
Transition Network Conference

Ruskin Mills, 31-May-07

Session Notes

Nick Weir: Localising food systems as part of the Transition Towns process

Mark Harrison, Greg Pilley and Nick Weir
– advisors on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

44 Bisley Road, STROUD GL5 1HF
greg.pilley@localfood.org.uk
mark.harrison@localfood.org.uk
nick.weir@localfood.org.uk
Tel: 01453 840037

Nick made a presentation covering;

- Stroud Community Agriculture (SCA) – see www.stroudcommunityagriculture.org
- Stroud Slad Farm Community – a second CSA project recently set up in Stroud
- Stroud Food Co-ops
- Stroud Food Hub
- Stroud's communal allotment group.

The questions, comments and suggestions in **bold** below were raised by participants in small group discussions following the presentation. We then had time to discuss some of them in open session. All of the questions, comments and suggestions are listed here followed by Nick's responses to the questions. Thanks to the people who recorded all these questions, comments and suggestions in the small groups.

1) Land ownership – can you run a CSA on tenanted land?

Both of the Stroud CSA's are renting land on a rolling 3-year lease. Both of them have long term plans to make their land more secure by setting up a Community Farm Land Trust – see www.communitylandtrust.org.uk

2) Is it possible to pay a living wage to the workforce?

SCA is paying its farm managers £8.75 per hour and will increase this by 10% when it increases the price of a veg share in Sept 2007. Seasonal labour is paid at £5.50 per hour. Both projects would like to increase these rates to acknowledge the importance of the work of growing food.

3) Is the volunteer workforce a reliable part of the planned workforce?

SCA estimates that volunteer work makes up only about 10% of the productive work done on the farm. However, the social benefits of involving the hundreds of regular and occasional volunteers in the project are massive. Members and non-members seem to love the opportunity to get involved in the work of the farm.

4) How much land do you need to feed 100 families completely for all their food needs?

We estimate that we would need about half an acre per person if we wanted to meet all their food and heating needs. Much of this would be taken up by woodland. The more vegetarian you are willing to be, the less land you need.

5) How do you handle membership that wants to leave?

Both the Stroud CSA's have joining forms and membership agreements that request 13 weeks notice to cancel (this is in line with standard community co-op agreements). However, for two years now SCA has had a waiting list so we can agree immediate termination if necessary. SCA has a form it sends to departing members asking them why they are leaving, what could we do / have done to keep them, what needs improving, etc.

6) After the initial enthusiasm was there a drop-off in commitment?

No, after a few months where SCA membership grew quite slowly, there has been a steady increase to our maximum veg share membership (limited by the amount of cultivable land). There has been a veg share waiting list for two years.

In terms of management, the volunteer 'core group' (elected from the membership) has been meeting at least once a month since the project started six years ago. Their remit has changed from a direct management of the farmers to more of a trustee role, but they still do a lot of planning and administration for the project and there never seems to be a shortage of new core group volunteers when longer-standing members stand down after their maximum four-year term.

7) What grants are available for making food re-localisation projects happen?

Rural Enterprise Gateway funding (through the RDA) has paid for us to advise this new CSA to set up in Stroud. It has also supported the development of Stroud Food Hub. This grant is available to any

community group in the South West and may be available more widely. There are rumours of a lottery grant being set up specifically for local food projects.

8) What about food hubs based in shops – e.g. fresh food to wholefood shops locally?

Yes, we tried to base our Food Hub in Stroud's independent wholefood shop, but despite our best efforts, they saw it more as a threat than a bonus to their business. There was also a space issue – we need a lot of space to do the 'sort'. We now have a very supportive relationship with a town-based school.

I still believe that a food hub could work very well in such a shop, complementing their product range and bringing in a new group of customers who might not otherwise shop there.

9) A food co-op is a good way for urban dwellers to get involved in food

10) What kind of people get involved in these projects? Does the typical member have a bit of money?

SCA set up with low-key promotion based mainly on word-of-mouth. This meant that we ended up with a membership that was similar to the people who set it up i.e. white, middle-class ex-hippies. It has now realised that this fails one of its founding principles, which is about inclusivity. SCA now has plans to focus promotion in different socio-economic areas. However the waiting list makes this a lower priority than some of the more pressing jobs.

SSFC – the second Stroud CSA has started from the beginning by targeting some of the council estates that are close to the farm.

The reality is that you don't need to be well-off to be part of a CSA. We have done several price comparisons and found that SCA veg shares are consistently less expensive than buying organic veg in a supermarket.

The food co-ops and food hub all offer significant cost savings to consumers (as well as giving a good deal to the local producers in the case of the Food Hub).

We do need to do some work to make all these new food systems more mainstream.

11) Why do people join? What motivates them?

There seems to be a basic, fundamental hunger in a lot of people to re-connect with the source of their food. It seems to me that many people are not aware of this hunger until they see a project like SCA; then they just want a part of it.

Some people treat it like a box scheme. They just want fresh, local, organic veg (arguably the best in Stroud) and don't really care that they are supporting a farm. They just pay their money and take the veg.

They don't choose to join in any of the activities. That's fine – their money is good!

Over 20 families are paying a monthly membership fee and not taking any veg. They just want to support the farm because they think it is a good thing.

Some families join because they like to get involved in the animals. Especially families with young children like to visit the piglets when they come to collect their veg. The parents say they want their children to grow up understanding a bit more about where their food comes from.

12) Is there some kind of contract joining the farmers and members so that there is no mass exodus following a bad year?

The joining pack makes it clear that the principle of CSA is that the farmers and consumers share the rewards, risks and responsibilities of farming. It then makes it clear that members are paying to support the farm, rather than paying for a veg box. It also says that there is no guarantee of receiving a set amount of veg. New members are asked to sign this and agree to give 13 weeks notice to cancel.

The farmers keep in regular touch with the members (through the quarterly newsletters, meetings and face-to-face) letting them know details of the highs and lows of farm life.

However, I expect that if there was a particularly bad year, some members would leave – although the core group would probably do all they could to communicate the reasons for the crop failures and encourage people to support the project through the difficulties.

13) How does the group afford land in a place where land prices are so high?

The second Stroud CSA is choosing to pay double the market rate for its rent. Even so the cost of the land is a tiny fraction of the total project costs. You can grow a lot of vegetables on 3 acres of land.

14) How to go about educating people about what local food is?

Word of mouth seems to work quite well. Most new members are recommended to the project by people who are already members. Just seeing the farm gives people a strong impression of how the food is produced. We host a lot of visits from schools, colleges, youth groups, WI, etc.

Several Stroud families use the farm as a part of their children's home education process – turning up on a regular basis as volunteers.

15) Why sell surplus to a wholesaler rather than at a farmers' market or to local shops?

Farmers' markets are expensive (£45 per market in Stroud) and take a lot of time to set up, staff the stall and close it down.

Our surpluses often don't suit the demand pattern of local shops.

We regularly buy organic veg from the wholesaler to supplement the veg shares so it works well to drop off our surpluses when we are collecting our wholesale purchases. The wholesaler also gives us all his grade-outs for our pigs so we can drop off surpluses when we are collecting the grade-outs. The wholesaler is willing to take pretty much any quantity of any veg at any time.

There are some organic cafes in Stroud. Some of them are regular veg share members. Others sometimes buy surplus veg.

The wholesaler is an easy fall back so we don't waste any veg.

16) What is the relationship between the group and the farm?

The group is a legal entity in its own right – an Industrial and Provident Society. It employs the farmers and has a membership agreement with each member family. It also has a tenancy agreement with the landowner. This is currently a rolling three-year lease. In the long term, we would like to buy the land as a community farm land trust – see www.communitylandtrust.org.uk

17) How do CSAs work? Structures and legal issues spelled out.

We think it is important that a CSA is set up in a way that allows;

- One member one vote
- Open entry to membership
- Profits to go back into the project and not to members
- An asset lock – in the event of the project winding up the assets can only be transferred to another CSA; not sold off for the benefit of the members.

A community co-op set up as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) allows all these to happen. I have a document that sets out the pros and cons of different legal structures – let me know if you would like a copy.

18) Organic status. Bypassing Soil Association registrations. Small local initiative builds up trust, which builds by consumers visiting the farm. Farmers can abuse organic status.

I don't understand all the threads of this note, but I do agree that certification systems like the Soil Association's will become less relevant as more and more people have a direct relationship with the people who grow their food. Consumers can then ask very specific questions of the farmers and have much more influence on how their food is grown.

However, organic certification does mean that we are paid the organic premium when we sell surpluses to wholesale.

19) Allotments next to community centres. How can food deserts participate? In Totnes there are difficulties of finding land for allotments. Technically you are not allowed to sell food from an allotment.

Maybe Councils need to be more flexible in defining allotments. The

Cuban model is that all sorts of little bits of land in Havana are used to grow food. This way you can get food production right in close to where people are living and you can involve them in the growing.

In Stroud we got around the 'allotment sales' technicality by selling the produce through the LETS system.

If the people who do the work on the allotment are paid in vegetables then the food is not being sold.