

# WELL FED IN WEST LOTHIAN THROUGH COLLABORATION



Improving Scotland's  
food and drink businesses  
through collaboration

**SCOTLAND**  
OF FOOD & DRINK

West Lothian Food and Health Development, (WELFEHD), was set up in 2006 as a Company Limited by Guarantee. It is the supplier and distributor of fresh fruit and vegetables for community food co-ops in West Lothian, as well as community food networks in East Lothian, Mid Lothian, Edinburgh and Aberdeen

The organisation is a social enterprise and has charitable status. Its objective is to create 'a healthier West Lothian where affordable fresh fruit and vegetables are more widely available and the benefits of eating a healthy, balanced diet are recognised.'



WELFEHD delivers to fifteen co-ops, three of which it owns, and also to a number of private customers. The organisation has a turnover of around £619,000. Almost three quarters of its income is from sales. In the last financial year, 21% of its sales were of local produce, but it aims to develop this further over time.

WELFEHD works with a number of partners to break down the barriers associated with eating a healthy diet. This is focused on areas of deprivation where cost and access to high quality produce are the major obstacles. As a social enterprise, the organisation also provides volunteering and work opportunities for people with a history of unemployment. These opportunities offer them the chance to access training and support which, in turn,

helps them move into the wider job market.

The organisation is located in a warehouse in Livingston – it has outgrown two other premises in its three years of operation and will shortly be moving again. It has a core staff of 18 with additional short-term workers. Since it began operating, sales have grown from £24,000 each year to £450,000. The warehouse also has a food preparation area, which is increasingly in demand.

WELFEHD works with a number of local producers, particularly farmer David Dickson, who supplies a substantial amount of its root vegetables. As a result of that partnership, WELFEHD estimates that £17,000 has been kept in the West Lothian local economy.

## KEEPING IT LOCAL



By working with local farmers, the organisation has access to high quality products, which are not travelling large distances to customers.

Says Allistar Strickland, General Manager: "We are willing to pay a fair price for the product and, in return, the farmer knows he has a guaranteed market for all he can produce. He also knows what he'll be paid for the crop on a yearly basis, which means he can plan and budget

for the short and long term without the vagaries of the market intervening."

Another benefit to the organisation of sourcing locally, is that the quality and the provenance of the products means that it can deliver healthy, fresh and tasty produce to consumers who would not be able to buy it otherwise because of cost and availability.

In addition, WELFEHD is reducing food miles by working in partnership with David. Prior to the partnership, he would sell his produce at the fruit market in Edinburgh whilst WELFEHD would buy produce from the market, some of which would be from his farm. This would then be driven from Edinburgh back to West Lothian. As a result of the partnership between WELFEHD and David, the produce is now taken directly from the farm in East Calder to WELFEHD in West Calder.

The organisation also makes clear the origins of the produce to its customers – "We promote the farmers on the posters that are displayed at the co-ops," says Jen Richards, Development Officer, "and we carry out surveys about the

## KEEPING IT LOCAL CONTINUED

produce, the results of which we feed back to the suppliers.”

This connection with the consumer is integral to maintaining the quality of the produce. David Dickson has firsthand experience of just how important it can be.

Says Allistar: “We had very good feedback about the carrots we got from David. Then he changed the way he was growing the crop to try and get a greater yield. The result was that the quality went down. But, as a result of the feedback, David has reverted to his original growing method and the quality has risen again.”

David has clear views about the benefits of collaborating with WELFEHD. He used to sell his produce only through his farm shop, which was seasonal, and at the market in Edinburgh.

He says: “I originally sold around eight product lines, but potatoes were the only

line producing a margin. When I was approached by Angela Moohan, WELFEHD’s Development Manager, she offered me an improved price and said she could take all I could produce. She was very open and fair on the pricing.”

As well as the agreed price, David benefits from the stability that a regular customer offers. The annual pricing means he can budget better and, as he gets direct feedback from the customer, he is learning more about market requirements and can alter production to meet these needs. Feedback on the quality of the products also allows him to monitor his production methods and crop varieties so that he can meet quality standards.

David has now rented more land in addition to his 40 acres to meet future demand from WELFEHD. He also buys a range of fruit and vegetables from them which he sells in his own farm shop to other customers.

## DRIVING A BARGAIN

Whilst the overall goal of the organisation is to source and sell as much local produce as possible, it hasn’t been easy to find suitable partners. Angela Moohan and Clare Bell, Development Officer, initially set out on the quest by driving round the local area and, literally, knocking on doors. By this method they found David and John Sinclair, another local producer.

Says Allistar, one of the difficulties is scale: “The farms tend to be either so big, supplying major retailers or food service

companies, that we are not a good option for them as a customer. Or they are so small that they can’t supply outside their own retail outlet.”

For Allistar, one of the biggest hurdles was the fact that farmers couldn’t deliver to them.

He adds: “At first we had to go out in our cars to pick up supplies, loading up with as much as we could carry. Fortunately, we now have our own transport so we are able to collect from suppliers as well as deliver to our outlets.”



## GROWING THE BUSINESS

Both WELFEHD and David attribute the success of their relationship to the fact that it is based on openness and transparency. Says Allistar: "We keep in touch by telephone and have regular face-to-face meetings, but trust has built up between us because we both know we can be honest with each other and get over any hurdles that might come up."

The organisation has recently been awarded a grant from Big Lottery to acquire new premises and equipment. The organisation aims to increase its supply of locally grown produce over the years to come and would also like to expand its sales to private customers and other local businesses, as well as to the co-ops it works with. It is also very keen to find many more suppliers like David with whom it can work.



For further information about the Cultivating Collaboration project please contact **Fiona Hamill** on 07799 450792 or **Rona Sutherland** on 01360 850763 or visit our website at [www.ctwo.org.uk](http://www.ctwo.org.uk)

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