

The future of community retailing

Notes from a roundtable discussion held on 24 September 2014

Community retailing has played a significant role in reducing health inequalities for many years, through increasing access to affordable healthier foods, particularly in communities affected by low income. However, the context in which community retailers operate has changed: the growth of supermarkets, the development of the convenience store sector through the Scottish Grocers Federation's Healthy Living Programme, increased interest in locally-grown and sourced produce, and the effects of the economic crisis and welfare reform are all affecting community retailing, both positively and negatively.

The roundtable discussion was held to give community retailers an opportunity to consider:

- the position of community retailing at the moment
- the impact of food poverty on community retailing and community retailing on food poverty
- the future of community retailing
- what is required to strengthen the sector
- how community retailing can contribute further to the development and implementation of Scottish food and drink policy.

Representatives from Edinburgh Community Food, Broomhouse Health Strategy Group, NHS Forth Valley Community Food Workers team, North Glasgow Community Food Initiative and Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership attended. All support or run community retailing in their operational areas, including fruit and vegetable co-ops, food co-ops, fruit barras and stalls. Some also run fruit and vegetable stalls in hospitals and other health service and public sector buildings.

What did they say about the position of community retailing?

The community food initiatives agreed that community retailing is an important part of what they do – one person suggested it is 'the glue that holds everything together' - but acknowledged that, while some are doing well, many of the 'traditional' community -managed and volunteer-run co-ops are struggling at the moment. One person suggested the community -run co-ops in his area are in 'danger of extinction'.

This compares less favourably with stalls run by the initiatives at NHS and local authority sites. These are run by paid staff, and aim to generate income for the initiatives. The community food initiatives involved in this highlighted that sales through the community-managed co-ops are significantly less than through their other retailing outlets.

The following were identified as contributing to the difficulties that community run co-ops are facing:

Fewer customers

It was suggested that this may be due to a number of factors: an ageing customer base; more community members at work when the co-ops are operating; the growing number of supermarkets; and, not being able to compete with supermarkets prices.

Customers spending less

This may be because customers have less money, are buying less food, or are shopping more wisely and frugally.

Difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers

This was identified as a common issue. One participant stated that this had stopped her organisation expanding their food co-op's opening hours. Another spoke about the volunteering 'revolving door', with volunteers being recruited, developing skills, and then moving on. Another stated that a lack of capacity had stopped fruit baskets in her area from setting up an additional service in a hospital.

Lack of development support

Two of the community food initiatives were no longer funded, or able, to provide development support to the community-managed co-ops in their areas. Two also noted that the community-run co-ops that were being supported by other organisations, including community learning and development teams, were operating better than those without.

Funding 'short-termism' and changing priorities

It was suggested that the short-term nature of funding streams, and the reluctance of funders to continue to fund on-going activities or pieces of work, made it more difficult for the community food initiatives to provide consistent support to the co-ops.

Operating costs

One participant highlighted that the community-managed co-ops may have higher operating overheads than those run in NHS premises. He cited the example of one co-op which has to pay room hire, and also pay for testing of electrical equipment.

Produce supply

Those co-ops supplied produce on a 'sale or return' basis appear to be doing better than those that aren't. One participant noted that the number of community food co-ops operating decreased significantly when her organisation was no longer able to supply produce 'sale or return'. Another noted that they had reintroduced this, to support the community-managed co-ops in his area.

Is food poverty having an impact?

All agreed that it was, as highlighted by some of the points above. Three of the community food initiatives had been awarded funding to develop services that were linking emergency food aid with their community retailing outlets, their other food and health activities and other support services. One saw their work as a 'catch all',

ensuring that people experiencing food poverty but unable to go to a food bank received support.

Does community retailing have a future?

Everyone agreed that it did. One participant suggested that food co-ops give identity to and provides strength within communities. She added that it can be difficult to demonstrate the impact that community retailing can make, especially towards reducing health inequalities.

Another spoke about the hub delivery model that his organisation has developed and how the community development approach the hubs are adopting is supporting community retailing.

What would help strengthen and develop the sector?

Increased recognition of its importance

Participants highlighted the need to demonstrate the important role that community retailing plays, particularly in supporting the most vulnerable communities.

Funding

The need for long-term funding was identified for the following purpose: for development support for the community retailers; for support with recruiting and developing volunteers; and for marketing.

Linking community retailing with other activities

The community-managed retailers that appears to be doing best are those that are linking the retailing with other food or health activities (e.g. cooking classes, walking groups, gardening projects), or emergency food aid provision.

Finding innovative ways of reducing costs

One participant spoke about building relationships with commercial suppliers and retailers to access cheaper supplies.

Accessing on-going support from other organisations

It was also suggested that building relationships with organisations that may be in a position to provide long-term, on-going support would help sustain and strengthen the sector. In addition to those identified above, housing associations and credit unions were suggested.

Adapting the model

Linking into service delivered by other organisations was suggested (for example, within sheltered housing complexes and nurseries) as was delivering services differently (for example, only selling fruit and soup bags). Being able to open at other times, to attract more customers, was also suggested.

What should happen next?

The participants were unanimous that community-managed retailing plays a vital role in communities in addition to improving access to affordable food, and that it requires

support. Supporting community cohesion, building community capital and helping to reduce health inequalities were all highlighted. They highlighted a lack of recognition amongst policy makers and funders about importance of community-managed retailing. They requested that CFHS arrange a meeting for both parties where the importance of community-managed retailing and its support needs can be discussed

