

Growing Communities

Summary

An established social enterprise initiated by urban community activists providing community growing, links with farms, therapeutic placements, volunteering, training, a box scheme, shop and farmers market. Growing Communities works for community, environmental and economic benefit.

Full Description

History

Growing Communities began 10 years ago, when three friends asked themselves how they could make Hackney a better place to live in. A group of supporters began paying a subscription and in 1994 the first vegetables were delivered from a farm they supported in Aylesbury. The scheme soon grew to 50 households and has developed towards its wider vision since then.

Organisation

Growing Communities is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. This legal structure provides protection in terms of liability for management committee/directors. Potential management committee members for new organisation to be set up (what was to become Growing Communities) were recruited from those involved with Box Scheme that Julie had set up in 1994. Those who came forward were keen to be hands on but not be part of a workers co-operative as such (i.e. they did not wish to work in any paid capacity for Growing Communities). Bearing this in mind, it was considered the most sensible structure would be a company limited by guarantee because it would provide some financial protection and reflect the not-for-profit/philanthropic nature of the organisation. The drawbacks of this structure is having to lodge annual accounts and company returns, but in fact this provides a framework for the organisation which is helpful.

There are currently 10 part time members of staff. The scheme has a volunteer management committee of 6 which is elected by volunteers and box scheme members at the AGM.

Finance

Last year Growing Communities had an annual turnover of around £100,000. Just over a half of this came from Growing Communities own income generating activities (mainly the Box Scheme) while the rest was provided by external funders including the Community Fund and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. There are no shareholders. Profits are invested in the enterprise. The scheme has few capital assets and does not own land.

The box scheme currently provides the financial backbone of the organisation. Some 140 households pay for weekly boxes priced between £3.50 and £8.50. The produce compare favourably to equivalent organic produce from local shops and supermarkets. Part payments in LETS is accepted (Local Exchange Trading Scheme).

Current development work including the Farmers Market and Volunteer Task Force is grant funded. Funding has come from the New Opportunities Fund SEED Programme, The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, the Bridge House Estates Trust and Woodberry Down and Stamford Hill SRB. The enterprise intends to become financially self supporting through fees from the Farmers Market, increasing the sales of our own produce, fees from providing placements in our Volunteer Task Force and by continuing to explore other potential income generating areas of work such as running training courses.

Activities

The enterprise has several activities linked to sustainable local food. Weekly boxes of organic fruit and vegetables, all from Europe (except bananas) go to 140 homes. Members are told each week where produce has travelled from. Several farms near London supply as much as possible in season and members go and visit these farms for work days. Growing Communities aims to support rural businesses and break down urban/rural divisions.

From the annual questionnaire of 2002, the membership was found to be 58% female and 42% male, 84% white and 16% from black or ethnic minorities, with 35% who considered themselves to be on a low income.

Urban growing schemes operate on three sites of less than one acre in total. The sites were derelict. The land is organic and the produce is sold through the box scheme, a small shop and the Farmers Market. A grower is employed and over 450 people volunteered in the gardens last year. Two sites are in parks and the third is in the grounds of a community centre, which is used by toddler groups, carers groups etc. The gardens are used for training and demonstration purposes, for schools and for groups with special needs, with the help of an outreach worker. Community events are held in the gardens.

A weekly farmers market with 8-10 producers was launched in May 2003 to act as a meet-the-buyer forum for those seeking new markets. This has been successful so far, with both farmers and customers happy.

Future

Recently taken-on staff will provide better access to training and experience for people seeking ways into paid work in retail and food production. They will support new entrepreneurs. The volunteer programme will be formalised.

They intend to diversify product range by introducing processed food such as jam, seeds and transplants.

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