



Bolton Wholefood Coop

Background

The Bolton whole food co-op has been around in different forms with different members for over 20 years. The group was set up to provide local residents with access to wholefoods. Today the Bolton Wholefood Coop aims to promote healthy living through diet and to make organic and wholefoods more accessible and cheaper by buying in bulk, enabling people to exercise individual control over food purchasing and distribution. The group also attend events to try to promote co-operational values and environmental issues.

How is the buying group organised?

The Bolton Wholefood Coop has 20 members who are kept up to date through email but only 10 people order food on a regular basis. The group has no paid members of staff and is run by a core group of 5 volunteers. The Food co-op is open to members on the last Saturday of each month from 10.30am -12.30pm. New members are welcome. By opening on Saturday mornings they hope to make the co-op more accessible to new members. By increasing members and volunteers they hope to increase these Saturday openings in the future.

How is food purchased and distributed?

The group place an order with the wholesaler Suma Wholefoods every 6 weeks. The group used to meet before every order to go through the catalogue but now the order is collated online or members can ring in and place an order by telephone. After the order is received members send cheques or pay online so they don't have to pay for food that has either not been ordered or has not been delivered due to error or lack of stock. The online ordering system has substantially reduced the workload associated

with placing each order. However, some people are not happy to use a computer in this way and miss the social atmosphere of ordering in a group. Group members now have a meeting every 12 weeks which gives people a chance to socialise and to discuss any issues that have arisen or to plan events.

Suma deliver the order to a room in the Greenhouse Project, an independent community organisation who allow the Bolton Wholefood Coop a space with a cupboard to store surplus food. The group try to order just what they need but if there is something that isn't too expensive, gets ordered regularly or has a long shelf life then they can keep it in stock. However, it is not always possible to fulfil everyone's requests as Suma only allow the group to split 6 cases per order and storage space is limited.

Positive outcomes of the buying group

The Bolton Wholefood Coop's activities have led to a growth in awareness of the benefits of healthy eating and environmental issues. Members very rarely need to use a supermarket if they don't want to and there are opportunities to learn new skills for people willing to get involved. In addition group members value the social and networking aspect of the group.

Organic produce

The Bolton Wholefood Coop buys organic and non-organic produce; most people who join the group have a good understanding of the benefits of organic food and farming. The group try not to dictate what members can or cannot purchase but members are encouraged to buy the organic option where available - approximately 25-30% of members only buy organic products. The Bolton Wholefood Coop is not the cheapest place to buy organic produce as they buy from a wholesaler rather than going directly to the supplier and some items are cheaper in the supermarkets. Members buy organic produce in this way because it is seen as a healthier option and a means to avoid GM ingredients and most are happy to pay a bit extra to support the organic movement. However, for some people there can be an issue about whether to buy organic or fair-trade items such as sugar and tea, if fair-trade organic produce was more widely available there would be more

purchasing of organic produce within the group. Organic items that are usually bought include dried goods such as rice and flour, tinned products, teas and Soya milk and some fresh products such as cheese, eggs and vegetarian products. The group buys approximately £5,000 worth of produce a year and it's estimated that just under half of this is spent on organic products, approximately £2,000 worth.

The group have found that some organic products, namely fresh produce such as cheese and soya milk can be difficult to get hold of as Suma are often out of stock. However, they are generally happy with the supply. They would like to buy fresh local organic fruit and vegetables but it needs someone with the time and enthusiasm to make it happen.

Problems/issues encountered by the group

The Bolton Wholefood Coop struggle to find enough members willing to share the work involved in running the buying group; most members contribute at sometime during the year but mistakes are often made because people are not familiar with the systems. Suma are based in Halifax and only deliver to Bolton on a Wednesday afternoon; this is not very convenient for members who are busy with work or families. Some people struggle to pick up their orders before the Greenhouse Centre closes and it is difficult to find members who have the time needed to wait for the delivery on a Wednesday afternoon. The group no longer split wholefoods that are bought in large packs because they don't have the time, even though buying in large sizes keeps wholefood prices very low and allows more savings for members.

The group have also had administration problems including members not paying for their order within seven days which means that the treasurer has to visit the bank more than once a month; complaints from members who have not received items they've forgotten to order. In addition members regularly forget to update the balance sheet stating who owes what and to keep the stock sheet up to date. The group have talked about setting up a work rota but this has not been implemented so far.

In the future it is hoped that more active members could open a shop or a community café every Saturday and perhaps a home delivery service; this would make the co-op more usable to its members.

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The Soil Association is working as part of a partnership programme called Making Local Food Work which was awarded funding through the Big Lottery Fund for the next 4 years. The programme aims to reconnect people and land through issues of food: access to fresh, healthy, local food that has a clear provenance using social and community enterprise approaches to link communities and producers. For more information on the programme see: www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk