of national and regional support and management structures, initial challenges and adaptation to change and problems encountered on the ground in relation to original aims and objectives. Interviews explored the policy context for programme uptake; identification and development of the Cumbria model, perceived and anticipated barriers and facilitators of programme success, aims and objectives; national and local contextual conditions needed to meet stated objectives; appointment of programme staff and choice of pilot areas. These interviews were followed up by interviews with staff and advisors, including the two Food Development Officers in North and South East Wales involved with the set-up and ongoing support provided for the programme as a whole. These interviews further informed the selection criteria for the case studies and the development of interview and observational schedules.

Case Studies

- 2.9 The case studies comprised a multi-method approach which included: individual/group (mainly face to face) interviews with around twelve key stakeholders in each area (including individual project managers, staff/volunteers, suppliers, consumers and partners), documentary evidence where available (including steering group meetings, advertisements, financial reports, newspapers articles, newsletters), observation of local co-ops in practice using a structured observation matrix utilising themes identified by interview and documentary evidence. In addition, local profiles from 2005 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) and Neighbourhood Statistics of Lower Level Super Output Areas were obtained for case study areas.
- 2.10 Co-ops were identified, using insights from the literature, interview data and knowledge of different areas, especially in relation to issues of social deprivation. Given that the pilot required that 75% of food co-ops should be located in Communities First areas this was also reflected in the selection of

case studies. The evaluation team set out to ensure that the case studies presented a mix of geographical locations and that rural, urban and de-industrialised South Wales Valleys location were all included. The research team also selected case studies that had strong links to other area based health initiatives, such as Healthy Living Centres, Inequalities in Health Programme projects and Sustainable Health Action Research Programme projects, alongside food co-ops that operated as stand alone initiatives in their locality. Identification of case studies, using these criteria is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Selection of Case Studies

	COMMUNITIES FIRST AND/OR STRONG LINKS TO AREA BASED INITIATIVES	COMMUNITIES FIRST AND/OR WEAK LINKS TO AREA BASED INITIATIVES	NOT COMMUNITIES FIRST
RURAL/VALLEY TYPE ONE	Case Study 9 Bridgend	Case Study 7 Caerphilly Case Study 1 Flintshire	Case Study 12 Monmouthshire
URBAN – SMALL TOWN/TYPE 2 VALLEYS	Case Study 11 Powys	Case Study 4 Conwy Case study 5 Flintshire Case study 6 Wrexham	Case Study 2 Denbighshire Case Study 3 Conwy
LARGE TOWN/CITY	Case Study 8 Newport	Case Study 10 Swansea	

Type 1 South Wales Valleys: Very isolated (just a few houses and no or minimal Shops and facilities)

Type 2 South Wales Valleys: Closer, or in, larger towns like Merthyr with easy local access to shops and other facilities.

2.11 Following initial selection of twelve potentially suitable sites (6 in North Wales and 6 in South Wales), pilot fieldwork was conducted either by visits or by telephone to confirm details on exact location and length of operation, unique identifiers and models of practice.

- 2.12 Live model frameworks were developed for each case study depicting the number, and date of each data collection event (observation and interviews) to enable the progress of each case study to be monitored and tracked. Frameworks were also developed to map food co-op links, and other related health and regeneration projects, some of which were implemented as a direct outcome of food co-op development.
- 2.13 The case study evaluation aimed to include interviews with a minimum of two volunteers (where there was more than one), a minimum of two agencies per food co-op and four customers per case study. Suppliers were also interviewed though only 4 interviews were successfully conducted. This was largely due to the fact that only one producer supplied the North Wales food co-op case studies. This producer, towards the end of the evaluation, was supplying twenty-one food co-ops. In addition, food co-ops were visited on a least one occasion to undertake observation of co-ops in progress.
- 2.14 To make efficient use of the time available interviews were arranged in advance wherever possible. In the majority of cases these interviews took place at suitable venues that afforded privacy for respondents. In some cases this was not possible for customers who were, in many cases, keen to continue with their normal daily activities and if they were happy to be interviewed on the spot in the co-op, then an interview was undertaken. All respondents signed inform and consent forms copies of which were kept by the interviewer and interviewee.

Observation of case studies

- 2.15 Observation was undertaken at each case study using a detailed thematic template designed by the evaluation team. The schedules captured rich details of co-ops in action, contextual details of local areas and venues and provided insights which were incorporated in the semi-structured interview schedules which were used with agency workers, volunteers and co-op customers

Case study interviews

- 2.16 In total, thirty two semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from community agencies linked to case study food co-ops. These included interviews with Communities First officers, voluntary sector representatives, public health officers, church elders, a landlord of a local pub, Credit Union volunteers, local college representative, area-based initiative co-ordinators and project managers, after school club co-ordinators, representatives from health and fitness/ healthy eating clubs, Local Health Board representatives and Local Authority officers.
- 2.17 These interviews focused on the both agency remit and the role of the individual respondent in relation to the inception, development and implementation of food co-ops. They were also asked about local need for a food co-op in the area, the perceived role of the co-ops in meeting local and their own agency objectives, the extent to which the food co-ops were reaching a range of population groups, perceived barriers and facilitators to success and issues of sustainability.
- 2.18 Thirty volunteers were interviewed in total. These interviews focused on the respondent's history of volunteering or community action, their involvement with food co-op, their involvement in other community based activities, positive and negative experiences of involvement, perceived role of the co-op in meeting local need, relationships with other actors involved in the food co-op, perceived levels of support, local population groups benefiting from the co-op, perceived barriers and facilitators of success and issues of sustainability. In most cases interviews were set up by the researchers, although the Food Development Workers helped to access and arrange a small number of interviews if necessary. In most case studies volunteers were interviewed individually however in other cases it was felt to be more appropriate to interview them as a group or small groups.
- 2.19 A total of fifty two customer interviews were carried out. These interviews focused on respondent's history of association with the co-op, the perceived role of food co-ops locally, perceived local need, ease of access, food co-op

ambience, positive and negative experiences of co-ops, barriers/facilitator to using co-ops, suggestions for improvement, understanding of food origin, issues of diet and food preference, behaviour change and anticipated future use of co-ops.

- 2.20 Interviews were carried out with the four suppliers of food co-op produce. These interviews focused on the nature of the supplier's business and percentage produce (if any) self produced, size of enterprise, percentage of food co-op associated business, association with food co-op/s, local access to fresh produce, issues of supply/demand, perceived local need, relationships with food co-ops, links to other community initiatives, positive and negative food co-op related experiences, impact of food co-ops on business, responding to customer demand and anticipated future relationships with food co-ops.

Ethical issues

- 2.21 All work was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998. Information sheets were provided to all participants who were given the option of withdrawing from data collection at any time. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews. Participants were informed that they could refuse to participate in the interviews at any time. Visits to site locations were preceded by information on the evaluation to advertise beforehand to users of the food co-ops or their complementary activities.
- 2.22 In relation to data storage, all the interviews ID numbers used during data collection and paper and audio records are held in locked filing cabinets in secure offices. Paper records linking names to ID numbers are kept in a separate and secure location. All tapes will be destroyed 6 months following project completion.

Data analysis

- 2.23 For the most part, interviews with respondents were tape recorded (with permission) and fully transcribed. In a small minority of cases notes were taken by hand because of (a) respondent refusal for the interview to be tape recorded, (b) context of the interview (such as in a community hall setting) was not

conducive to taping.

2.24 Data analysis was informed by constant comparative, grounded theories approached. All the data (including transcripts and notes from interviews, plus other documented materials and data from observation schedules) were read and re-read by evaluation team members. Initial themes were identified (and coding validity between team members established). A case study protocol was then designed to capture key issues emanating from the different data sources and higher level themes were identified. The protocols were completed in respect of each case study. This report derives in large part from information/analysis captured in the protocols.

3 The Case Study areas: the importance of location

Introduction

3.1. Location of food co-ops is important for several reasons. For policy makers, health providers, and community practitioners, location is important because food co-ops address problems of access to, and availability of, affordable fresh fruit and vegetables in disadvantaged areas. Within these areas they also address poor levels of nutrition knowledge and dietary practises. For those involved in the running of food co-ops and the customers they serve, issues of location focused on the perceived social acceptability of the venue, its visibility and convenience, the adequacy of the accommodation and support it provides, and its potential to function as a hub of social interaction.

Case study areas

3.2 In terms of social disadvantage, five of the case study areas are designated among the top 10% (190 most deprived) in the 2005 version of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (see Appendix One). In addition, particular case studies appear within the top 10% of different domains of disadvantage. One case study area, for example, is highlighted as faring particularly badly with regard to health, standing within the top five of that domain. Closer scrutiny of the Lower Level Super Output Level areas, in which the co-ops are situated (which cover a population of around 1,500), indicates that most of the case study areas are worse off in relation to their electoral division and local authority with regard to limiting long term illness, general health, economic inactivity (due to unemployment and disability) and educational qualifications.

3.3 Nine of the twelve case studies are located in Communities First areas. It is interesting to note, however, that respondents from non-Communities First areas described their areas as nonetheless deprived. Although none of the Non Communities First areas feature in the new Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, two of the North Wales case study areas are in the top 10% for income deprivation, and one of these is in the top hundred. In the Non-

Communities First areas in South Wales, one of the agencies represented in the study noted that the area, unlike others in the borough, had high levels of social deprivation. This was because social disadvantages indexing the two housing estates which comprised the area were masked by the relative affluence of the surrounding neighbourhood. Unemployment and low income which are features of this case study area are compounded by the fact that there are virtually no facilities and no shops for five miles.

- 3.4 Communities First areas have attracted funding and resources in a number of ways. For example, they are likely to have a Surestart initiative in the area, and will have been a priority in terms of lottery funding for Healthy Living Centres and other health and regeneration funding, as well being a focus for Welsh Assembly Government projects such as the Inequalities in Health programme and the Sustainable Health Action Research Programme (SHARP). Two of the case studies are attached to Healthy Living Centres (ten and eleven), four are in areas where existing Inequalities in Health projects run (one, five, eight and, nine) and two are linked to SHARPs projects (five and eleven). In case study twelve there has also been a successful bid to the Food and Fitness grants programme. Although there was no obligation on behalf the food co-op volunteers to link into these projects, it is interesting to note that many of these projects saw the food co-ops as an opportunity to develop an integrated approach to health improvement.
- 3.5 An important issue for many of the residents living in case study areas was that affordable fresh fruit and vegetables were not accessible at a local level. Although none of the case study areas are highlighted in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, as being in the top 10% regarding lack of geographical access to services, most of the co-ops in North Wales are in remote areas where access to food outlets depends entirely on availability of private transport. In one study area, where only 50% of the residents own a car, the nearest bus service is two miles away. Similarly in one co-op in South Wales, the nearest shop is five miles away with the local bus service running just once a day, on week days. Even where the proximity of shops and other facilities is not too far, the physical geography serves to isolate people living in those

areas. In five of the study areas the steep gradient of the areas makes shopping a real chore as one customer said, “For car drivers it’s not bad. For people like myself it’s a slog down the hill and a bus or a taxi up” (3C). However access can also be hampered by other factors such as the lack of pedestrian friendly roads. For instance in one case study area without access to some form of transport, it is difficult to walk into the town as the access road is one dual carriage way geared to heavy traffic. Furthermore buses serving this estate do not stop near any supermarkets.

Access, attitudes and behaviours

- 3.6 In terms of access to fruit and vegetables most of the areas have few local outlets. Where they exist these are often small corner shops, carrying general groceries. In these outlets quality of produce was often perceived as poor, the prices high and the variety restricted to basic root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and carrots.
- 3.7 Although access to food outlets was an issue for many people living in case study areas, levels of knowledge and information which inform food preferences and practices were described as equally important. For example, in one of the case studies physical access to supermarket fruit and vegetables was not a key issue because the food co-op is located opposite a large supermarket. What was felt to be more problematic was the tendency for local people to buy “fast-food” rather than fresh. Agency workers associated with the co-op, among others, described this area as particularly disadvantaged, highlighting the main problem as a lack of life skills and knowledge of local residents. In this case study area, 57.16 of residents between the ages of 16-74 have no qualifications, compared to 45.97 in the electoral division, and 33.02 in Wales. In addition, according their most recent Estyn report, 52% of the local secondary pupils in the area are registered to receive free school meals. This figure is significantly higher than the county and national averages. In this case study area, the food co-op was seen by local agencies as a vehicle for improving local people’s skills, both in relation to their self development through volunteering opportunities, and as a means of providing better information and advice on food and nutrition. In particular, agency

respondents talked about the importance of demonstrating to local people the value of fresh food as opposed to the fast food which is readily accessible. Other respondents from co-ops in South Wales also stressed that while access to food was a problem in many areas, an equally important issue was food preferences and practices of local people. One respondent noted, for example, that people would “rather take the bus to town than buy from us” (11V) and:

...certainly with some of the families that we're involved with there's so much reliance on convenience foods, snack foods that even if there was a wholesalers right in the centre of the ward I'm not sure people would be inclined to even think of purchasing fresh fruit and vegetables so it's the educational side of the work that they're doing as well. (10A)

Location of co-ops in local communities

- 3.8 Food co-ops operate from a variety of buildings including community centres or resource centres, youth centres, Healthy Living Centres and, in one case, a church. The physical location of food co-ops within local communities was felt to be vital to their success. According to respondents, buildings needed to be fit for purpose, visible and socially acceptable. Venues worked best when they offered adequate space for efficient packing and selling, when they facilitated a sociable atmosphere for both volunteers and customers and when they were in a location that was easy to find and in the ‘heart’ of local community life. However where cost was a key determining factor, the best venue might be sacrificed for what was affordable or free.
- 3.9 Costs for the use of buildings are usually either waived or met by an existing organisation or initiative, particularly if the co-op is seen as part of a number of community activities that it supports. For example, part of the remit of the Healthy Living Centre’s programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund (previously the New Opportunities Fund), has been to develop health related activities which respond to locally identified need⁵. Food co-ops are run as part of a local Healthy Living Centre project in two of the case studies and

⁵ New Opportunities Fund (1998) Healthy Living Centres: Information for applicants. London: NOF.

situated within their buildings. In another two case studies, the food co-ops are run from dedicated tenants and residents buildings providing an additional resource to local residents. In other cases the costs of the use of building have been met by different organisations. In one case a large youth centre building is hired on a weekly basis by the local Citizen's Advice Bureau. In this case the co-op was invited to share the use of the building whilst the CAB is in operation. In most cases the food co-op venue is located in a place where volunteers are happy to work and with which they are familiar.

- 3.10 However, sometimes co-ops volunteers have not been able to identify a venue with which they are entirely happy. In one instance volunteers described the location of the co-op in the "roughest part" of the estate as problematic. Residents living in, what one respondent described as, the "posher" areas were reportedly deterred from using the co-op because of its location. Here, discussions were taking place about the possibility of moving the co-op to a more socially acceptable venue. However, this may beg the question of who the co-ops need to be accessible to and food co-op volunteers need to be sensitive to the local balance of needs and question notions of acceptability to different local population groups.
- 3.11 Another problem that some food co-ops faced was a lack of space to enable volunteers to work comfortably. In some cases, rooms were too small and cramped to organise the bagging and selling of the produce efficiently. In one case the volunteers had to operate from a small room which usually functioned as a nursery. Working on tiny tables to separate the fruit and vegetables required some ingenuity to manage the number of bags that volunteers had to fill. Another food co-op operated from two rooms in a small community house. Conducting the job on the day was a cumbersome matter with fruit being bagged in one room, vegetables in another and bags due to be delivered to nearby venues were put under the stairs.
- 3.12 Although volunteers in these situations were usually observed to enjoy the ordered chaos of the situation, pulling together in adversity, it could sometimes make it hard for the volunteers to find the time and space to

socialise. Observations have highlighted the importance of those quiet moments when volunteers can sit and talk, often about ideas to improve the co-op but also just to enjoy each others company. Later in this report it will be emphasised that the sustainability of the co-ops depend on the commitment of the volunteers. Given that volunteers see the social aspect of running the co-ops as a central benefit for themselves, then venues that facilitate opportunities for “tea and chat” could be a contributory factor in securing their long term support.

Food co-ops as a hub of social life

- 3.13 However volunteers were also keen to promote a good social atmosphere for customers. In one co-op, volunteers were frustrated by the fact that customers had to queue to buy their fruit or vegetable bags. Here volunteers were considering providing refreshments for customers in order “to try to get them to mix a little more”. The social function of the food co-ops is most apparent where opportunities have been created to provide the opportunity for customers to socialise with each other and with volunteers. In two of the case studies this has been promoted through setting up community cafés which reinforce the food co-ops as part of a social focus for local people. Whilst only a handful of co-ops have the space or capacity to set up a community café, volunteers often looked for ways in which they could improve the social ambience for their customers even if it was just spending a bit of time to talk to people. It should be noted however that, even where space constraints do not allow for a designated ‘social’ area, it is important that the food co-op venue is conducive to promoting social discourse.
- 3.14 Taking a broader view of their relationship to the wider locality, food co-ops were felt to be best placed in areas where they were visible and where they were considered to be at the centre of public life. In the case of one co-op (case study two), for example, an important draw back of the venue was felt to be its lack of visibility from the main road. Because the co-op did not attract attention from passers-by, customers, for the main part, were a small network of people who already knew about its existence. By contrast, the location of another co-op in a community house was described as key to its success

because the house constituted the focus for many local community initiatives and provided a source of volunteers. Food co-ops which are co-located in buildings where other activities are taking place can provide mutual benefits. For instance, these food co-ops can (and did) operate as a mechanism for local people to become involved, for instance, in other Health Living Centre activities, and vice versa.

- 3.15 Case study findings suggest that it is important to the success of co-ops that they are located in venues where people routinely meet and interact. However, whereas it is relatively easy to identify the heart of communities in small rural areas with fairly small populations, this can be more difficult in larger urban estates where boundaries are unclear and which may be characterised as having a number of socially meaningful areas. For example, in one of the case studies we learnt that it had been difficult to identify a universally acceptable focus of social activity because the estate housing the co-op was characterised by historic territorial rivalries.

Illustrative example 1: development of a community café

This food co-op has linked up with services for people with learning difficulties. Clients of the service have participated in the food co-op from its inception, with support from a care manager and a cook from the day centre. They either help with the fruit and vegetables or they assist in the community café with the day centre cook. The café is in a separate room adjoining the food co-op. It provides tea, coffee and homemade cakes. The volunteers in the café also make tea and toast for the food co-op volunteers, once the fruit and vegetables have been bagged. Customers and volunteers enjoyed this extension of the food co-op, valuing it as opportunity to chat ‘to other housewives’ and as a good example of supporting social inclusion.

- 3.16 It would be unrealistic to expect all food co-ops to identify venues which satisfy the needs and expectations of volunteers and customers. However where volunteers felt that unreasonable or “trivial” barriers (such as accommodation rental), prevented them from using a choice venue, they expressed resentment about the perceived lack of support. For instance one

food co-op was unable to operate from the local community centre which, respondents felt, offered better facilities and a more appropriate location:

The community centre is near the post office where they all go for their, you know the girls go in get their money every week ... it's a lot of things they do in the community like the crèche that perhaps could be co-ordinated on the same morning. You know we only want a little part of the community centre but where we are at the moment it - the premises are not suitable at all. (8V4)

- 3.17 Notwithstanding constraints on venue choice, for the most part, volunteers managed as best as they could with the buildings they were offered. Indeed, in many cases, co-ops have revitalised previously neglected or underused buildings. In one extremely remote rural community, for example, where all shops and public buildings had completely disappeared the co-op had managed, in some measure, to recreate a social focus for village life. In another case study, the development of the co-op had provided a platform for a several other community activities to operate out of a building that had previously been closed down (case study six).
- 3.18 To reiterate, several co-ops were housed in buildings in which a number of other activities were taking place. This was particularly the case in Healthy Living Centres or community buildings, where a number of voluntary and statutory agencies were based. While on the one hand this provided a broader context for food co-ops, on the other it could engender a sense of dependency. This was most apparent where agencies operating out of the building took on roles which, in other co-ops, were filled by volunteers. This theme is taken up later in this report.

Summary

- 3.19 The location of food-coops is important on a number of levels. They make an valuable contribution in areas of disadvantage (irrespective of whether these are Communities First designated), in that they provide a much needed supply of affordable fresh produce in areas which characteristically have few food outlets and poor local transport. Co-ops also have an important role to play in

challenging and changing local food knowledge and behaviours in a context that is familiar and acceptable.

- 3.20 In order to maximise their potential, it is important that food coops are accommodated in buildings which are highly visible, in socially acceptable locations, well maintained, accessible and which are the natural focus of community activity. Many successful food co-ops well networked, through physical location (sharing a building) with other community interventions/activities. It should be noted that food co-ops can, and do, both benefit from existing interventions/programmes, and contribute to the development of new community endeavours. One caveat to this, however, is that while mutual benefit derives from the relationship between different interventions/activities, there is a risk of co-ops becoming over-dependent on staff (and other resources) from different agencies.
- 3.21 Finally, it is important for retention of volunteers and attracting and keeping customers, that the accommodation is adequate for the demands of the co-op (food storage, sorting, bagging and receiving customers). Moreover, at the very least, venues should be conducive to social interaction between customers and with volunteers.

4 Understanding How Community Food Co-ops Work

Introduction

4.1 The model informing the food co-ops initiative is designed to be simple to set up and implement. On the whole this was the experience of suppliers, customers and volunteers. In the following sections we examine different aspects of the translation of the model into practice and the ways in which co-ops have evolved to address the practical exigencies which they encounter.

Generating interest in local food co-ops

4.2 The Community Food Co-ops pilot was implemented at a time when public health policy in Wales was open to innovative initiatives addressing food poverty, on the one hand, and the rising prevalence of diet related health problems on the other. By far the most important local champions, however, for initiating the concept of food co-ops among most of the case studies were Communities First development officers. They felt that the initiative not only addressed local health needs but also addressed wider issues in relation to education and skills, access to facilities and services, and community empowerment. In other, non-Communities First case study areas, the need for local food initiatives was, for the most part, highlighted by local needs assessments and/or consultations, and agencies involved in those consultations were often the key initial contact points for the Food Development Workers.

4.3 Local people, however, were not passive recipients of this new initiative, an important driver of which was conversations between community workers and local people. It was those working in the community who felt that (a) they had “knowledge of local people” and (b) that the initiative would resonate with what residents actually wanted. In one case study the food co-op’s origins were described as arising from a conversation at a parenting class where local mothers were discussing the closure of the only local shop. In two other areas, the prior existence of food co-ops (which had subsequently folded) created a context conducive to the renewal of effort to get them up and running. While the more recent co-ops in these areas were not directly associated with earlier

food-coops, the historical presence of food co-ops in the area is understood to have eased their reintroduction.

Setting up the co-ops

- 4.4 Once contact had been initiated between community workers and residents, the Food Development Workers usually arranged to conduct a presentation with local people and other interested parties. Such presentations presented an opportunity to sell the idea of a food co-op. Prior to setting up of food co-ops the Food Development Workers conducted presentations to all interested parties. In these presentations the Food Development Workers highlighted the purpose and advantages of food co-ops for local people and the local economy. The simplicity of the project was also emphasized and a comprehensive description provided of how food co-ops work, from ordering produce through to collection by customers and the roles of volunteers in this process. If no volunteers are already available to run the project, the event provides an opportunity to enthuse local people to come on board. For the most part these presentations were successful in identifying an initial number of individuals. In some cases potential volunteers were taken to see a co-op in action, although this happened to a lesser extent in the North Wales case studies. Such visits were very successful in enthusing volunteers and it was often this experience of witnessing a going concern which sealed their commitment to setting up food co-ops in their respective areas.
- 4.5 Once a viable number of volunteers are prepared to set up a co-op, the Food Development Workers conduct informal but documented risk assessments to ensure that they do not pose a threat to local businesses for nearby fruit and vegetable outlets, and to provide information for relevant local traders. While it might be argued that where no affordable fresh fruit and vegetable are available to local people they have a legitimate right to meet that need, it is important that food co-ops do not become a focus of local dissention. In addition, the risk assessment can be a valuable mechanism to win the support of local traders and provide opportunities for identifying mutual benefits. In some case studies the possibility of involving local traders was entertained. However, while discussions took place with some businesses (for example, a

local butcher) nothing has transpired in case study areas from these discussions to-date. Notwithstanding this, It should be noted that volunteers for the most part continuously seek out supportive links with other organisations/agencies and local businesses.

Illustrative Example 2: Assessing the risks to local businesses

In this area the local shop, which had been run by the post office, had closed down. Discussions were held with the post office as to whether they would wish to run the co-op from their premises. The offer was declined but the owner of the sub-post office was involved throughout the development of the co-op and was invited to the launch. There had been no complaints from the post office since the co-op was set up in autumn 2004.

4.6 Food co-op participants appeared to recognise the importance of establishing clear roles and responsibilities in relation to their work. Volunteers differ in their availabilities, the skills they can offer, their interest in the endeavor and the degree to which they want to lead in the co-op development or simply perform routine functional tasks on the day. While the vast majority of co-op volunteers turn up on the day to bag the fruit and vegetables, it is usually left to one or two people to manage the accounts and deal with the orders. It should be noted here, that where the co-ops are located in Communities First premises, it is sometimes a Communities First worker who takes responsibility for (a) ordering produce (b) doing the accounts. Overall, an advantage of the food co-op system is that it is simple enough to enable people with a relative low level of commitment, time, confidence or skills to get involved, but it is also open enough to invite innovation and encourage the development of leadership roles. Thus, it does offer volunteers the opportunity to develop new skills and hone existing skills. Many volunteers talked about their involvement with the co-op as an enabling experience.

The order, payment and delivery system

4.7 Although the system for buying and selling is designed to be simple (see 1.5). In practice the 'system' is adapted according to local needs and preferences. For instance, whilst some food co-ops simply order the bags according to

number of orders for fruit, vegetables and salad, others prefer to have more control over the produce that is ordered and will request particular items. For most co-ops there is an element of customer influence determining what the supplier delivers. On the whole, suppliers are happy to respond to food co-op requests for more or less of a particular type of fruit or vegetable so, “if they get fed up with an item, say cabbage we will substitute it for something else” (S1). In one case, a supplier provided the food co-ops with a price list each week, thus enabling the volunteers to choose what items they wished to have in each type of bag. However, the disadvantage of this system for volunteers was that it was over-complicated. That is, when determining bag content, volunteers were left with the task of balancing perceived customer demands within an agreed budget. Giving customers choice was found to complicate the system in other ways. That is, problems could occur if a non-seasonal product was requested because this had cost implications and affected the amount of produce provided in the bags. However, where the relationship between supplier, volunteers and customers was good, these issues were usually ironed out through discussion.

Setting up ‘shop’, selling and clearing up.

4.8 For the most part, bagging and selling the produce on the day was observed to be a straightforward business. Volunteers are usually punctual. They arrive at the food co-op in good time to prepare the room and arrange the tables for sorting and bagging produce before the suppliers arrive. Not all suppliers, however, delivered on the day of the co-op. In a few cases suppliers delivered the day before. This usually happened at the request of volunteers, where the supplier was not always punctual. In a minority of cases this had caused problems in setting up the stall, and there have been occasions where customers have been turned away because the produce did not arrive on time. Delivery the day before, however, can also cause problems. These problems mainly surround the receipt and storage of produce. While this happened in only a minority of cases it does highlight benefits of observing the simple model (where this is operationalised appropriately)

- 4.9 The busiest time for participants is often once the supplier arrives. There are usually separate tables, or areas, for vegetables, fruit and salad. Fruit, vegetable and salad products are put onto their respective tables and a notice is set up to let the volunteers how many of each product goes into each bag. Most items are counted, potatoes being the only product that is usually weighed. Any obviously rotten or unacceptable fruit or vegetables are returned to the supplier at this stage.
- 4.10 Organising the bags can be a chaotic process particularly in co-ops which have a high number of orders. All have developed their own systems to ensure they have the right number of bags and that each bag has the correct number of fruit and vegetables. All have developed systems that suit the setting and the people involved. For instance in one co-op a number of the volunteers have learning difficulties and a system was developed to ensure that each of these workers was supported by another volunteer. A checking system was then used, with stickers identifying those bags confirmed as containing correct amount of produce.
- 4.11 Most co-ops enjoy a quiet time, either before the supplier arrives or just prior to opening. These quiet spells appeared, through observations, to be important for volunteers. This was the time in which they relaxed, talked with each other and enjoyed “our tea and toast”. Throughout this report reference will be made to the important social aspect of co-ops for all those involved.
- 4.12 Once the food co-op is open, customers arrive to pick up their bags and place their orders for the following week. Customers do not always order solely for themselves and family. Through observation it was apparent that many ordered several bags, some of which were destined for friends, neighbours or relatives. While generally ‘the pay in advance’ rule was operationalised across co-ops, the system is interpreted with some flexibility. That is, most co-ops recognise that not everyone will be able to order on the day for a wide variety of reasons. For this reason, most co-ops allowed customers to order throughout the week, before the order was placed with the supplier. One co-op has a holiday book so that if customers know that they are unable to place

an order for one or more weeks they can order two, three or more weeks in advance. The need to be flexible is a lesson learnt by food co-ops over time, and the degree to which they introduce these flexibilities has been a balancing act between the need to keep it simple with the need to respond to the needs and circumstances of local people.

Illustrative Example Three: Developing a flexible system

The system is now flexible in this co-op in that orders will be taken from customers when they attend other activities at the local community house. There is also there is some flexibility about when orders may be collected in order to increase some of the number of orders. It was emphasised that the co-op day does not suit everybody and people would sometimes forget if that was the only opportunity. However, they noticed that there was quite a large collection of people getting together on the Wednesday morning for a parent and toddlers group so they used this and other opportunities to collect weekly orders.

4.13 In a small minority of cases, volunteers put money in for regular customers, where close friendships are involved. In one food co-op the ‘payment in advance’ rule was waved temporarily in respect of new but known (to volunteers) customers. This was because volunteers were concerned to develop trust between customer and co-op. However, it must be noted, that this was only used as a temporary measure (where trust was established) and with customers perceived by volunteers to be “reliable”.

Co-ops as a part of wider systems – wider links

4.14 In some venues the food co-op was the only activity that was taking place. In others, however, customers had the opportunity to access a number of different activities or services that were taking place in either the same room or somewhere in the building. One Communities First development worker highlighted this as a key benefit of the food co-ops, describing them as mechanism for local people to see other activities and services available for local people. This is an important theme that will be developed later in this report.

4.15 Community food co-ops have been set up with the intention that they should be able to operate as 'stand alone' entities, with local volunteers entering into a simple contract with a local suppliers. As highlighted earlier, community food co-ops have emerged at a time of intense concern and debate in public health policy and the media about the food people eat and the link between poor diet and escalating rates of obesity. Parallel concerns about the links between poverty and ill- health and the lack of affordable food in areas of social and economic deprivation have spawned a proliferation of local and national initiatives to improve people's access, attitudes and behaviour in relation to food and nutrition. It was not surprising that food co-ops have entered into a terrain that is crowded with other agencies and initiatives whose own objectives dovetail with that of the community food co-ops. Although building wider connections at local and strategic policy levels sometimes created difficulties for co-ops, there were clear advantages for the co-ops themselves and in terms of developing an integrated approach to health improvement. All co-ops have developed links at some level and they should therefore be seen as a part of wider local health systems for health and regeneration.

4.16 One of the programme's remits was that seventy-five percent of co-ops should be in Communities First areas to ensure that the co-ops reach the people who, because suffering disadvantage, are most likely to benefit from a 'service' providing affordable fruit and vegetables. For Communities First development workers co-ops are not only seen as a way of ensuring access to fruit and vegetables but as potentially fulfilling wider objectives in relation to economic and community development. This meant that the perceived health benefits of the co-ops might be seen as secondary to other regeneration priorities:

The first and foremost was trying to fill a gap in people's access to shopping, that is a disadvantage in itself, so that was one of them. The health side of it is the accidental bit because again I would have done it with Iceland; I would have done it with anybody who would have helped the estate, to be honest. Equalising is the main thing. Giving people equal access to services and information and then allowing them to make their

own decisions based on their own judgements and support provided. (6A1)

- 4.17 Given that the potential benefits of co-ops often dovetail with the objectives of a number of different agencies, these other organisations have become integral to the set up, delivery and development of the co-ops. Although these agencies/organisations have their own distinct agendas, their remits largely complement those of the community food co-ops.
- 4.18 Co-ops variously developed three distinct, but related types of links. First, they developed *operational links* with individuals/groups delivering services and activities locally. These links enabled co-ops to become part of a local network of activity. Where co-ops were co-located at the same time and place as other activities this could strengthen the relationships between workers involved in each endeavour, encourage mutual support and attract new users to the respective services. For example a community agency worker noted, “I usually, help when it’s delivered and drag any boxes across the road for the bin man” (1A5). This respondent also described benefits of working with the food co-op for his/her own agency, hence, “The food co-op has improved it yes, it’s got more people coming in and X will leap on someone new as they come through the door and say ‘join’”.
- 4.19 Not only were some co-ops co-located in buildings alongside different services/activities, there were also opportunities to link up with other local community services and interventions. Food co-ops frequently provided produce for events linked to these other activities, which, if the co-op had additional financial resources, might be provided free of cost. More enduring links were sometimes forged with schools. Among the case study co-ops, two after-school clubs were supplied with fresh produce which was used in ways that highlighted the role of the co-op locally. For example, children at one school designed the logo for their local co-op and sometimes provided goods to sell on the day. In addition, some schools are developing allotment projects and discussion was taking place about the potential mutual benefits which these links might provide. Two food co-ops have also made links with local

Surestart groups, which are an important potential customer group. In one case study, co-op links have been forged with a local supported housing agency, some of whose residents are now supplied with fruit and vegetables on a weekly basis.

- 4.20 The second type of link which co-ops forge is with health relevant *area based initiatives and programmes*. These include not only Communities First, but also other Welsh and UK wide programme such as the Inequalities in Health grant programme, the Sustainable Health Action Research Programme and the Health Living Centres programme. To reiterate, the Surestart programme is another area-based initiative with which co-ops linked, however links with Surestart tended to be forged at the local and operational, rather than regional/national, level. In one case, a lottery funded health improvement project was credited with the instigation of a food co-op. All of these wider initiatives and programmes, in common with each other, share a health improvement and/or tackling inequalities in health agenda and have a focus on sustainability and local engagement. However, they are also all time limited in terms of funding. This means their presence in the local health economy may be temporary, at least in their present form. While, to some extent food co-ops might be understood as examples of local activity having their own remit, the advantage for them in linking in with wider programmes is access to resources. That is food co-ops do receive some additional finances, human support in running the co-ops and help with local publicising from these other agencies/programmes. These initiatives have also been pro-active in helping to identify and support food co-op volunteers. The Communities First worker cited below perceived her/himself and colleagues as providing a key role in supporting food co-op volunteers:

Just to encourage them and just so they knew that there was someone there to help them with anything along the lines of how to deal with the money, help with the bookings and help really just to ring them through for the produce. (1A2)

- 4.21 Notwithstanding the advantages which these associations offer, there can be a downside. That is, a disadvantage attendant on the supportive role is evident in

the fine line the evaluation detected between support and control. Where food co-ops have been set up as part of an area-based initiative then a question arises about where the responsibility for the food co-op lies. Food Development Workers have emphasised to local community workers the importance of letting the volunteers make the decisions. However, it is evident that where the agencies themselves provide and, in some cases, control food co-op resources volunteers may (and in some cases do) find it difficult to control their own destiny. In addition the sustainability of some food co-ops may be threatened where they become over-dependent on (physical and/or financial) support which is of a temporary nature.

- 4.22 A key difference, however, between Communities First and other area based initiatives is that it is a long-term programme which is key to the Welsh Assembly's national approach to regeneration. Local Authorities have specific duties to treat Communities First areas as a priority, and they are integral to their Community Strategies. They provide an important infrastructure for ongoing support and also a link to wider sources of support and resources. While other area based links also provide access to strategic level support (not least because some of these were run by local authorities or Local Health Boards), the short term nature of their funding has meant that the support they offer is geared to more specific objectives within a shorter time frame.
- 4.23 The final type of links forged by (and with) food co-ops, highlighted by the evaluation, were *strategic*. Strategic links are more difficult to encapsulate because they are apparent in the way in which co-ops support and are supported by wider socio-political agendas, rather than in the practical realisation of their mission. Hence, it was clear from interviews how food co-ops were perceived as meeting the aims of local Health, Social Care and Well-Being strategies, or, as one local authority respondent said, "in making healthy choices easier". In another case the local authority identified direct links between their Food and Nutrition strategy and the activities of the co-ops, which they described as working with the Rural Regeneration Unit to roll out the model across priority areas. In another food co-op area the Local Health Board respondent emphasised the importance of food co-ops in promoting

community health, noting that, “we are particularly keen on the food co-op because it supports the consumption of fruit and veg to the population” (2A3). It was clear that for some authorities food co-ops constitute a sound local initiative which suits the political and strategic vision of all partners.

There’s such a lot of good will in the county, whether it be from the statutory sector, the local health board, us in the voluntary council, volunteers on the ground, elected members whether they be AM’s, County Councillors, Community councillors and MP’s. There’s such a lot of good will there to will these initiatives to take hold. It’s irresistible. (5A3)

- 4.24 These strategic links appeared to work particularly well where Communities First and other area based initiatives were perceived as working closely with authority wide statutory organisations. In a sense, the area based initiatives act as mediators between local operational activity and strategic development at an authority level. A clear advantage of good partnership working between these two levels is that learning from the co-ops can be better understood, and ‘seen’ by public authorities, as meeting their own strategic objectives. This may therefore provide the optimum environment in which the model is supported and rolled out to other areas.
- 4.25 Other authority and region wide organisations, both statutory and voluntary, also had links with some co-ops. This provided an opportunity for these organisations to deliver and test their own activities and approaches at a local level. For instance, as a part of a ‘Health Challenge Wales Day’ health checks were offered by a local pub in North Wales. As part of this event, local hospital dieticians provided nutritional advice as well as samples of fresh fruit and vegetables. The publican had strong links with the food-coop. Orders for co-op produce were taken at the pub from customers and the publican allowed his premises to be used as a collection point.
- 4.26 In another case study, a national voluntary organisation recognised the advantages in setting up and linking in to a local food co-op:

I think we were both equally determined to get a food co-op going. A [*colleague's*] I assume, because he saw some of the deprived conditions.... and I suppose my own, because I'm a great believer in eating healthily and that by eating healthily, we will start to regenerate our agricultural communities by producing more of our own food.(2A1)

- 4.27 Similar to advantages of linking with area based initiatives, these larger organisations provided access to (even more substantial) resources which included pump priming money to set up the co-op, payment of rent, links to other services/departments and training:

Basic food hygiene, self-assertiveness, confidence building anything with a personal development role. It could be recruitment, we have about 70 or 80 different modules so that it covers the whole spectrum and so we give them what they want so we identify what their needs are. (5A2)

- 4.28 By linking with local food co-ops, other organisations/agencies ensured that the delivery of their services was relevant to the people that they were targeting. Food co-op volunteers provided an important link to local people and knowledge about their particular interests, tastes and understandings. Hence, "I think you can empathise with people, what they actually want, what they feel would improve their diets" (2A4), and, "initially they'll contact us and say they have a food co-op up and running and then we discuss the possibility of putting a course on to incorporate the food within the co-op" (4A2). Respondents from local colleges, for example, talked of the need to provide appropriate learning geared to specific customer groups:

We will cook our meal in response to their circumstances. So if they've only one ring that's all we'll use. It's group orientated and you have to tailor the course to what you've got to work with. Like, when I shop for the course at the local food co-op or whatever. I don't shop outside of the area because they won't. I'll do what they do and the food co-op is an encouragement and a continuation of that, so if they're living in a bed-sit, then that's how we'll cook. (4A2)

- 4.29 Hence, in meeting broader policy objectives, advantages are to be gained by both sides. Policy makers can witness the practical application of their agendas and food co-ops can reap the advantages of practical and sustained support

from a number of sources. Certainly this potentially provided an opportunity to ensure an integrated approach at local and authority wide levels and a mechanism to put 'joined up working' into practice. The agency respondent sited below had a clear sense of what co-ops have to offer and where their contribution may fit in the range of issues that both regeneration and public health need to tackle:

I personally attend their steering group meetings..... I offer a public health perspective because I'm aware that food co-ops are more than just about promoting fruit and veg, they're about economic development, sustainability, community development, ...and getting people to think about why fruit and veg might be important to them" (2A3).

Conclusion – emerging models

- 4.30 Underpinning the operation of food co-ops lies the concept of a simple model which facilitates access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables, by local people. It is a cost effective system which once implemented relies on the sustained commitment of volunteers, a workable relationship with a local supplier/grower, a suitable and accessible venue, and a satisfied customer base. This is the starting point for all case study food-co-ops. However, since implementation the case study food co-ops have evolved. This has happened as a function of the volunteers' experiences of their practical application and, related to this, aspects of the contexts in which they are located. Models may work well as theoretical concepts, but they are implemented into a messy and complex world.
- 4.31 Volunteers have learnt that in order to survive, food co-ops must be flexible. Most importantly, according to volunteers, they must listen to their customers. Volunteer workers attribute much importance to customer satisfaction. In part, this is a function of the commitment of volunteers to the co-op endeavour and the importance they place on being valued for that contribution. In many cases, customer satisfaction was the main impetus for volunteer sustained involvement.

- 4.32 Volunteers defer to customer preferences and prejudices in a number of ways. For example, they will negotiate with suppliers for particular types of produce; they will take orders throughout the week, waive (in exceptional cases) the 'payment in advance' rule, allow collection on days following the food co-op and (where possible) deliver to customers or groups of customers. Even where changes have not been instigated, for the most part customer requests are seriously entertained.
- 4.33 Co-ops also change as their stand alone ethos is challenged by dependencies which develop with longer standing, better funded, initiatives. For the most part, the links which co-ops form with a range of community agencies and endeavours work to their advantage. They enable co-op activities to be visible and relevant to a wider range of local people, they provide financial, human and physical resources and they facilitate an integrated approach to health promotion and regeneration activities. The risk for food co-ops, however, is when volunteers become caught up in the middle of other organisation's objectives and their own aspirations become threatened.
- 4.34 Thus in a number of (and often minor) ways, the simple co-op model mutates, for reasons of survival. While there were clear advantages, and indeed necessity, for them to exercise flexibility, the evaluation findings urge an element of caution for food co-ops contemplating moving too far from the original model. First, in bending excessively to customer demands, volunteers complicate their work. A simple example is where customers preferences for particular (and notably out of season) produce are accommodated. Also, while in some cases delivery is managed informally by volunteers, efforts to instigate ownership of vehicles for customer delivery is often financially unrealisable within co-op means. Such measures may actually serve to compromise the overriding objective of proving affordable fruit and vegetables. Second, food co-ops must be wary of becoming over-dependent on organisations/agencies with whom they link. This should be a lesson observed also by participants of those organisations. For while they may understand their support to be beneficial (as it surely is), it may not be available in the long term as funding priorities change.

5 Adapting to change and solving problems - making the system work

Introduction

- 5.1 The majority of the case study co-ops had been operating for several months before they were contacted and visited by the evaluation team. In South Wales four had been running for approximately a year and two had been running for three to four months. All the North Wales case study co-ops had been running for at least six months at the time of their evaluation, with the exception of one co-op, which was followed through from the Development worker's initial presentation, setting up, and subsequent launch. Main data collection in this latter co-op was delayed by three months to allow time for it to settle down.
- 5.2 All case study food co-ops continue to operate (at the time this report was written) but with varying degrees of perceived success. Most co-ops encountered some problems as they evolved, and the evaluation provided an opportunity to assess the extent to which they were able to respond to challenges and changes encountered over time.
- 5.3 A key indicator of success, as far as many the volunteers are concerned, is the numbers of customers that visit the co-op. At the point of data collection there were wide differences in the size of customer base across co-ops. These varied between the smallest, with regular customers in single figures (n=7), to the larger co-ops who had three figure customer numbers (n=150+). It should be noted here, however, that customer numbers fluctuated according to a number of factors discussed below.
- 5.4 When asked how they would ideally like their co-ops to develop, many respondents simply said they wanted more customers. However, as will be shown in section seven, some co-ops were undertaking activities that involved working with other organisations to reach population groups that are less

likely to be eating fruit and vegetables as a regular part of their diet. Reaching these groups and affecting changes in attitudes and behaviour in relation to healthy eating was itself an achievement for food co-ops in some areas.

- 5.5 Generally, low customer numbers, which constituted a concern among both volunteers and suppliers, were perceived as stemming from a number of problems that food co-ops had encountered. All had experienced some fluctuation of customer numbers since their inception, A general pattern was that numbers were very high to begin with, and then evened off at a lower level. Notwithstanding this general pattern, food co-ops identified particular incidents or issues that they felt accounted for customer attrition, in some cases. These included low quality of produce, disagreements between volunteers, difficulties in accessing the food co-op and lack of local interest in eating fruit and vegetables. Another difficulty highlighted by some respondents surrounded the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Poor quality fruit and vegetables

- 5.6 On the whole suppliers in the case studies were perceived as providing high quality fruit and vegetables, which constituted good value for money. However, this has not been the experience for all food co-ops. Indeed, a key reason for customers turning away from the co-ops was described as the poor quality of the produce provided. Quality of produce was seen as essential for maintaining a customer base and volunteers noted that a dip in the quality of the fruit and vegetables meant that customers were lost. Moreover, customers who left the food co-op were difficult to win back even where suppliers had been replaced: “His produce seemed to be the tail end of what they couldn’t sell on So the numbers dropped off quite considerably”. Hence a loss of trust between food co-op and customer was difficult to rebuild. In one case study, the memory of a previous co-op which was perceived as having failed due to poor quality of produce had left a legacy of mistrust surrounding future ventures:

The other thing we have on this estate, a couple of years ago there was a food coop previously which went really, really well and (until) they changed supplier and then they changed

supplier again and ...the produce was not very good - pretty awful - and it went down hill very quickly ...so for people on this estate, they're quite suspicious. (4A3)

- 5.7 An emerging pattern in such cases was that, while initially the quality was fine and the suppliers were keen to come on board, there was a tendency for both quality and quantity to gradually deteriorate over time:

When we've had previous suppliers. It would be alright for a while and then first the quality seemed to go down and then the bags got smaller and it was decided by the steering group to change the wholesaler because everyone was complaining. (2C3)

- 5.8 The quality and cost of the produce were perceived by respondents as the main reasons why customers continued to buy from the co-ops. Where customers felt they were not getting a good deal, then the volunteers were the first people to be told.

Illustrative Example Four: Poor quality and loss of customer trust

The co-op was initially supplied by a local grower but they soon found that the quality went downhill and they did not feel that they were getting a good deal. The grower had been very involved at the beginning with this and another food co-op. However not only did the quality go down but relationships broke down too. He was not delivering what he said he would deliver, they were always short of produce, and he did not have the flexibility to deliver when they wanted him to. They also found that they did not have value for money and some customers/volunteer made unfavourable comparisons with what they would get in the local supermarket.

- 5.9 A source of disappointment to some food co-ops was that suppliers did not grow their own produce. However, even where suppliers grew their own produce, some customers were less than satisfied. For example, in one of the two South Wales case studies, where suppliers did grown their own, some customers were described as unused to "dirty" vegetables, These customers appeared to equate quality with "clean" produce available in supermarkets and poor quality with soily co-op produce.

The farmer used to pick the stuff the night before so it's still dripping wet because he pulls the carrots so they're still wet. On some occasions the swede, there might still be a bit of soil, and we had one customer who stopped getting the stuff because mud on the swede got onto the cauliflower so the cauli was dirty. That was the reason they used to stop having it. (10V1)

- 5.10 This perception was reinforced by an agency respondent who explained that such customer concerns did not arise because the produce was poor quality, but because local people were unused to notions of seasonality and had little grasp of the origins of food:

Of course people aren't aware of seasonable vegetables; this is an educational process for them. When they used to the supermarket, they have to be washed now and see something's that dirty because one of the comments we've had from the children is "*food co-op* is dirty," and I said "that's because the veg comes out of the ground, they've been dug up from the ground the day before and now you have to peel them". So that's an education process, but it can be a barrier. (10A1)

- 5.11 However, it must be noted that ex-customers of this particular case study co-op insisted that they were unhappy with the quality of the produce and not the fact that vegetables were dirty. One ex customer of the food co-op had bought vegetables twice. On the second occasion she claimed that the potatoes were bad inside and she "had to cut too much of them off" (10C5).

- 5.12 The contrast between those food co-ops whose supplier was letting them down and those where the supplier was perceived as making an effort to provide a good service, was striking. A good supplier was described as one who was friendly, would make an effort to give good value for money and would also attempt to involve themselves with the community in some way. The following response from volunteers at one food co-op are those typically associated with a 'good' supplier:

Because on our open day when we did the smoothee, he gave a bag to us for nothing.

Because I got these apples and he said try these, they'll be cheaper.

He said you can have these free. He just said today didn't he, I'll chuck a couple of odd things in for you...

He's so friendly the driver. (9Vs)

- 5.13 Letting a supplier go can be a harrowing experience for volunteers. In most cases respondents described a tipping point which precipitated the decision; “It was the onions that pushed us. Yeah, when we had that big bag of onions...The onions came bad. It was disgusting that was” (9Vs). However, because co-ops would often persevere with a supplier for some time before this point reached, in many cases customers would begin to drift away and stay away in increasing numbers. Where food co-op volunteers or other agencies lacked the confidence to confront a supplier, the Food Development Workers proved a valuable resource in mediating the relationship. In two of the case studies, however, the volunteers arranged for a new supplier themselves. Where this happened it was seen by local community agencies as was a positive indication that the volunteers were gaining in confidence, and taking control and ownership of the co-ops.

Apathy – no interest in buying or eating fruit and vegetables

- 5.14 In some areas it was suggested that low numbers of customers was due to a general lack of interest in eating or buying fruit and vegetables. This was compounded by a perceived reticence on behalf of local people to engage in a shopping experience outside their normal shopping habits/routines. That is, in order to attract customers, food co-ops must, for example, overcome residents' usual routines of simply shopping in supermarkets once a week.
- 5.15 In one case study, volunteers described local people as uninterested in any community type interventions, even those which targeted them directly, including food co-ops. In this case study, the number of customers had dropped to a particularly low level and the majority of customers were perceived as living away from the estate. This was compounded by the assertion that local people did not know where the community building was

located, let alone that a food co-op operated from the premises- “no-one knows where we are, not even the people who live here” (11Vs). Moreover, a neighbouring co-op was perceived by volunteers as taking away their existing custom.

- 5.16 Other food co-ops also described ingrained local ‘apathy’ as a problem, arguing that it was endemic in the way in which ‘people round here’ think and act:

I think a lot of people would benefit from it but they just can’t be bothered. If you were to pay for it and carry it there, oh yes they’d have but not if they’ve got to put themselves out. (6V1).

- 5.17 Furthermore, some volunteers were unsympathetic towards people who had stopped using the co-op, describing them as “Snobs. Perhaps they just feel they can’t be arsed to come up and collect it.” (9V2).

- 5.18 Underlying this frustration with local apathy, however, was a recognition that local people do have to make an effort to buy from the food co-ops. Buying from a food co-op constitutes an activity usually over and above the normal shopping routines of local residents. It is often additional to the regular one stop supermarket shopping where the weekly shop may be carried out. Furthermore, if local people are not used to buying and eating fruit and vegetables then it may be wrong to assume that access alone will change habits. Two ex-co-op customers claimed, for example, that frozen vegetables are “just as nutritious” and “can taste better” (10Cs). Other respondents argued that frozen vegetables were more convenient for families because they could be purchased in bulk and, unlike fresh produce, incurred “no waste” (10C2). The ‘different’ style of shopping associated with the co-ops was also highlighted by those ex-customers who preferred the supermarket concept “where you can pick and choose what you want” (10C5).

- 5.19 To reiterate, in response to customer concerns, volunteers introduced various measures of flexibility into their schemes. This enabled them to be more responsive to customer requirements by attempting to cater to their

preferences and introduce an element of choice:

A lot of people do want to choose what they buy.... I don't like pears but we have pears every week in the bag and it would be good if I could swap them every week for something else, so that is something we're working on. (5V1)

- 5.20 Suppliers interviewed were also willing to accommodate demands for new produce and were keen to be flexible to customer demands. Volunteers also tried, as highlighted earlier, to find ways of making it easier for people to obtain their fruit and vegetables by, in some case, providing an informal delivery scheme, providing alternative distribution points and extend the time for people to place their orders.
- 5.21 Investment in formal delivery services, with dedicated transport, has, however, been discouraged by the RRU. This is because it was seen as complicating the initiative and adding to the costs. However some respondents expressed concern that people were not buying from food co-ops because they were unable to visit during opening times. This might be a function of pre-existing commitments (such as employment). However it might also stem from the fact that even the relatively short distance to the food co-op for some local residents may be challenging for older people, people with disabilities and young mothers with small children and buggies. One food co-op did run a delivery service by paying someone to deliver the fruit and vegetable bags on a weekly basis. This was not, however, found to be cost-effective. Getting the produce to people, who want or need it, remains a persistent concern for co-op participants. In one case, a co-op devised an innovative way of overcoming the problem of supplying customers “who can't collect the stuff during the day” by delivering to a local pub where it was picked up by customers at a time more convenient to them:

A lot of the orders come through from one of the local pubs. The people that go in there, they write their name down and leave their money and what they want. [A volunteer] goes and collects it on a Wednesday night and we order them. It's amazing isn't it? (1V4)

5.22 In another case study, produce bags were dropped off at a local sheltered accommodation unit and a school. Identifying alternative delivery points may provide a solution to access for co-ops in some areas, as long as it does not over-complicate the system. It may have the advantage of incurring minimal costs and may serve to build relationships within some areas. However this would depend on the willingness of volunteers to provide additional time which, in some cases, would not be possible or welcomed.

Lack of volunteers

5.23 The vast majority of case study co-ops expressed some concern over the number of volunteers. In two cases, the number of volunteers had fallen because of arguments between factions of participants. In one case, these arguments led not only to the loss of customers (who were described as having “taken sides”), but resulted in the workload falling on the shoulders of a smaller group of volunteers.

5.24 Two models represented the way in which volunteers worked together. These models were not necessarily planned but arose naturally out of the circumstances in which volunteers found themselves. The first model was where there was a loose group of volunteers with an inner core that assumed leading roles in terms of keeping the books and taking orders. In this scenario the main concern focused on the unpredictability surrounding the number of more casual volunteers who were likely to turn up on the day. This was particularly pertinent in one case study co-op, where the number of bags sold each session consistently exceeded a hundred. Here, it was felt to be crucial that a reasonable number of volunteers turned up on the day in order to ensure that the packing process was conducted efficiently. The other model that was apparent in cases where a small tight knit team worked and planned the future development of the co-op together. In the latter case, concern tended to focus on the high level of dependence on these core participants, and how the co-op might fare if, for any reason, they were temporarily or permanently unavailable. Certainly a common complaint issuing from co-ops operating on this model was that “it is always the same people” who get involved.

- 5.25 Volunteers in the case studies were naturally concerned to support each other, and their commitment to the food co-ops was expressed as a joint or shared endeavour. The commitment of volunteers to each other and to the small core group was a recurring theme in the interviews:

The only thing that I am bothered about is...just with me being able to get here to do my share. I know it's voluntary but I still ... if the weather gets really bad then I won't be able to get out.....because I'm disabled. (6V1)

- 5.26 While the small numbers of volunteers in some cases studies may be a source of concern to participants it was not necessarily a disadvantage. Indeed, there are strong indications that there are advantages in having a small, close knit team. Firstly, people in small groups appeared to enjoy each other's company and the bonds both created and reinforced close friendships. Secondly, as volunteers sometimes admitted, having a small close knit group meant that they worked well together and had a mutual understanding of what had to be done. For example, in one case study a local authority officer described the sustainability of the initial large group of volunteers associated with the endeavour as "extremely fragile". This contrasted with what s/he described as the advantages attendant on the emergence of a small group of determined/dedicated volunteers, once the larger group had dwindled down. The advantages of the small tight knit group were in many cases described as offsetting concern about low levels of volunteer participation:

It seems always to be the same people that get roped in, but there again that has its advantages because you know each other and you know how each other works. (6V1)

Well we manage really. It's only a small room, so we couldn't do with a lot of volunteers because we've got a system now that works for [other volunteer] and myself. (1V1)

- 5.27 Notwithstanding the acknowledged advantages associated with the tight knit group, participants described problems of volunteer recruitment and retention as a function of (not unjustifiable) concern among local people that volunteering was a chore. As one respondent noted, "they've got all the excuses, 'I've got no time, I'm busy, I can't cope'" (6V1). In an extreme case,

volunteer attrition has meant that only one, albeit very committed, person was currently running the co-op.

We used to have other volunteers when it first started. There were lots of people for the first week and by the second it had dwindled off and by the third week we were down to about four of us. And you'd get "I can't be bothered coming this week, I'll come next week" and it slowly dwindled down to me, and another girl and she moved, and she doesn't come anymore so it's just me. (10V1)

- 5.28 Volunteering is not be an activity that suits, or is viable, for everyone and insights into what is likely to sustain the interest and commitment of volunteers is discussed in the following section. The way in which this problem is being addressed in one case study area is through the linking up with another local co-op so that any volunteer shortfall in one co-op can be made up by volunteer input from the other.

Illustrative Example Five: mutual aid between co-ops

Two nearby co-ops in small rural villages in North Wales, with the assistance of the Communities First development officer, have made strong links with each other. For the volunteers this has had the advantage of ensuring that if there are problems with getting volunteers out on one particular week they can make arrangements for the other co-op to cover for them. For the people involved this had the added benefit of forging new friendships between people who are not living in the same village. This has benefits for the volunteers as individuals but is also seen as making connections between relatively isolated rural communities. The perceived success of this arrangement has prompted discussions on developing more concrete plans for networking across a number of potential village co-ops.

Conclusion

- 5.29 As co-ops have matured, they have inevitably encountered problems which they have had to address. Lessons can be learnt from these experiences and in future some of the problems may be avoided. For instance, if the quality of the fruit and vegetables is proving to be consistently poor then volunteers need to be able to terminate the arrangement and switch to a new supplier. However,

to avoid this happening there needs to be a clear agreement between the food co-op customers, volunteers and the suppliers as to what is expected in a typical fruit and vegetable bag. Where good relationships have been established between co-op and suppliers then confounding factors such as the expense and quality of particular fruit or vegetables out-of-season are more likely to be resolved satisfactorily.

- 5.30 Similarly, through experience, co-op volunteers have adapted their approaches according to changing expectations. Thus the initial excitement surrounding the anticipated customer base as well as anticipated volunteer involvement in food co-ops has evolved into a more realistic appraisal of the situation. However the food co-op volunteers have not been complacent and, as shown, in many cases they have developed innovative ways of tackling the problems they face, such as identifying alternative delivery points and developing peer support mechanisms across co-ops. Many of the problems that food co-ops face are similar and it will be important in the future to establish mechanisms so that they can learn from each other. To a certain extent this is happening naturally with recognition that some volunteers have particular skills in this area:

....there were the volunteers that were actually involved in delivering the programme, you know, they're actually consultants for other areas that want to get going. (5A3)

- 5.31 Common problems that the evaluation has identified most often relate to the experience of food co-ops fairly early in their development. However, it is likely that different problems may arise as co-ops mature and the contexts in which they operate change.

6 The role of volunteers – securing their involvement

Introduction

- 6.1 The community food co-ops initiatives are run for local people by volunteers, and the sustainability of individual co-ops depends on the willingness and ability of volunteers to provide that support. Volunteers provide approximately 3-4 hours on the day of the food co-op. During this time they engage in a range of activities from setting up the room, equipment and tables to clearing up at the end. However, others may put in more hours throughout the week. This may include delivering bags to customers who are unable (or who in some cases have forgotten) to collect their produce; chasing up customers (not seen) for the following week's orders; and submitting orders to the supplier. To reiterate, this latter task is one which varies in its complexity. In addition, some volunteers give their time to involvement in food co-op related activities such as health fairs, open days, school based activities and well as networking with other nearby co-ops.
- 6.2 The time volunteers give to running co-ops is therefore quite considerable. It is important for the long term sustainability of co-ops to understand the conditions likely to encourage this commitment, whilst not expecting the same level of commitment across all volunteers. This section will explore volunteers' motivations for getting involved in the first place, why they continue to do so, and what is needed to secure that involvement for the future.

Becoming involved

- 6.3 Respondents, for the most part, became food co-op volunteers through one of three routes. Evidence of the first route was apparent where individual involvement was linked to, and stemmed from, their involvement with other community activities and/or volunteer activities and where they describe themselves as "involved with everything that goes on" (1V1). Certainly, in the Community First areas, and particularly where food co-ops were housed within Community First accommodation, we found volunteers, were involved

with other Community First business and/or a range of community activities/interventions operating out of that location:

I answer the phones in the Community House, I've helped with meetings. I used to be the secretary for the Community House committee (and) the Residents Association. (4V1)

Illustrative Example Six: people who volunteer

David says that he has always been involved in volunteer activity in one way or another. He was involved in a local consultation exercise as part of a bid for a local Healthy Living Centre and, once set up, became a member of the Board. He also helps run a community newsletter and is involved in a local history video project. He has been a central figure in the food co-op since the idea was first mooted.

6.4 A second route to volunteering was apparent where respondents were approached by those already involved with the food co-op. Involvement through this route was often reciprocal in that individuals might be drawn in by friends or through networks of associates:

Sheila dragged me (*laughter*) I was off work I had to give up work and I was bored and she said come down and have a go and I've been coming down [ever since]. (8V1)

6.5 Hence volunteers talked about the concept of involvement as “something we very often do to each other” (6V1). Equally, those respondents invited to volunteer often joined with friends rather than individually, as was the case, for example, when, “somebody came to our bingo and we were asked if we would like to be volunteers” (1V4).

6.6 The third route to volunteering according to our respondents was through visiting the co-op as customers. Hence:

The person that was sorting out the orders then asked me if I'd give him a hand and I got involved from there. (2V2)
The first day the food co-op was up and running, I went in there and ... she collared me and said, “would you like to do the money?” (5V2)

I simply came across one day to put my order in, check out what was on offer, came across the next week basically to see

what time I had to pick my order up and they said, “Seeing as you’re here, you can pitch in and help.” (6V2)

Motivation for getting involved

- 6.7 Overwhelmingly the key motivation for getting involved in a food co-op was a sense of wanting to give something to the local community. Even more apparent than their commitment to each other is the commitment which volunteers demonstrate to their fellow local residents and particularly, among those, customers of the co-op:

I like helping people, I think this is why I’m doing voluntary work now, and I don’t mind not getting paid for it. (1V4)

- 6.8 Older people, in particular, talked in terms of being able to give some time now that they had retired, as a one couple of friends said:

We like getting involved with people, you know the community”, “In the community doing something”, “And we had time off, a few hours to spare”. (8V4&5)

- 6.9 In addition, volunteers recognised the role of co-ops in addressing the needs of local residents. In some cases this recognition stemmed from a sense of what the local area used to be like. A number of volunteers and customers talked about how the communities had changed and perceived their co-ops as filling a void created by more recent consequences of social and economic change:

We had about 17 shops in the village. We’re reduced to just the post office now. He sells tinned stuff and bread, but apart from potatoes, carrots and onions that’s it. (1V1)

- 6.10 In addition, in some co-ops particularly in the South Wales Valleys, it was not just the physical assets of the community that had diminished, but the sense of community itself. Hence one customer noted, “if you were in any sort of trouble we’d be there, you’d help anybody and they’d help you” (12C2). Similarly, a group of volunteers in a co-op in the South Wales valleys recalled:

It never used to be like this ... I mean it was a community.
We'd have street parties, a match down the field, men against
the women. (9Vs)

6.11 At this co-op, volunteers reminisced in terms of “I found a photo of that”, “we'd go door to door collecting for raffles”, “now the Carnival is gone”, “the youngsters just don't want to know” and “parties-we don't have nothing like that any more” (9Vs).

6.12 To reiterate, volunteers were often frustrated because food co-op work often fell on the shoulders of a few people. However, those interviewed were themselves motivated by a sense of altruism. They felt that commitment to the endeavour was important for communities they served as well as for themselves as individuals and for their fellow workers.

6.13 The volunteers also saw themselves as educators, raising awareness among local residents about the importance of having “more vitamin c, better digestive system, it's better for your teeth” (3V1), or “trying to educate the younger ones” (8V4). Equally, they noted financial constraints on residents in eating a healthy diet, “(we) try to get people to eat the five fruit and veg a day at a reasonable price; there are quite a few families that are pressed for money on this estate” (6V1).

6.14 Volunteers clearly bought into the concept of the food co-op as a worthy venture, and seemingly took pride in the knowledge that:

When people are coming in and we're leaving with our
bursting bags they're like 'What!' 'How much?' It sells itself.
(3V1)

There's a lot of young ones coming through now, young
mothers, they're getting more for their money now which is
going further. (5V2)

6.15 Because they are motivated by desire to demonstrate generosity to local people, volunteers became dispirited when customer numbers dropped. They also expressed a sense of disbelief when attempts to make direct contact with

potential customers were not met with corresponding enthusiasm. Certainly, volunteers talked with frustration when their attempts at attracting customers though the doors were ineffectual, “I knocked on the doors and I introduced myself, and said, ‘Just come and have a look,’ and they don’t”(1V4).

- 6.16 To reiterate, volunteers were concerned to show sympathy towards, and flexibility in addressing, perceived customer preferences/needs. In cases, for instance, where customers are perceived as ‘trustworthy’ and ‘reliable’, the insistence on payment in advance was waved in a few instances. Volunteers appeared adept in understanding the customer perspective which made them sympathetic to their preferences. When talking about customer grievances they were able to put themselves in the customer’s place:

A lot of people do want to choose what they buy rather than have ... a personal preference of mine. I don’t like pears but we have pears every week in the bag and it would be good if I could swap them every week for something else. That is something we’re working on. (5V1)

Some have said we don't like them apples so we change them, you know you do respect them then don't you, that woman she'd been a customer from day one and she said oh I don't like them green apples, I don't want them anymore so I said to the girls, change them.(9V5)

- 6.17 The sense of giving something to the community was in some cases taken on board by volunteers quite literally. One food co-op, for example, used any additional budget to provide gifts to their customers and local people at Christmas. Hence, they gave bags of fruit to every class in the primary school, provided a hamper to the local sheltered accommodation unit and added extra fruit and vegetables into the customer bags. Other co-ops also provided similar ‘gifts’ to the community on special occasions. However volunteers sometimes felt disappointed when the gift was unacknowledged or where they perceived their gestures were unappreciated. For the most part, however, food co-op volunteers continued to find a sense of satisfaction in providing a resource to the community that depended upon their efforts.

Providing Support

- 6.18 From the outset it has been recognised that the sustainability of the co-ops depends on the continued commitment of the volunteers. In October 2004 the Welsh Assembly Government funded two networking events to support volunteer. In addition, Food Development Workers have been responsive to volunteers' needs. They have, for instance, carried out troubleshooting, with regard to disputes or a sudden drop in orders on behalf of volunteers, provided Health Challenge Wales bags for produce and food co-op banners, sorted out efficient payment and delivery systems and helped to promote the food co-ops locally in number of ways.
- 6.19 Food Development Workers were described as essential in the initial stages of implementation, and volunteers often reported that they “would not have known where to begin” without their enthusiasm and support. They were praised in equal measure for the length of time that they respectively devoted to the success implementation of co-ops. Additionally Food Development Workers were appreciated where they played roles in forging links between food co-op volunteers and other interested parties. Hence a Communities First development worker noted:
- (South Wales Food Development Worker) was a really big influence and in the beginning when she gave shape to the whole thing, she gave structure and so you know she, we kind of got together and were a bit shambolic but [she] knew it.
(9A1)
- 6.20 Equally, once food co-ops had their systems in place, volunteers highlighted the importance of infrastructure support. This was most notable where food co-ops were located in Community First areas and volunteers were particularly appreciative of the input from Communities First workers and the facilities which they provided. In some cases, this was contrasted to a perceived lack of support from local authorities. This perception arose where, for example, local authorities charged food co-ops for refuse removal or denied them free use of community facilities.

- 6.21 Communities First development officers were also described as a source of support for volunteers. Whilst over-dependence on local Communities First officers may be problematic in terms of co-op independence and sustainability, their association brought many advantages. For example, volunteers described how through association with, and involvement in, Communities First activities, co-ops became meshed within the wider range of community activities. As highlighted earlier, this provided them with a broader based network. It enabled the food co-op become a part of wider community endeavours and facilitated mutual support from a range of existing and new interventions/initiatives/programmes.
- 6.22 Representatives from a range of local agencies (particularly Communities First) and workers linked to other area-based health initiatives recognised the effort of volunteers at the local level. Many worked alongside co-ops as a means of fulfilling their own organisational objectives. This might be to improve people's diets, provide better access to local facilities, increase community engagement in local activities, tackle social exclusion or improve people skills and knowledge. The unpaid input of volunteers into co-ops was clearly acknowledged and often rewarded by, for example, organised trips, pampering sessions and bottles of wine. In one case the local community development worker was exploring the possibility of developing more formal mechanisms to reward or remunerate volunteers by setting up a skills bank or similar scheme. However no local scheme of this nature has as yet been developed in any of the case study areas. Notwithstanding this, recognition at a local level demonstrates sensitivity to the fact that volunteers like to be valued for the work that they do and that appreciation is more important than payment. In one non Communities First area, whilst local authority officers tried to provide volunteer support, they were unable to furnish the level and kind of emotional, physical and financial resources that was apparent in Communities First areas. As a result, volunteers expressed some resentment about their level of resources in comparison to those of other food co-ops.

Tension between support and control

- 6.23 While it is clear that volunteers, other initiatives and the community as a whole benefited from the support provided by a range of agencies, it is

apparent in some cases that volunteers have relinquished control to others. This may be partly a function of understandable concerns on behalf of other agencies to (a) control the development of regeneration activity in an area, and/or (b) ensure co-op success. While some area-based initiatives have undoubtedly provided a great deal of help and resources to co-ops, concerns were expressed where these initiatives were nearing the end of their funding period. In one case this had created some tension between volunteers and people working on a particular health promotion project. In this case, the lead agency worker, sensitive to issues of dependency, was attempting to withdraw input (particularly around promoting the co-op locally). While s/he was driven by the understanding that volunteers need to do this work for themselves in future, volunteers felt abandoned and let down. Her agency worker explained:

At the moment I am trying to engineer a gradual withdrawal. I have to...there are always issues, problems, emergencies relating to the co-op which we have to sort out... In 15 months time we won't exist and what will they do then? (12A1)

Conclusion

6.24 While acknowledging the difficulties associated with maintaining an optimum balance between support and control, it is argued here that co-ops work best where volunteers are enabled and supported to do their work, rather than relinquishing that responsibility to others. The reasons why volunteers initially become involved in co-ops, and the enormous satisfaction they derive from the appreciation which they receive for their efforts, signals the importance of user ownership to co-op sustainability. After all, in many cases it will be volunteers who will ultimately take the co-ops forward. Moreover, that volunteers describe themselves as “always the same people that get roped in” (6V2), means they effectively become the threads which weave community activities together and the social glue which holds them tight. Thus, notwithstanding the importance which volunteers attach to Communities First support, it was not surprising that some volunteers were of the opinion “even if Communities First doesn't continue, the food co-op will” (1V4).

7 The use and reach of community food co-ops

Introduction

- 7.1 This section reports on the customers who buy from the co-ops: who they are and what they value about having a co-op in their locality. However, the evaluation has highlighted that food co-ops rarely operate in isolation. For example, in Communities First areas (particularly) they have become part of wider local systems in which physical and social assets have been developed. In some cases, this has enabled food co-ops to extend their reach to a wider group of beneficiaries than those who would ordinarily see themselves as co-op customers.
- 7.2 In assessing the success of the co-ops it is therefore important to track the way in which the co-ops have reached groups of people who may not themselves be customers. To reiterate customer numbers vary greatly from seven to over one hundred and fifty. This variation was due to a variety of local factors, some of which we have already identified. Hence, customer levels were found to be partly a function of inappropriate location, volunteer disharmony and historical experience of poor quality produce. However the evaluation was able to indicate that current low customer numbers, though demoralizing for volunteers and therefore an important threat to the sustainability to co-op, did not mean that the co-op was unsuccessful.
- 7.3 The research for this evaluation is qualitative, focusing on how co-ops operate in different contexts, why they take the approaches they do and how these may affect particular outcomes. In this evaluation we were interested in assessing how, and whether, food co-ops reached different population groups. This allowed us to look more broadly at the ways in which the influence of the food co-ops diffused through different areas. The disadvantage, as far as this evaluation was concerned, is that we were unable to provide reliable customer profiles for each food co-op. In addition, the customers we were able to speak to were those people who were able to come into the co-op on the selling day, whereas many of the customers were actually people who relied on friends or

neighbours to pick the bags up for them. These were still customers but largely invisible to the researchers.

- 7.4 However we were able to speak to volunteers, other agencies and, to a certain extent, the customers that were interviewed, about which groups of people they felt used the food co-ops and, in their view, whether these were the customers who were most likely to benefit. We also asked them who was not using the co-op and what they felt could be done to attract these groups.

The customers: who are they?

- 7.5 It is quite clear that the food co-ops developed as part of the pilot are based in areas that, in terms of deprivation, are most likely to benefit from a resource which is both accessible and affordable. All the case study co-ops (including those in the non-Communities First areas) were socially disadvantaged in relation to their broader electoral divisions and local authority areas. However, this does not necessarily mean that food co-op customers are always those who have most to gain from the initiative.

- 7.6 It was not possible, in this study, to assess the extent to which the customer base reflected the local population in terms of deprivation. Indeed some case studies findings highlighted that 'outsiders' (those living outside the coop area) were buying from the co-op. Interestingly, where a customer balance was maintained between locals and outsiders this was perceived as encouraging because it was thought to reflect positively on the area as a place that offered something that other people wanted.

You know it's marvellous how they have come up and...you know that's people who haven't got to come up. (9V3)

- 7.7 Hence, while the co-ops were seen as a resource that made buying fruit and vegetables easier for people who may otherwise find the cost prohibitive, there was a general reluctance among respondents for co-ops to be thought of as *for* deprived people or *for* deprived areas.

- 7.8 Elaborating further on which groups, in the local areas, were buying from the co-ops, there appeared to be were two distinct types. While some co-ops were perceived to mainly attract families others were perceived as attracting, for the main part, older people. While at some case study co-ops, the customer base was perceived as broad based, comprising a wide spectrum of customers, further probing suggested that in all case studies some groups of people were difficult to attract and this was of particular concern to volunteers.
- 7.9 Observation data suggested that older people constitute a core group of people who use the co-ops. However, these older people are crucially those who are mobile and in reasonable health. In areas which were physically demanding there were concerns about the elderly frail for whom even the shortest distance was a deterrent (compounded by the necessity of carrying heavy bags of produce). Notwithstanding this, on the whole, co-op opening times (in all cases on week days) suited the reasonably healthy retired.
- 7.10 A few co-ops highlighted how they attracted families. The perceived family appeal of one co-op in particular was understood as partly a function of the strong links it developed with a local school. In this case, the after school club co-ordinator (a local person who claimed to “know everybody”) was also a volunteer at the food co-op. The after-school club had previously won awards for their work to promote healthy eating and the volunteer claimed that the food co-op helped to provide an affordable resource for parents to back up the work s/he was already carrying out with the children. Two of the customers interviewed at this case study food co-op claimed that they had heard about the food co-op from school newsletters. One customer claimed that word-of-mouth through at the school gate helped to promote knowledge of, and interest, in the food co-op:

I've got a nine year old son and when you are there in the mornings, dropping them off you probably always have a little conversation, a group of women about what happened in the day or, you know, and then we start talking about things, you know, it just comes up. (8C1)

- 7.11 The vast majority of respondents across food co-ops, however, felt that younger people, including young parents, were least interested in buying from the food co-ops. This was the group of potential customers, identified by respondents as those least likely to be eating fruit and vegetables. Indeed, the evaluation indicated strongly that the customers buying from co-ops are currently those who were already cooking and eating fresh fruit and vegetables. Largely, respondents attributed this to a generational shift away from eating fresh food to buying food requiring little, if any preparation. One local community worker said, for example, that co-ops failed to reach “young mums”, and:

We often see the vans from the supermarkets and we often see them deliver frozen produce and we often see the mums getting off the bus with their frozen chips, and all frozen vegetables. (9A2)

- 7.12 Other respondents claimed that younger people no longer witnessed food preparation, and thus lacked the wherewithal, knowledge, skills or interest to cook:

Again we go back to the 25 year old mums, that age group and it's purely because... it sounds extremely patronising. They don't know what to do with fresh stuff and some comments have been "Oh we're take away people," other comments have been "But cabbage doesn't go with chips," and it's just a re-education. (5V1)

- 7.13 Many respondents felt that it was in families that the habits of eating food are established and the importance of shared meals was often highlighted. Furthermore some volunteers and customers compared their own practices favourably to what they felt were those of others.

(My family) have a roast dinner because I do it every Sunday and they come in. The little one she's eighteen months and she has a dinner exactly the same as we do all. She don't have peas but I put her up a roast dinner exactly the same...But I mean we've always done it see cause we're all brought up on the veg but I mean its different with the youngsters these days. (8V4)

- 7.14 Co-ops have tried a number of approaches to reach these groups of potential customers. These have included provision of simple recipes relating to the food bags, often combined with cookery demonstrations with particular groups of people:

We thought one thing we could do was to provide recipes with the food bags so the volunteers again brought really, really, simple recipes in, like vegetable soup. What you can make with a £2 bag of vegetables, you could make desserts, and you could do bubble and squeak the next day, everything like that. So we put those in the bags and we did another flyer to try and introduce young mums. It worked to a small degree; we've got a few coming in. (8V2)

- 7.15 Volunteers have also invested a substantial time and effort into the design of leaflets and publishing articles in local newsletters. However, though word-of-mouth (for example at the school gate) was perceived by volunteers as the most effective mechanism by which local people got hear about the co-ops.
- 7.16 Some respondents, however, asserted that it was not their job alone to highlight the importance of eating fruit and vegetables to young people, and that their efforts needed to be supported by targeted health promotion campaigns in this group.

What attracts customers to the co-ops?

- 7.17 According to the 52 customers that the evaluation team interviewed, there were three overwhelming advantages to buying from the co-op. These were value for money, quality of the produce and convenience. Where those advantages are felt to be absent then customers are likely to be lost. These appear to be necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for co-ops to develop a good customer base.

Benefits of using the food co-ops

7.18 In terms of quality, customers talked about the “freshness” (3C1) of co-op produce, “it smells very fresh and it keeps, and the taste, it tastes different” (1C6). On many occasions customers, particularly in North Wales (where a high percentage of the produce is grown by the supplier) compared food co-op produce favourably with that purchased in supermarkets:

Well it’s fresher and when you take it out you can see ... the cauliflower if you buy it from (supermarket) sometimes the outside green is soft ... but (here) it’s lovely and fresh and everything’s fresh. (1C1)

7.19 The taste of good quality fresh vegetables was the thing that customers felt distinguished fresh from frozen produce. However, customers valued freshness not just because of the taste, but also because the produce lasted longer, particularly in comparison with that sold in chain stores which they noted “tends to deteriorate very rapidly”(4C1). When customers and volunteers talked about previous suppliers who were unsatisfactory it was often in terms of lack of freshness:

I tried it once but I didn’t like it... The vegetables...looked old. I don’t think they were fresh. (10V4).

7.20 Respondents often used words such as ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’ to clarify further the difference between fresh and out of date fruit and vegetables, sometimes citing frozen vegetables as typifying what they look for in fresh produce. Two ex-customers agreed that frozen vegetables could be better than buying “fresh” which is “actually not as fresh as the frozen, which is frozen upon picking”. Perceptions of produce freshness are thus often reached in comparison with frozen food.

7.21 In terms of produce freshness, supermarkets fared poorly in comparison with food co-ops, particularly in North Wales. Hence, “if it’s grown on the farm then obviously it’s fresher than if it’s bought in the supermarket” (2C4). Moreover, in a minority of cases, respondent accounts about their preferences

for co-op produce were informed by knowledge about the origin of food, its treatment and storage:

Well I don't know but I do surmise there's a lot of water added to things, and you are paying for weight that is nothing [in supermarkets]. Things are kept in cold storage, so if you buy bananas they take a week to be edible and go off in 24 hours and I am just opposed to treated foods anyway...., I'm not sure, but I believe it's untreated, so your health must be better...It comes straight from the farm. (2C1)

7.22 All the customers interviewed in the evaluation, commented on the good value for money of current co-op produce. Customers, for example, marveled at "...the sheer amount. Have you seen the size of those bags?" (1C7). Many respondents claimed that fruit and vegetables cost "roughly half, I'd normally spend ...in the supermarket" (4C2). Not only was the produce itself perceived as less expensive, but because the co-op was locally based, customers saved money on transport in areas where supermarkets required a taxi ride. Hence, "I've got it for nothing" (4C1), and "it's not cost me anything because if I go ...and come back on the bus that is £2" (3C2). Overall customer satisfaction with value for money is summed up by the following respondent:

I don't think cheapness always counts I think quality does, but I think what you actually get is really good value for money...£2 and in that you get new potatoes, you get a cabbage. The cabbage I got last week would have fed the street you know what I mean? I got a cauliflower, I got courgettes, I got turnips, and I got corn on the cob. Well I can't get that for £2 in the supermarket and to be honest with you, I find that supermarkets, the fruit and veg are really grot. (3C1)

7.23 Again, where value for money was questioned local people were likely to stop using the co-ops. On one estate, where there was supermarket, customers began to compare unfavorably the price of produce in the bags against what was available in the local store. One agency respondent talked about a (non-case study) co-op where customers had unfavorably compared their £1 stew bags with the 50p stew bags available in the local supermarket.

7.24. Perceived convenience of co-ops is difficult to quantify because ‘convenience’ means different things to different people living in different areas. Some food co-ops are situated on housing estates in isolated areas, with few local amenities or fresh food outlets the co-ops. Because many of these areas are serviced poorly by public transport, local residents, without cars, must either walk long distances (often involving steep hills) or take taxis, in order to shop. Unsurprisingly customers were grateful that the co-op was “closer to home ...because we’ve got no real shops” (C62):

It’s made a big difference having it because most of our shops in the village have closed down. And there’s no fresh fruit and veg shop here.... having the food co-op here is a real lifeline.
(1C5)

7.25 Customers particularly described the benefit to those “people who don’t have cars who are struggling” (1C7). Given that “veg is so heavy to carry” (1C5), respondents described how having a locally based outlet for fresh fruit and vegetables, “saves me lugging it up the hill” (3C2). Even those co-ops based in more urban areas highlighted the convenience of the co-ops over shopping in supermarkets. However given the indications that some groups of people are not using the co-ops because they either can’t (due to alternative commitments or mobility problems), or won’t (because of the additional task entailed on top of their weekly supermarket shop or lack of interest in buying fruit and vegetables) further research on this area might be useful. Not surprisingly, all the customers interviewed, who were having bags delivered to them, highlighted this as an advantage.

7.26 Other reasons for using the co-op, given by customers, included being able to support a local community initiative or that they enjoyed the social aspect of meeting up with other local people. Some people enjoyed the variety of produce supplied in the bags, though this depended in part on the supplier (for quality) and the extent to which customers were used to buying a wide variety of fruit and vegetables in the first place.

7.27 The advantage of having access to locally grown produce was not perceived by customers as important to them as quality, price and convenience. In South Wales some respondents wrongly assumed that the co-op was supplying local produce. Observations have highlighted a lack of attention to drawing customers' attention to the source of the produce. If food co-ops are to develop a local customer supply base then these advantages will need to be explained and highlighted to customers who, on the whole, are currently ignorant of produce origins.

Reaching beyond the customer

7.28 Particularly in areas where there was a strong links to other area-based initiatives, including Communities First, there were opportunities for the food co-ops to make the produce available to local people in different ways. The most striking example of these was where schools were being supplied by two case study food co-ops. This meant a large group of children became direct and regular recipients food co-op produce:

We've got 35 children a day coming in from half past 3 till half past 5, we supply all the schools from 5 to 12 year olds, predominantly, we've got a lot of 5 year olds at the moment and a big gap and then 9 years olds at the moment so then the rest are 1's and 2's of the other ages.... We've got 172 registered on our books. We basically re-register every July so last year we had up to 220 by then end of the year but this year we are now at 170. They don't all come at the same time thank goodness. (10A1)

7.29 One school in particular linked the provision of fruit with games to encourage children to recognise fruit by both their appearance and taste. They also had their own allotment which was, where possible, used as a source of produce. Communities First workers used this produce in cooking sessions with the children, who then ate the results. The after school clubs, which bought co-op fruit bags for the children, emphasised the advantage as providing an affordable resource, especially as they operated within tight budgets:

I've never had a problem with the quality so far and its ... cheaper....If I went to Asda's and I bought a bunch of grapes

that gonna cost me what one pound something whereas I had today a bunch of grapes, apples, oranges, bananas and plums and last time I had kiwis. It's a variety you're getting, well even if you make a fruit salad for the children, so instead of me paying about - I would be paying about twelve to fifteen pound a week on fruit, 'cos I would even try and incorporate some exotic fruit as well with that to get their taste buds going. So that was a lot of money coming out of our budget. Now I am paying six pound eight pound. (8A1)

- 7.30 Other case study respondents talked about ad hoc events or educational initiatives for which co-ops would provide fruit and/or vegetables. While such arrangements do not represent traditional ways of selling to customers, they illustrate the potential market provided by other outlets. Most notably, these include schools, where breakfast clubs, after school clubs and tuck shops provide a mechanism to reach groups of people who may not otherwise have the opportunity to eat fruit and vegetables. In the next section we will argue that such outlets, combined with appropriate 'educational' or community projects furnish an opportunity to change people's attitudes and behaviour in relation to the food that they eat.

8 Early Impacts

Introduction

- 8.1. Evaluation is rightly concerned with outcomes and how the new resources that any intervention provides facilitate change in a particular population. Establishing the effectiveness of public health interventions is notoriously difficult, not least because improvements in health may take years to become apparent⁶. However, changes in behaviour are easier to capture, and can be considered as indicators that individuals are placing themselves in lower risk categories of health related behaviours.⁷ Changes in diet, however, relate to the role that food plays in people's lives. Although small changes in diet may have an important affect on health, any sustained changes in people's relationship to food are likely to require cultural shifts which may take longer to effect.⁸ The evaluation did highlight that most people buying from the co-ops were eating more fruit and vegetables. However, co-op customers were more likely to be individuals who already considered fruit and vegetables to be important their daily diet. Notwithstanding this finding, this section indicates ways in which the food co-ops may encourage shifts in attitudes to food and healthy eating.
- 8.2 In highlighting the impact of co-ops, this section points to other changes that respondents highlighted as beneficial both at an individual level and at a community level. The section also examines impacts, not just for consumers but for volunteers and suppliers as well.

⁶ Department of Health (2002) Health and Neighbourhood Renewal: Guidance from the Department of Health and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

⁷ Department of Health (2002) Health and Neighbourhood Renewal: Guidance from the Department of Health and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

⁸ Caraher, M, et al (1998) 'Access to healthy foods: part I. Barriers to accessing healthy foods: differentials by gender, social class, income and mode of transport'. *Health Education Journal*, 57, 191-201.

Volunteers

8.3 Whilst volunteers were usually motivated by a sense of altruism, and wanting to do something for the local community, they described their involvement with the food co-ops as advantageous to them in several ways. These included self improvement through work experience and life skills, opportunity to socialise, re-integration into community life and nutritional education leading to behaviour change.

8.4 For many volunteers, the food co-op has provided an opportunity to try something new. In a few cases it was described as the first opportunity of this type which individuals had ever experienced:

...they can give it a go and...when they've really gotten into it; it gives them something they can work on, whereas they've never had that chance before (2V2)

8.5 Some respondents reported that food co-op involvement had provided them with new skills and/or had served to improve/upgrade their existing skills. While for some, this learning experience was valued for its own sake "I feel like I'm learning more really"(2V1), others viewed it as a step on the road back to main stream employment ".possibly I have a better idea of taking the first step back in to employment"(3V2). One ex-volunteer respondent had secured a job because of her involvement in co-ops:

she has now gone on to get four hours work at [the supermarket] as a result of what she did with the food co-op or in part you know in part, she needed a lot of support you know lots of social difficulties and things like that".(8A1).

8.6 Another volunteer had used her new skills while working at a local club, and food co-op colleagues commented how, while this volunteer had never previously had a job, that, "she could work in a shop now" (9Vs).

8.7 In one food co-op the local community development worker used the co-op to support people developing their skills as a route into employment. S/he

perceived the co-op as a practical means of developing volunteers' self confidence to gain employment...

We're not only using it for a vehicle to get fruit and veg out onto the estate you know we're using for a vehicle to, how can I say, reintegrate and to build confidence and self esteem in people. (8A1)

- 8.8 Many of the volunteers also felt that the food co-op had contributed to increasing their social skills and with building up their self confidence:

I've learned how to talk to people without being embarrassed, through the co-op. I learned to cope with people better and how to approach people when they first come in to make them feel welcome ...It's built my confidence yes. I've never done anything like that before so it's a challenge. (2V2)

- 8.9 Key to confidence building was respondents' interaction with customers. Here, respondents described how involvement with the co-op had helped to improve their communication skills, "because obviously you have to learn to talk to the customers" (4V1). Hence volunteers reported that through interacting with co-op customers...:

...my interactive skills have grownit's a listening skill as well because you do get a lot of the mature generation whose dogs have died, or their partners passed away and that's when you've got to be careful what to say. I think a few of them use us to let off steam and it's nice to now that they've got someone that they feel secure enough to say that to and it's helping them as well (5V2)

- 8.10 The co-op also served to increase respondents' sense of self worth. Here respondents talked about the rewards associated with "feeling useful" (1V2), and the pleasure of bringing enjoyment to others:

It's very rewarding to myself when you've bagged up and you see the enjoyment on people's faces." (2V2)

Illustrative Example Eight: involving people with learning difficulties.

Food co-ops can involve people all levels of skill and confidence. In one case study volunteers include local people who have learning difficulties. They are involved in different ways including packing the bags, handing the produce to customers and serving customers in the community café. Volunteers and customers felt that the inclusive nature of the co-op was important and volunteers who had learning difficulties reported that what they enjoyed about the co-op was making good friends. It was also reported by their support worker that they would often turn up early for work at the co-op and that it was an indicator of the value that they placed on their involvement with this initiative.

- 8.11 The food co-ops programme was therefore perceived as an initiative that fulfils many of principles of community regeneration. That is, it exemplifies the holistic nature of regeneration, whereby is seen as a mechanism to facilitate change in its broadest sense:

They start there, their confidence grows, their self-esteem, grows they meet new friends and they move on, which is great because it's dynamic. The old term of regeneration comes to mind, and that's happening at a very local level, so the issues about social, economic, the educational, the environment and the physical, all those five elements in a little cameo. (5A2)

- 8.12 Volunteers clearly appreciated the social aspect of their involvement with food co-ops. Here they talked about the enjoyment of “going out on a Friday morning and when we're waiting for the food to arrive we can have chats” (1V4), and the advantages of having “a meeting place” (3V1), where they could meet up and have “a laugh with people” (6V2), and make new friends: “nice people....I didn't realise there were so many” (6V1).

- 8.13 For some respondents, volunteering at the food co-op had provided an opportunity for them to overcome obstacles to community integration:

Since my husband died I was very depressed for quite a while and I got to meet people and forced myself to do things and as soon as I've worked on the food co-op I felt useful and it's not a problem now. (1V3)

It's just got me out of the house coz I'm on me own now. It's just got me out of the house and you get company... 'Cos I used to look after my two grandchildren since last year and 'cos they've gone back to live with their mother it's just got me out of the house, stop thinking about them. Make friends and everything. (8V3)

8.14 For some the co-op has provided a life-line:

It's helped me because I do have two disabled in my house, my son and my husband and this work keeps me sane. It gives me a purpose I can't give up on myself, not that I'm indispensable I do say 'No, I'm going to get up this morning,' because I'm doing this and that. (5V1)

Another talked about their involvement with the co-op as a reason for leaving the house:

It gets me out of the house. I'm not working anymore so I'm able to do it. It's good to get out for a bit. (4V2)

8.15 These volunteers, in particular, value the weekly commitment demanded by the co-op:

I'm like a person who likes to stay inside a shell and I don't like coming out of myself every so often and without the food co-ops meeting that we do and me doing this I have actually started coming out of my front door. I know I have to come to do the fruit and veg so I know I have to come out on a Thursday to do the orders and on the Wednesday, so I have, yes, started meeting new people. (4V1)

It's given me something to do to be honest with you. I mean I'm home doing not a lot and I can't do a lot with a [bad] back so going down there on a Monday breaks Monday up then Wednesdays its something to look forward to, it is and I've met new people as well. (8V2)

8.16 In terms of the social impact for volunteers, their involvement in the food co-ops had thus brought important changes regarding the quality of their lives. In particular they associated co-ops with forging new friendships and making new connections to other people in their locality.

8.17 Volunteers also talked about how involvement with the food co-ops had raised their awareness of the importance of nutrition and diet. Although some

volunteers still held onto a long held dislike in respect of particular fruit and/or vegetables, most said that they had increased the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables they ate because “the fruit’s there, they’re now ...I’ve actually started eating it”(4V2). Many had tried new forms of food preparation “I’ve learned some, because there’s some recipes that have been on the table that I haven’t noticed before” (5V3). Others went on to describe how volunteering with the co-op had led them to make important lifestyle changes:

I no longer eat biscuits, junk food in a manner of speaking. I’ve stopped eating chocolate. I mean I could eat quite a lot of chocolate and this has been what the last 6 months... I’ve really started getting into it I’ve actually changed my lifestyle. I try and order at least ...whether it’s a veg pack one week or a fruit pack the following week, I try to... but in the summer I was always buying salad packs. (4V1)

I enjoy doing it! And the best thing about doing it is that I help to eat it! It agrees with me and I eat a lot more fruit at the end of the day. (12V2)

- 8.18 In some cases these changes affected whole families and not just the volunteers as individuals. In some food co-ops volunteers have brought in or involved their children, particularly during holidays. In one case study the children helped their parents after school. This parent felt that family involvement in the food co-op had changed the way they ate.

Well my kids are eating more fruit and veg. .. I mean at one time the only fruit and veg they’d eat were carrots and peas and now he eats broccoli, he loves sprouts, he’ll eat practically every vegetable we’ve got to eat. (12V1)

- 8.19 In another food co-op, the close links to initiatives with a broader lifestyles agenda provided opportunities for volunteers to become interested in other health related activities. These included keep fit, walking the way to health projects and smoking cessation programmes- which respondents said they would not have done if not for their involvement in the co-ops. Other volunteers had extended their involvement in the community as a result of their co-op work. One group of volunteers, for instance, organised Halloween and a Christmas party for local children providing fruit from the co-op.

Illustrative Example Nine: Co-ops as pathways into other health related activity.

One group of volunteers were in regular contact with community based health promotion project. This provided them with direct access to health related opportunities which has had a direct result on their lifestyles. One member of the group has made a first serious attempt to stop smoking and they have all been involved in keep fit activities. Local community workers have noticed a marked improvement in the health and well being of the volunteers themselves.

- 8.20 Moreover, the knowledge which volunteers gain through their involvement with the food co-ops is passed on to customers:

(The supplier) gave us a particular type of vegetable we got, which was a cross between a cauliflower and broccoli and I thought “What the hell am I meant to do with this?” And he said “Give my dad a ring and he’ll tell you,” and he’s like “Cook it like this and it’s lovely like this.” And so then I can then pass that on to other people and it’s nice then that people come to me and say “What do I do with a courgette?” (3V1)

- 8.21 The extract from a volunteer interview below indicates how volunteers take on board knowledge which informs the work co-ops do, which then becomes shared knowledge with local residents:

At the moment is, the stuff that we’re getting now is properly farm grown and the salad is imported but the people who are running it seem more conscious of GM’s and things and you can tell the tomatoes have been grown on a farm, you can tell it hasn’t had pesticides soaked all over it and there’s lots of bird peck on it, now to me I haven’t got a problem with it but we had one lady who was really not happy... I tried to explain that properly grown food doesn’t look pretty and cute and round, it’s not been altered and modified. But that was one of the problems this week funnily enough. (3V2)

Customers and other beneficiaries

- 8.4 A number of changes were also highlighted for the customers of food co-ops. These included changes to the quality of their social lives and in their

connections to other people, perceived improvements to health and their understanding of health related issues and changes to the amount of fruit and vegetables that they consumed. However, changes in attitudes to fruit and vegetables were reported for other beneficiaries: in families, in schools and in the community as a whole.

- 8.5 The impact of community food co-ops on local people's social networks and the quality of their connections to each other was noted by volunteers, customers and agencies alike as particularly striking. The food co-ops provide an opportunity for local residents to meet up with each other, and have a chat (in co-ops where refreshments are offered) over a cup of tea or coffee. Hence customers we talked to said "it's very common, people coming in for a coffee and a chat" (2C4), and:

I have made new friends [*volunteers*] who run the food co-op; they are really friendly and nice. Always have time for a laugh and a joke, it's all very light hearted, but they know what they're doing all the same. (1C5)

Oh I think the café that we've got here is unbelievable because we've got mums with babies now that are coming up here they're telling me and they love their cup of coffee with a nice cake and their talking about you know, having a good old natter. You've got pensioners coming in and probably having a good, you know it's their focal point here now I've had a lot of people say that this is brilliant for them. (8A1)

- 8.6 In some instances the co-ops were described as offering a social lifeline to those local residents who (otherwise) led isolated lives, "it gives me something to look forward to" (4C4), and acted as a springboard for them to start re-engaging with community life:

I used to just stay at home I didn't know half the people around here and I've lived here 15 years and then we started..... Well my daughter takes the little one to play group and I go with her and got to know people then and now they've formed their own little group which hopefully will grow bigger, go to the gym and get to meet more people. (4C3)

- 8.7 This was also the case for older people whose families may have grown up and where and the need for the company of friends is especially important:

You know there's just the two of us [at home] and as well we're all here two person households and the gentlemen don't have much to say you know. I don't know whether you realise this but [husbands] are very short on conversation much of the time and you think well if I don't talk to somebody about something I shall go mad you know.
Laughter Well I'm overstating the case but it is nice to meet other housewives and chat away. (8C2)

- 8.8 Some customers made direct reference to the health benefits which they associated with the food-co-op produce. While in some cases customers perceived benefits to health in general terms...:

I think there must be some benefits if you are cutting out fattening foods and substituting them for healthier ones...it's untreated, so your health must be better (2C4).

- 8.9 In other cases, respondents made a direct association between the impact of co-op produce on a specific health condition, "it's good for my blood pressure" (5C3) or "digestion problems". The perceived success of new dietary practices attributed to the food co-op, had prompted some customers to make health-related behaviour changes:

I had quite high cholesterol and I've just had another cholesterol check and it's gone down. So if you were hungry you'd have a cake or a biscuit, now I eat fruit or have plenty of veg at lunch time so I'm not feeling hungry to eat the things that will take my cholesterol up again. (1C1)

- 8.10 Moreover customers, who had noticed benefits of their new dietary regimes, claimed that these changes were long term:

I've lost weight because I am eating more fruit and vegetables and instead of having a cake or a sandwich, I have a piece of fruit instead (its) one of the reasons I am so keen to continue with the food co-op because my fruit and vegetables is a very important part of my diet now (2C3).

- 8.11 Other respondents reported that they had become more aware of the health benefits of eating more fruit and vegetables, with the co-op reinforcing media messages about healthy eating:

But with the fruit and that. I mean because it has been advertised on the telly more I sort of sat up and took more notice. And all of the leaflets on healthy eating. I'm also trying my husband with it as well, because he is a big man. And yes in the last couple of months my attitude has changed a lot with healthy eating. (8C1)

I've learnt a lot since the food co-op because they've brought it together with the [health promotion project] people and so I've attended some workshops and I have learned – you never stop learning. .. [Before] I was unsure, at the end of the day, the type of proportions. And I've seen some quizzes with the young people about what makes up a portion. (9C2)

- 8.12 The vast majority of customers who we interviewed claimed to have increased their consumption of fruit and vegetables since joining the co-op. Increased consumption was variously attributed by customers to the size of the bags, the low price of the produce and the improved taste.

- 8.13 While many customers said that they had always included some fresh produce in their diet, “we’ve always eaten fresh food “(1C3), they now claimed to eat more because (a) “it’s there” (5C1), and (b) the bags are so big, I’m always trying to use it all up” (1C5) or “because of the price” (9C1). From responses it is apparent that the high quality of produce means that some customers have increased their intake because they dislike leaving any waste.

Because you get so much, there’s only myself and my husband so we tend to eat more things with veg now than we did to use it all up.” (5C4)

- 8.14 However it should be added at this point that while customers generally appreciated the variety of produce obtained from the co-ops, a minority would prefer to exercise choice over the content of food bags:

The only problem I've got with it is ...I spend a lot of money on fruit and veg in my house and you can't buy exactly what you want. You know like you can go into Asda and say can I have 2lb of apples, a bag of oranges, whatever, you can't here. You just get what you're given. (3C1)

- 8.15 Also, we were told that some single people and older couples, in particular, were deterred from buying at the co-op because of the quantity of produce contained in each bag:

I don't buy it for myself because I live on my own. I buy it for my neighbours. I waste a lot when I get things like this. (1C3)

- 8.16 Although many comments highlighted that customers ate more produce to avoid waste, it should be noted that the issue of smaller bags for single and elderly customers is one routinely raised by those working in the co-ops:

- 8.17 Notwithstanding customer claims that they had always eaten fresh produce, it was apparent that the food co-op had introduced some variety in to their diets.

I wouldn't have got all that before, it's too dear, so we used to have some apples maybe, bananas but we get all different things in the bags and we enjoy that. (1C6)

- 8.18 Most customers claimed that since shopping at the co-op, not only that they had tried different types of vegetables but that their own and their family's consumption of particular types of produce had increased:

I think we eat more fruit, like I say there's always fruit in the bowl, my husband eats the fruit too, I didn't mention that, he eats it to lose weight. (3C3)

My mum and dad...eat a lot more fruit ...they just put it all in a fruit bowl and they just eat it and it's gone within five days. They have lost weight from eating so much. (6C3)

- 8.19 This was partly because the co-ops in most case-study areas were exposing customers to varieties of produce that they would not have chosen to buy, let alone, eat:

I'd have never have thought of going to a supermarket and buying Sharon fruit? And we had them one week and they were nice, it was different. Something different and well we, I didn't have a clue how to do so I just guessed. (12C3)

I have had some veg that I'd never seen before, like a green cauliflower and a fruit that I'd never bought (*Kiwi fruit*) although I had seen them. (1C5)

- 8.20 This was particularly noticeable in respect of fruit consumption

We've always been vegetables eaters before we bought it from the food co-op and I think with the fruit we probably eat more different fruit than before, because there's more choice. (2C2)

- 8.21 Respondent accounts also reflected the way in which other individuals, not simply the customers themselves, are affected. Certainly customers talked about the way in which the food co-op had affected dietary behaviours of spouses and siblings, "I know I eat more now, so does the family" (2C3) and "there's more different fruit, strawberries we've had and grapes, so the kids love it" (3C3). In addition, customers talked about other family members who benefited indirectly from the food co-ops:

I've got one 16 months and an 8 year old and then there's me and my partner, but my mum's also been getting me to get it for her. She lives up the road and round the corner but she works nights so she's been getting me to get it for her and she's been making like veg meals taking fruit for her in work. Making the meals when she's off, putting them in the freezer, like cottage pie and then taking them to work (4C4)

- 8.22 Certainly customers reported using different methods of food preparation and trying out new recipes. In some cases this was necessitated as customers received food co-op produce with which they were unaccustomed:

We have had vegetables that we didn't know what to do with it (and for example have) learned how to cook courgettes (2C2).

- 8.23 Even in respect of familiar vegetables, customers reported trying new dishes. Hence when describing how they might make leek soup, for example, a respondent noted "I would never have done that before" (2C3). Moreover the wide variety of vegetables found in each bag, prompted customers to turn to new ways of combining produce for different recipes:

We go for the recipe book now. Well before, we'd have cauliflower cheese or something like that once a week, because you'd have a small cauliflower, but now, it's.... "How am I going to use all this, turnips and all this, is there a new way, cooking everything altogether?" And yes it has, it's made it very interesting because we're trying everything (6C1)

- 8.24 Customers talked not only about trying different types of produce, prepared in new ways, but also talked about taking healthier approaches to eating. For example the customer cited below claimed to have started making fruit salads:

...with the kiwi fruit and we have an apple in it and everything like that and some grapes and that's it. We don't put custard on or cream on it. (6C1)

- 8.25 Respondents also talked about how unhealthy foods, which were previously a feature of their diets, had been substituted with healthier choices:

Well now I always have a dish on my table and it's always full of fruit until it's going down and I come here and Saturday I go and get more fruit. (Whereas) at first it was chocolate from the fridge, it was crisps it was anything, but now it's fruit. (3C1)

And my husband is eating more as well and fruit. Instead of going in the kitchen for a bag of chocolate he's coming for an apple or something like that, which I try to encourage, I've got to admit. It makes you think. (7C1)

- 8.26 It was apparent from respondent accounts how such changes implemented by respondents were impacting on dietary behaviours of other family members:

I get a banana and cut it up and give it the baby to put in her yoghurt and things like that, whereas, before I would end up giving her Kit Kats to keep her quiet. Or I cut up an apple and she loves grapes but so does my older daughter. And you know at night when the kids are in bed if you're feeling peckish, instead of going and getting nuts or a chocolate bar, there's a fruit bowl there and we'll get an apple or an orange. (4C4)

- 8.27 In their accounts, respondents tended to associate dietary change with health benefits and linked to this to healthier lifestyles:

I've lost weight because I am eating more fruit and vegetables and instead of having a cake or a sandwich, I have a piece of fruit instead. (2C3)

- 8.28 In particular, dietary change was linked, in some respondent accounts, with other risk-related health behaviour change:

I gave up smoking a month ago and I've put a stone on (so) before where I was reaching for a cigarette, I will now reach for a pear (3C1)

- 8.29 Where these changes were perceived as effective they were more likely to be incorporated into customers' routine behaviours.

One of the reasons I am so keen to continue with the food co-op because my fruit and vegetables is a very important part of my diet now. (2C2)

- 8.30 While the majority of respondents appeared to associate dietary change with a general move in the direction of healthier lifestyles, in a minority of cases they went further to claim significant lifestyle change:

We go to the gym twice a week, we have a weekly meeting to discuss what kind of things we can do in the future, we've made home made jam, we've had a pamper session with facials and things like that, after Christmas we're going to swimming sessions once a month, cycling and aerobics once a week and also with the diet/food side we're going to be doing cook and eat sessions. (4C2)

8.31 These changes were particularly apparent where other food co-ops could act as a 'signpost' to other available health based activities. Observations in many co-ops highlighted leaflets and posters advertising other activities in the area. In particular, representatives based in building which housed other community or health based activities claimed that the co-ops provided a mechanism "to engage with communities" (10A2). This provided a pathway for customers to become involved in a wider range of activities.

8.32 Changes in behaviour were also highlighted in relation to consumers who were not actually customers of co-ops. That co-ops are in some cases supplying schools through after school clubs, tuck shops and allotment projects has already been highlighted. There is also reported evidence that these links (in conjunction with educational activities or community events) is impacting on exposure to fruit and vegetables among those children who do not eat fresh produce at home. In some cases, the children's experiences (reinforced by eating events at after school clubs) results in pressure on parents to acknowledge their new tastes:

And I've had parents say well that person wouldn't have nothing you know "our John wouldn't have this now he's on..." you know? So we've made a big improvement and if our children are going home from the club saying they want fruit then they're gonna purchase it in the house and you may get the parents starting to eat it the as well - we're actually getting parents yeah. I mean I have had one mum go frantic with me saying 'where the hell do I find a mango for god sake.' (7A1)

Suppliers

8.33 An important condition for the success of the community food co-op is that there is a sustainable supply of good quality affordable produce. There was only one respondent who grew a significant amount of the produce he supplied, with another providing a small amount of a limited range of crops at certain times in the year. Two growers were abandoned by their food co-ops as not providing good quality value for money bags.

- 8.34 All supplier respondents commented on the demise of growers in (particularly) Wales, apart from those in the Gower region. This was partly attributed by respondents to poor growing conditions in many parts of Wales, but excluding West Wales where the climate is warmer. However, it was also reported that in some areas, local growers were disappearing. One respondent reported that while previously growing more produce, increased production of a range of vegetables would incur considerable investment in time and learning about new production techniques with which he was unfamiliar. Even the grower, supplying twenty-one food co-ops at the time, was supplementing his vegetables with crops from producers outside Wales, such as in Ormskirk and farmers based in Lancashire.
- 8.35 Clearly there is a need for research to identify what is required to support the development of fruit, but particularly vegetable, production in Wales. Most suppliers acknowledged that many of the fruit consumed during most of the year is not those grown in the UK.
- 8.36 However, most of the respondents identified advantages in supplying co-ops. The grower interviewed, reported that turnover had increased by approximately 50% as a result of supplying the food co-ops, who are now his main clients. Advantages to him include an increase in income and the knowledge and that “we can plan, grow our traditional crops and know we've got an outlet ready for it” (G1).
- 8.37 The two wholesale suppliers interviewed had both been in the wholesale and, to some extent, retail business for approximately 40 years. While the food co-ops currently only account for around 5 % of their business, the trade constituted what one supplier referred to as a “contribution” to their existing business. For both these suppliers the food co-ops were located in areas where they routinely traded and could therefore only be construed as a benefit to their business.
- 8.38 The main complication noted by suppliers was in timing different food co-op deliveries to fit in with co-op needs, and their other deliveries. However in one

case, where deliveries were made to a co-op out of the supplier's way, falling demand for bags was becoming a problem.

- 8.39 However it appears that some suppliers can benefit economically through supplying co-ops. Supplying co-ops was generally perceived by respondents as "good for our reputation" (S2), and thus there was willingness to supply more co-ops. There was a certain amount of surprise among suppliers that the co-ops had performed so well for so. Respondents noted initially they suspected co-ops would be "a flash in the pan" (S3). For growers across Wales, however, there needs to be concentrated effort to support their input into the co-op, recognising that growers will vary in terms of the range of crops that they will be able to supply at any one time.

Benefits to the local community

- 8.40 As highlighted for volunteers and customers the social impact of community food co-ops has been particularly striking with some respondents highlighting that these effects have extended beyond the individuals involved to the community, village or estate as a whole.

I think for locals it has sort of developed a wee bit of a community spirit. It's pulling people together, you know. That's nice to see as well. I've seen that (9C2)

- 8.41 Where co-op volunteers ran community events, co-ops visibility in communities was most apparent, with many more people in the locality participating in these events than current customers. This suggests that the co-ops have a sphere of influence beyond individual customers, although non-customers have not been interviewed for this evaluation.
- 8.42 In particular, respondents noted how, because of co-ops, community buildings and facilities were being used for the benefit of local people, sometimes for the first time for many years. In some cases, the co-op has sparked off a range of spin-off community activities that have developed as local people began treating the buildings with a new found respect:

The food coop has provided something magical. OK it was new, it was a great idea in itself, but it's the benefits that you get from the food co-op that you would never probably dream of when it first started and it's just been supported and creative and very good for everybody on the estate. (5A2)

Because we use [*a hall*] at [*a place of worship*], it used to get vandalised quite a lot and it doesn't as much now. I spoke to the minister about it yesterday... she's really keen for us to carry on using [*it*] because the idea being that she mentions the food co-op every Sunday and she also promotes anything we want to do at Communities First...She's thrilled that people use Fair-trade Tea and sugar and she's thrilled that we've got a food co-op in [*in the village*], And she allows us to open the church. The idea that we can use it is that if anyone that's using the food co-ops that if there's anyone walking past they will look and keep an eye on it. (1A2)

- 8.43 In addition to facilitating social contact for participants, the co-ops are also recognised by volunteers as providing valuable opportunities for local residents to socialise. This is particularly noticeable in cases where co-ops can provide space for customers to sit and chat and where refreshment facilities are available. In one co-op a volunteer noted that even where the co-op was not used as a source of fresh produce it might perform another social function:

I think we get about two people who come in and they don't buy anything, they just come for somebody to talk to and a bit of atmosphere, a change because they're lonely at home and they'd just sit there all day with us. (5V2)

- 8.44 Finally, the role of volunteers themselves in developing community spirit and drawing local people into a wide range of activities was commended by respondents, with volunteers being described as "health champions" in their own community through example. Hence participants themselves described their roles as affecting positively social cohesion at a local level:

So certainly in terms of community cohesion and communication that's definitely, and the food co-op has played a key role in that because they were, they heard 'oh yeah lets get involved in going on a art event' and so other people were brought in. (9A1)

Conclusion

8.45 To sum up, the impact of community food co-ops is much more wide ranging than simply increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables. Most respondents commented on the wider benefits obtained in terms of gaining confidence and new skills (for volunteers), new friends and opportunities to get involved (for consumers) and improved physical and social assets in the community. What is more, their impact on behaviour change is likely to be more marked if their links to the wider community are strengthened.

APPENDIX ONE**Food Co-op Case Studies and Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation**

No.	Communities First?	LA Area	Overall Deprivation (WIMD top 10%)	Health Deprivation score (WIMD top 10%)	Income Deprivation score (WIMD top 10%)	Geographical Access to services (WIMD top 10%)
1	Yes	Flintshire	No	No	No	No
2	No	Denbighshire	No	No	Top 10%	No
3	No	Conwy	No	No	Top 100	No
4	Yes	Conwy	No	No	No	No
5	Yes	Flintshire	No	No	Top 10%	No
6	Yes	Wrexham	Top 100	No	Top 100	No
7	Yes	Caerphilly	Top 50	Top 50	Top 100	No
8	Yes	Newport	Top 100	No	Top 50	No
9	Yes	Bridgend	Top 100	Top 100	No	No
10	Yes	Swansea	Top 50	Top 10%	Top 50	No
11	Yes	Powys	No	Top 10%	No	No
12	No	Mon'shire	No	No	No	No

Welsh Index of Multiple deprivation, 2005

APPENDIX TWO**Health, Economic and Skills Information About The People Living In The Case Study Areas**

Data have been gathered from Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs). These areas have a minimum population of 1000 and a mean population of around 1,500. They are built from groups of Census OAs, usually 4-6.

General health not good

	Lower Super Output Area	Electoral Division	LA area	Wales	England and Wales
Case Study 1	15.24	15.24	9.77	12.45	9.22
Case Study 2 (Non CF)	12.05	12.30	11.54	12.45	9.22
Case Study 3 (Non CF)	11.19	10.14	11.56	12.45	9.22
Case Study 4	16.54	16.52	11.56	12.45	9.22
Case Study 5	14.09	12.86	9.77	12.45	9.22
Case Study 6	16.97	16.97	11.25	12.45	9.22
Case Study 7	18.50	16.12	15.01	12.45	9.22
Case Study 8	18.77	13.94	11.99	12.45	9.22
Case Study 9	18.33	18.52	13.62	12.45	9.22
Case Study 10	18.78	17.23	13.37	12.45	9.22
Case Study 11	21.62	19.19	10.10	12.45	9.22
Case Study 12(non-CF)	13.57	13.33	9.53	12.45	9.22

Limiting long-term illness

	Lower Super Output Area	Electoral Division	LA area	Wales	England and Wales
Case Study 1	28.39	28.39	19.20	23.27	18.23
Case Study 2(Non CF)	20.80	22.73	23.37	23.27	18.23
Case Study 3 (Non CF)	18.84	17.12	23.49	23.27	18.23
Case Study 4	22.94	27.45	23.49	23.27	18.23
Case Study 5	25.33	25.76	19.20	23.27	18.23
Case Study 6	28.64	28.64	21.46	23.27	18.23
Case Study 7	32.95	27.95	26.31	23.27	18.23
Case Study 8	31.23	23.35	21.59	23.27	18.23
Case Study 9	33.18	32.57	25.00	23.27	18.23
Case Study 10	29.47	28.60	24.73	23.27	18.23
Case Study 11	33.42	32.68	20.43	23.27	18.23
Case Study 12(non-CF)	22.37	23.25	19.06	23.27	18.23

People aged 16-74: Economically active: unemployed

	Lower Super Output Area	Electoral Division	LA area	Wales	England and Wales
Case Study 1	3.56	3.56	3.01	3.49	3.35
Case Study 2 (Non CF)	4.96	3.47	3.42	3.49	3.35
Case Study 3 (Non CF)	6.64	4.30	3.69	3.49	3.35
Case Study 4	4.97	3.84	3.69	3.49	3.35
Case Study 5	5.76	4.01	3.01	3.49	3.35
Case Study 6	6.03	6.03	3.28	3.49	3.35
Case Study 7	4.78	3.96	3.59	3.49	3.35
Case Study 8	7.40	6.39	3.94	3.49	3.35
Case Study 9	3.70	3.63	3.46	3.49	3.35
Case Study	5.49	4.61	3.61	3.49	3.35

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Case Study 11	5.54	4.67	3.56	3.49	3.35
Case Study 12 (non-CF)	4.40	2.96	2.63	3.49	3.35

People aged 16-74: economically inactive: permanently sick/disabled

	Lower Super Output Area	Electoral Division	LA area	Wales	England and Wales
Case Study 1	11.93	11.93	6.51	9.22	5.52
Case Study 2 (Non CF)	12.09	9.82	8.61	9.22	5.52
Case Study 3 (Non CF)	10.07	8.21	7.90	9.22	5.52
Case Study 4	11.96	11.48	7.90	9.22	5.52
Case Study 5	11.94	10.40	6.51	9.22	5.52
Case Study 6	17.93	17.93	8.01	9.22	5.52
Case Study 7	19.80	15.61	12.11	9.22	5.52
Case Study 8	14.22	11.00	7.89	9.22	5.52
Case Study 9	15.70	15.95	10.73	9.22	5.52
Case Study 10	17.06	14.01	9.82	9.22	5.52
Case Study 11	19.46	17.29	6.17	9.22	5.52
Case Study 12(non-CF)	10.24	8.25	5.76	9.22	5.52

People aged 16-74 with no qualifications

	Lower Super Output Area	Electoral Division	LA area	Wales	England and Wales
Case Study 1	38.16	38.16	29.31	33.02	29.08
Case Study 2 (Non CF)	38.56	33.23	31.36	33.02	29.08
Case Study 3	39.69	33.01	31.83	33.02	29.08
Case Study 4	41.65	41.90	31.83	33.02	29.08
Case Study 5	47.05	39.27	29.31	33.02	29.08
Case Study 6	51.26	51.26	33.5	33.02	29.08
Case Study 7	61.24	46.93	39.38	33.02	29.08
Case Study 8	57.16	45.97	33.58	33.02	29.08
Case Study 9	54.27	53.51	36.40	33.02	29.08
Case Study 10	54.39	45.74	30.51	33.02	29.08
Case Study 11	48.77	43.02	31.36	33.02	29.08
Case Study 12 (non-CF)	33.37	28.14	26.34	33.02	29.08

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