

Case study York SCOOP (Student Food Co-op)



Summary

SCOOP provides all students at York University with the opportunity to purchase ethical, locally sourced food at affordable prices. They are a non-profit organisation run by students for students who offer good food at cost price. As Geeta Koska who helps run the food co-ops says 'Ethical produce doesn't have to be an expensive lifestyle choice, you can just organise yourselves and enjoy good food.'

Background

The food co-op was set up in response to the fact that the food outlets on campus failed to meet students' basic food needs or desires and so the group wanted to offer a genuine alternative to what was available both on and off campus.

Its main aims are:

- to supply sustainable, ethical, affordable food to students,
- to enable students to have some input into where their food comes from and to get involved with making it a reality, and
- to have wider community engagement and dialogue.

The long term aims are to have a dedicated space on campus for the food co-op, to have lots of customers, to be able to supply the foods that people want and need, and to practically demonstrate another way of doing things.

Planning

After meeting someone from Green Action Food Co-op at Leeds University and sharing the idea with friends, a few of the students got together. They went along to a People & Planet meeting and got some more interest, and then started organising themselves and making plans from there. They held lots of group meetings!! Then had a meeting and a planning session with the Food Co-op Regional Advisor from Sustain. The Regional Advisor gave advice and helped facilitate some of the planning. The group also said that the Sustain food co-ops toolkit was really useful.

They had some engagement with the students union and the university and had one meeting with the Pro-Vice Chancellor to present the idea and plan. Engaging with the university was important in making sure they had an open dialogue.

Green Action Food Co-op were really helpful, dedicated and generous – they did some initial fundraising to help SCOOP get started and cover the cost of the first orders, provided advice on suppliers and how to get the idea off the ground, and donated some basic equipment.

People

SCOOP is run by a team of volunteers - Geeta met Judith from Green Action, and got the ball rolling. Zach is economically minded and does lots of number crunching. Beth is a key thinker and radical administrator. Dora and Chloe make sure it spreads everywhere and that people are excited about it. They have 'SCOOPers' with different roles who are responsible for moving that 'bit' of SCOOP on, they rotate and change as different things need doing and their position changes: fruit and veg – Dora; wholefood - Beth and Geeta; secretary – Alex; membership – Graham; website – Verity; marketing – Chloe; space – Zac; events – Chloe; funding – Megan; and finance – Simon.

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Practical resources

The food co-op currently uses the following resources:

- weighing scales,
- storage space,
- volunteers,
- jars to hold and display food in, and
- paper bags.

They are also looking to get a bike cart in the future. They did some fundraising to help buy the initial equipment, and also recycle and reuse stuff (for example they made scoops out of old plastic milk bottles), used donated jars, and grew seedlings in reused jars to sell at the spring fair. Volunteers have been obtained through love and appreciation! They are really sociable and cook together – and have ‘meet and eats’!

Promotion

They initially did an action with Food Not Bombs to start talking about food issues, and since then it's been mainly word of mouth. They have some leaflets and carried out a questionnaire to get feedback and gain evidence to show the support for the co-op.

They have just held a spring fair to help publicise and fundraise for SCOOP and have had an article in ‘Haus’ the student magazine. They are also trying to get involved in other activities going on around York, for example they helped with the cooking and supplied food to an activist kayaking training session. They have recently got some new members with new ideas.

Progress

The food co-op has now made two orders from their suppliers and sold most of the stock. The fruit and veg scheme is getting established and they've been working with People & Planet on their allotment, which is flourishing!

They've had lots of good, productive meetings, and are all still getting on well and feeling good about the project which is definitely a success! They are also making links with other food projects like Abundance York / Edible York. Most importantly though, they're still there and not in debt!

They measure their success by monitoring their finances and ensuring they are not in debt. It is also important to be aware of the level of enthusiasm and dedication of members (whose numbers are growing). They also monitor the numbers of orders and sales.

They are planning to do a survey at the end of the year to check how they're going and to get feedback. They are quite reflective in meetings and try to be honest and critical of their progress, so that they can make changes and find solutions as necessary.

The plans for the future of the project are to get a space on campus or if this doesn't happen to find an alternative way to develop, for example by having a bike trailer or some sort of transport. They also plan to do more fundraising, increase their prominence and do more outreach to students and others, so that they are more established both within the university and the wider community.

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The group's organisational and communication skills are constantly developing, as are their abilities to deal with the accounts. They try to make sure that they have clear records and processes so that the food co-op can be handed on and so they can use them to look back over their progress and to provide other information

Lessons learned

The best bits about running the food co-op are that whenever someone comes to SCOOP, they enjoy it, which shows that the co-op is actually providing a good service, and people really like the experience of shopping at SCOOP, as a result of the quality customer service provided by volunteers!! It's also good seeing the food come in and of course eating it.

The main problems have been getting a space on campus, as they've been operating from a volunteer's house since November 2009 and are still working to try and secure a more permanent base. Also, it can be difficult progressing and keeping momentum when things are tricky and solutions aren't obvious but they are getting more confident. Problems have been overcome mainly through discussions and working through things as a group, and having as much dialogue as possible with the university. The other on-going issues are how to generate money and stay a float without getting into debt personally, and finding the balance with being not for profit.

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