



Manchester's New *Food & Well-being* Group

Friday July 4th 2008, Manchester Alliance For Community Care (MACC)

Report by Rob Squires

[This report is available on line at <http://CreativeLocalSolutions.co.uk/roblog>]

Summary

This is a report on the inaugural meeting of Manchester's new *Food & Well-being* group, which I have been appointed to develop, on behalf of the [Health and Wellbeing Network \(formerly the Health Inequalities Pool\)](#). The group has been set up to enable the community and voluntary sector to have a greater influence in deciding the future of food, health and wellbeing. Amongst other things, we will be initiating new ways of sharing ideas and good practice on improving food and health, between the local community, and the [Manchester Food Futures Strategy](#).

Topics covered during the meeting include:

- The Food and Wellbeing Group - purpose, influence and development;
- Engaging in Food Futures, roles and responsibilities of Food Futures reps;
- Developing new ways to share information within the H&W Network, and Food Futures.;
- Climate Change, Peak Oil and Food Security;
- Food Future's Big Lottery Local Food Fund bid;
- Open Strategy - strategic planning tool under trial by Food Futures.

Present

The meeting was convened at [Manchester Alliance For Community Care](#), on Friday July 4th. In addition to myself, participants included the following mix of Network workers and frontline workers, predominantly from North and East Manchester:

- Jackie Kilbane – Health and Wellbeing Network
- Tricia Jones – [Environment Network](#)
- Tim McMahon – [Sustainable Neighbourhoods Pool](#)
- Jes – [MCIN](#), Web content developer
- Debra Pearson, [Zest](#) (North Manchester Healthy Living Network)
- Geraldine Wall, Zest Food Worker
- Rowena Pyott, [HELF Partnership](#)

The Influence of the Food and Wellbeing Group

Warning: unless you are familiar with the structure of Manchester Partnership, and the Community Network For Manchester, you will be likely to find this section very confusing, and unless you are really keen to learn, you are advised to skip to the next section. At some time in the future I would like to provide a diagram to explain these structures more easily.)

The Food and Wellbeing Group is a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Network, which is a part of the [Community Network for Manchester \(CN4M\)](#).

CN4M is set up as a structure to enable the community and voluntary sector to influence [Manchester Partnership](#), which is (to a greater or lesser extent) a cross-sector partnership that makes strategic decisions about how services are provided in Manchester.

The specific part of Manchester Partnership that the Health and Wellbeing Network seeks to influence is called the [Adults' Wellbeing and Health Board](#). (Note: The Adults' Wellbeing and Health Board grew out of the now deceased Health and Wellbeing Partnership.)

[Manchester's Food Futures Strategy](#) is led by the [Joint Health Unit](#), and is very inclusive of the community and voluntary sector. Food Futures has links with the Adults' Wellbeing and Health Board, and seeks to influence and improve local services through these channels. In general however, Food Futures is autonomous of Manchester Partnership, and has other avenues for improving the future of food for the City.

The Health and Wellbeing Network meets every six weeks, and concentrates on the following issues, amongst others:

- Food and wellbeing
- Alcohol
- Sexual health

The Health and Wellbeing Network has two representatives on the Board of Manchester Food Futures, who have had significant influence for around three years, in promoting the interests of the community and voluntary sector within Food Futures. The two reps are:

1. Rob Squires – knowledgeable in community food issues, and sustainability
2. Edward Kane – expert in adult learning disabilities and accessibility

Because there are always a lot of issues to discuss at Health and Wellbeing Network meetings, and because of the success that the Network has had over three years in influencing Food Futures, the Food and Wellbeing subgroup has been established in order to increase the capacity of the Health and Wellbeing Network, to have a positive influence on Manchester Food Futures, and the future of food, health and wellbeing in Manchester in general.

How to develop the Food and Wellbeing group?

The meeting included a mix of managers, networkers, and frontline workers, all of whom have busy diaries. It is not the intention of this new group to duplicate forums that already exist, or to waste people's time with discussions that do not lead to

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positive change. The group has been set up to increase the capacity of the Health and Wellbeing Network, and to better enable the community and voluntary sector to have a positive influence on the future of food, health and wellbeing in the City.

Participants were enthusiastic about the new group, and did not see it as duplication, or as a 'talking shop'. This was demonstrated by a decision to broaden engagement, through existing participants each asking other key people they work with, to participate in future meetings.

Big Lottery Wellbeing Fund

A potential duplication was identified in relation to two sets of community food projects that receive Wellbeing funding from the Big Lottery. This includes three projects that are part of the Groundwork Northwest regional portfolio:

1. HELF (Healthy Eating Local Food)
2. Herbie mobile grocery
3. Groundwork Manchester's Allotments For All project.

It also includes three projects that employ community food workers across the city, as part of the regional network of Healthy Living Networks' portfolio:

4. Zest (North Manchester Healthy Living Network)
5. Big Life Co. (Central Mcr HLN)
6. South Manchester HLN.

The meeting was attended by Rowena Pyott from HELF, and Debra Pearson and Geraldine Wall from Zest. Previous discussions have taken place amongst workers from the six Wellbeing funded food projects about the need for better co-ordination of activities. In order to reduce duplication of meetings, a decision was made that the Food and Wellbeing group could act as a forum through which the projects could co-ordinate.

A decision was made that those present would inform workers from the other four Wellbeing funded projects of this decision, and invite them to the next meeting.

Engaging in Food Futures, roles and responsibilities of Food Futures Reps

A discussion took place about the Food Futures small grants schemes, and it was expressed that although the fund is a good thing, the way in which the money is distributed is haphazard, in that it does not provide structured support to those that are already working on the ground / on the frontline.

Further discussion was held around the recent Food Futures Collaborative Commissioning Programme. It was acknowledged that this was an experimental project, which presented certain challenges to participating groups. The question was asked, "how can the new Food and Wellbeing group be useful to the organisations participating in the Collaborative Programme?". A decision was made to address this question, and invite participants from these groups to future meetings.

It was recognised that unless an organisation is working on the ground, it can be difficult to know about, and understand the functioning of the invisible structures / collaborations that operate between individuals and groups on a daily basis, and help to weave together local communities. It was expressed that the Food and Wellbeing group could play an important role in mapping and understanding these structures. It was also thought that the group could play an important role in helping strategic organisations like Food Futures understand how these structures and collaborations work.

A discussion took place about the structure of Food Futures, and how members of the Food and Wellbeing group can participate in it. The group is already represented at the board level (as discussed above) and in the steering group. However, there are several sub-groups of Food Futures, such as the Growing Food sub-group for example, which are open for participation. The Food and Wellbeing group can play a strong role in representing the community and voluntary sector, and influencing Food Futures, by acting as a forum within which representatives of the FF board and subgroups can share information, and co-ordinate activities.

A decision was made to have Food and Wellbeing representatives appointed to each of the FF sub-groups.

It was also acknowledged that it is not always easy for workers to be present at FF sub-group meetings, due to clashes, and other priorities. The Food and Wellbeing group can potentially play an additional supportive role, by co-ordinating participation in FF sub-group meetings, by ensuring that if a representative is not able to attend, then someone else can cover them.

Developing new ways to share information within the H&W Network, and Food Futures.

In addition to developing this new Food and Wellbeing group, I have been appointed the task of developing new ways to share information within the Health and Wellbeing Network and Food Futures.

In order to achieve this I have been investigating the potential of modern internet technology, specifically Drupal open source content management system, and RSS feeds. In addition I have been investigating MCIN's (Manchester Community Information Network's) Community Reporters programme.

I have set up an experimental web site called the [Roblog](#), which is designed as a central depository of information concerning community food, and related issues in Manchester. The site is currently hosted for free by Creative Local Solutions, which is a community development consultancy, involving myself and Fraser How. The site is designed as a means for easily sharing information about local food across multiple networks. Currently I am the only contributor to the Roblog, but the technology is designed such that many people can easily contribute to the web site.

In addition, I have joined MCIN's Community Reporters programme, so that articles I add to the Roblog, are automatically 'fed' into [MCIN's My Manchester community web portal](#), using *RSS feed technology*. My Manchester is the City's prominent community portal site, and receives hundreds of thousands of hits per year.

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Participants in the Community Reporters programme receive a range of benefits, including potentially, web site hosting, training in using content management software, and access to equipment such as video cameras and editing suites.

During the Food and Wellbeing meeting, I described the Roblog, and Jes from MCIN described the Community Reporter's programme. The group discussed the idea of setting up a site like the Roblog, with which members of the Food and Wellbeing group, could store, and share information, between themselves, and the wider community, via My Manchester. In addition members of the group could also potentially receive the support and experience of MCIN through engaging with the Community Reporter's programme.

These ideas were generally well received within the group, members of which expressed a keenness to use such a facility. It was agreed that I should further investigate ways of setting up this facility.

Another note of interest is that in addition to feeding information to My Manchester, at the same time, information could potentially be fed into MACC's web site, and also into Food Future's web site, in order to further increase the efficiency with which information about food, health and wellbeing is shared within the city.

Geraldine Wall (Zest Food Worker), speculated that there are existing cooking groups and allotment groups, who could also benefit from using such a facility, in order to blog their projects, and document success stories.

In fact such an activity is already included in the action plan of the Cooking and Nutrition Education group who received £10,000 recently through Food Future's Collaborative Commissioning Programme (already discussed above). MCIN are already collaborating within this group, to work with participants undergoing cooking and nutrition training, to blog their experiences, and share their successes. There is clear potential to link this project up with the Food and Wellbeing group, in some way.

Climate Change, Peak Oil and Food Security

A lengthy discussion took place concerning the interrelated issues of climate change, peak oil, and food security.

Oil supplies are peaking, meaning that half of the world's predicted oils supplies have been consumed, and that for the first time in human history, demand for oil is outstripping our ability to be able to supply it. The result of this is that oil prices are beginning to skyrocket. Since the western way of life is energy intensive, and highly dependent on oil, rising prices caused by peak oil mean that the cost of living is going to increase for everybody. Since we are locked into a globalised food system, dependent on oil based chemicals, and heavy machinery, and with high food miles, the cost of food is certain to increase dramatically as a result of peak oil prices rises.

The peak oil issue is coupled to climate change, which is resulting in large areas of marginalised land becoming agriculturally unproductive. On top of this, the world's population continues to expand. The outcome of these combined factors is almost certain to be

- [See my short paper, Food: the Local and Global Context](#), for summary information about the interrelated problems of global food security, peak oil, climate change, and population growth.
- [See this article on the Roblog](#) for resent newspaper articles
- See the Cabinet Office's resent report, [Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century](#), for the government's take on the importance of these issues.

Localisation of the food system, and conversion to non-industrial food production offers solutions to the interrelated issues of peak oil and climate change. In light of this, Tim McMahon from the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Pool is working on an agenda to increase the amount of land available in Manchester for food production.

Tim informed the group that the average amount of allotment space per person in Manchester, has recently been increased to 14 square feet – this is about the equivalent of two adult males lying side by side on the ground!

Action: Tim is to provide more information about how much additional land has been provided per person, and how many extra plots this equates to in the City.

The question was asked of the group, "Should Manchester be less dependent on international trade?" I shall be sure to be asking this question again in future meetings, as I believe that it is a question that is vital to the future well-being of citizens in this country.

Tim informed the group that Manchester City Council is currently not intending to produce a climate change strategy. MCC recently produced a paper called [The Principles of Tackling Climate Change in Manchester](#) with the intention to introduce the issue of climate change and to outline the principles behind tackling climate change in Manchester. However the news is that they do not intend to develop this into a comprehensive strategy to reduce climate change emissions. Instead they are producing what is being described as a 'mini Stern' report, in order to investigate the likely effects of climate change on the city's economy.

Tim is working with other Manchester people in order to set up a local food production 'writing group'. The plan is to produce well researched documentation in support of the urgent need for localised and urban food production.

I informed the meeting that there is an intention to recruit more people onto the Food Futures board. I have already discussed with members of the board, the possibility of including somebody with an interest in climate change, and possibly with a scientific background, because this issue is not being very clearly addressed by Food Futures yet, in my opinion.

It was agreed that I should make further inquiries with Food Futures, to ascertain what Food Futures could hope to achieve by having a climate change specialist involved on the board, or in a subgroup. With this information, it will be more likely that the Food

and Wellbeing group will be able to assist in identifying suitable candidates for this role.

The Big Lottery Local Food Fund, consultation.

Creative Local Solutions (myself and Fraser How) have been commissioned by Food Futures to raise funds from the [Big Lottery Local Food Fund](#), on behalf of the community and voluntary sector in Manchester. Following are notes from the consultation that I undertook during the Food and Wellbeing meeting, to assess participants thoughts on how the Local Food Fund could best used to support local communities.

Allotments

There is (or probably soon will be) a large demand for more allotments, and more land for producing food in the city. (Kenneth Wilson is Manchester's new allotments officer.)

There are opportunities to supply a growing demand from people who want to purchase more local food, but are not interested in growing it. (MCIN may be developing a web site in the future that could act as an online marketplace for local food.)

Training

Also people's skills and knowledge of growing food, and maintaining allotments, needs to be increased. Geraldine Wall (Zest) is planning a training allotment plot in Crumpsall.

The group discussed the idea of a network of collaborative training plots. This idea was of particular interest to Zest and Rowena Pyott from the HELF project, both of these organisations are already working towards these goals. It was suggested that Liz Edwards from Groundwork's Allotments For All project should also be included in these discussions, as should Andrew Steward and Helen Dodd who are involved in community allotment projects and training.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Rowena suggested inviting refugees and asylum seekers to future Food and Wellbeing meetings. She suggested obtaining money

from the Local Food Fund, to train refugees and asylum seekers as trainers, so that they could gain employment passing on their skills in growing food, to local people. This seems like an excellent idea to me.

Sustainable Allotment Infrastructure

There is potentially a lot of scope for linking the idea of a network of training sites with the Sustainable Allotments Infrastructure group that emerged out of the Food Futures Collaborative Commissioning Programme (see earlier section for more information on the Collaborative Commissioning Programme). The training sites will require infrastructure: classrooms, compost toilets, renewable electricity, kitchens etc. Creative Local Solutions have been consulting with the Allotments Infrastructure group to ascertain how they can be linked into the Food Futures Local Food Fund bid, in order to expand their programme. A network of training sites would be an excellent opportunity to build upon this work, and expand the collaboration.

As part of the existing Allotments Infrastructure development, The Lost Plot, at Southern Allotment in Chorlton, are planning to build a mobile classroom (possibly a yurt?), which can be taken around different sites and provided on demand.

[Ben Thomas](#) at START in Salford worked with mental health service users to construct a yurt. The yurt was hired out recently by the Birchfields park Forest Garden group, and pictures of the yurt can be seen [here on the Roblog](#). As well as a mobile classroom such a structure could also therefore provide an income stream for its owners.

In addition to a mobile classroom, it would be possible to build and supply mobile compost toileting systems. I designed and prototyped such a structure for the Climate Camp in 2007. Designs and videos of the structure (nicknamed the 'Camel'), under construction, and completed, can be viewed [here on the Roblog](#).

In addition to a mobile classroom and toilet, it is feasible that a mobile kitchen could be incorporated, enabling cook and taste sessions to be conducted on site. The entire assembly could be

hired out to events and festivals in order to raise funds for community groups.

Composting and bamboo bikes and bike trailers

Rowena from HELF mentioned the idea of a city-wide compost scheme, involving mental health service users from their network of day centres. The idea of building bikes and bike trailers from bamboo, to enable service users to transport the compost was briefly mentioned. There is another potential collaboration here between Ben Thomas at Salford's START project, and the HELF project, since Ben is a first rate designer and wood worker, and both START and HELF specialise in working with mental health service users. [Visit this page on the Roblog](#) for links to web sites about making bamboo bikes and bike trailers.

Capacity Building

Geraldine Wall (Zest) informed that there is a lack of support for capacity building for new food projects and enterprises in the City. It was acknowledged that the Scarman Trust provide capacity building, but only support existing projects, and do not support embryonic projects or groups.

It would be useful therefore if there were a structure that could assist build the capacity of new groups, like refugees and asylum seekers, who are starting from scratch to develop new food projects or enterprises.

In addition it was noted that there is a need for more technical support in relation to land issues. For example there is a demand for support around land based issues, including:

- ascertaining whether community land is contaminated;
- developing affordable ways of decontaminating land and water (bioremediation, etc)
- developing low maintenance, high yielding land based systems, using [permaculture design processes](#).

Social Enterprise

Question: Where and how could social enterprise fit into all these ideas?

Open Strategy - strategic planning tool under trial by Food Futures.

[Open Strategy](#) is designed to enable 'multiple stakeholder groups' (lots of people) to work together and add their projects and organisations into a constantly evolving online system, in order to 'liberate collective wisdom' by creating an integrated strategy. The online system can theoretically:

- Map who is doing what and where;
- Identify gaps and / or duplications in service provision;
- Help transform great ideas and intentions, into real benefit for local people, by making projects outcome focussed;
- Reduce endless meetings; and
- Cut through jargon, by creating a common vocabulary for system recipients.

Manchester Food Futures is currently embarked on a four-month trial of the system. During the Food and Wellbeing meeting, I invited participants to involve their organisations in the trial. Although most people present at the meeting could see benefits to using the system, certain criticisms were raised:

1. The Open Strategies software, and the vocabulary used by its developer, Open Strategies Ltd, is extremely inaccessible – this is the opinion of Edward Kane from People First, who has a learning disability and has expert knowledge about information accessibility.
2. The software, and the support services from Open Strategy, are extremely expensive – they are asking for £2,000 per month ... £24k / year. This blows a huge hole in the Food Futures programme budget which is around £100k / year.
3. Jackie Kilbane (Health and Wellbeing Network) expressed her thoughts about Open Strategy saying that it is a 'nice package' but concerned that it is a red herring, on the basis that all the ideas and values packaged up in Open Strategies, are already out there, and that with appropriate effort, a similar result could be achieved at a much lower cost.

The jury is still out as far as I am concerned. I am interested in the Open Strategy system getting a fair trial, in order to see what happens, and to see how users like it.

I am encouraging community and voluntary sector organisations to become involved in the trial, in order that they may feedback to me their own thoughts about the system. As a representative of the Health and Wellbeing Network on the Food Futures board, I will be required at the end of the trial, to make a decision on whether I think Food Futures should invest £24K per year in this system or not. If other community and voluntary sector organisations participate in the trial, I will be in a better position to make a decision that is representative of the sector, rather than a decision that is based just on my own thoughts and impressions. I feel a certain amount of weight and responsibility, to make the right decision, given the amount of money that is at stake.

Action: I have been asked to ascertain from Food Futures, what exactly they are seeking to gain from using Open Strategy, for example: a more robust outcomes framework?; a better LSP?; etc. Knowing this will enable other members of the Food and Wellbeing group to provide better advice about whether Food Futures should continue to use Open Strategy after the trial period.

Next Meeting

Next Food and Wellbeing meeting scheduled for 2nd September, 10.00 – 12.00, at Manchester Alliance for Community Care.