

*Report on the Food Futures steering group and board meetings,
held on September 3rd and 10th respectively.*

By Rob Squires

These minutes and relevant documents are available on line at:
http://CreativeLocalSolutions.co.uk/roblog/Food_and_Wellbeing_Network

Vulnerable Groups

The Health & Wellbeing Network has been working with Food Futures for some time, to improve the work done around vulnerable groups. This work falls largely on the shoulders of Edward Kane, who is an adult with learning disabilities. Edward is the chair of Manchester People First, and has been representing the community and voluntary sector on the Food Futures board for some time. Edward does not wish to continue being on the board, because he thinks he would be more effective working on a group within Food Futures specific to vulnerable people. Although there is not currently a vulnerable people's group, it was recognised at the board meeting that there should be a stronger focus on these groups. It is looking positive therefore that this work will begin within the new strategic approach that Food Futures is developing.

Edward reported that he enjoyed the most recent board meeting more than others, because we split into small discussion groups for part of the meeting. He felt more able to communicate within the smaller group, than he does normally to the entire board room. There is definitely more scope for improving the accessibility of Food Futures for people with disabilities, and Christine Raiswell (the Programme Co-ordinator) is working hard to take this on board. More information on making FF meetings accessible can be found in the short report: Improving Communications Between food Futures Board Representatives, available on the Roblog at: http://CreativeLocalSolutions.co.uk/roblog/Food_and_Wellbeing_Network.

Strategic Review

Food Futures held a strategic review day in July, and the way in which FF communicates with the public was high on the agenda. The focus of communication has generally been around healthy eating. I am advocating that there should be a subtle shift in focus to healthy, local food. I think we should be encouraging people to think more about where their food comes from, and how it is produced. There needs to be more focus on the sustainability of the food that people eat.

I often subscribe FF as a “sustainable” food strategy, because it seeks to localise the food economy, which would have a significant impact on reducing Manchester carbon footprint and ecological footprint. I think that Food Futures could generate a lot more mileage for itself than it is currently doing, by bigging up its environmentally sustainable agenda more.

Another issue within the strategic review is how we can make the board more dynamic. Councillor Bernard Priest is the chair of FF, and as the Executive Member for Finance and Procurement within Manchester City Council, he is very influential. He is very supportive of FF, and spoke of a need to ratchet it up a gear, such that it engages in the heart of City Council policy. When asked how this could best be achieved he suggested that an Executive Policy should be written, and that he would ask Howard Bernstein (Chief Executive of Manchester City Council) for his support.

Engaging with the private sector

I was in the same discussion group as Bernard, and could not help myself from engaging him in a conversation about the fundamental unsustainability of supermarkets, and the need for LA’s like Manchester City Council to find ways of protecting small, local retailers, and producers from their destructive effects. The Executive Member was surprisingly sympathetic towards my point of view, although he did stress that the issues that I raised were national, and that he didn’t think it was the role of Food Futures to tackle these. He suggested an alternative strategy of working with the public, to educate them, and influence their shopping practices.

Open Strategy

FF is reaching the end of its four month trial of Open Strategy, the online, multi-stakeholder system for strategic planning, which is intended to 'liberate the collective wisdom' of the system's users. As part of this review, I received two days training, and helped facilitate an Open Strategy event. I am getting mixed messages, both from food Futures, and end users of the system. Whilst the liberation of collective wisdom is clearly desirable, the system is very expensive, and highly time consuming. FF are to undertake a cost – benefit analysis of the system at the end of the trial. The jury is still out, but hopefully a decision will have been made by the time I write my next report. My colleague Fraser How has been supporting me with that work, and will be providing Food Futures with an evaluation from us in the near future.

Local Food Fund

I have also been working with Fraser How, on a piece of work, to research strategies for using the BIG Lottery Local Food Fund to support voluntary and community groups in Manchester. This has involved an interesting online survey, and a consultation with some 20 organisations doing local food work in the city. We will be making the report on this available in the near future.

The report has revealed to us that the most important issues for groups that completed the survey, are to do with education and awareness around food and health.

We have suggested a number of options for projects that could be developed using the Local Food Fund. One of these is to develop a network of training allotments, with compost toilets, and mobile training facilities. The idea for the network of training allotments arose out of a previous Food and Wellbeing Network meeting held in July. The FWN have an existing remit to support allotments and food growing initiatives, since this was agreed in a strategic review in 2006.