

EGC SW Co op presentation outline – 19 March 2024

(1) Title slide – RR [00:00-00:30]

Thanks to SW coops for inviting us today; very pleased to be here.

I'm RR & I'm DM - both members of Exeter Growers' Co-op.

Basically, we're a co-operative that grows food for our members and friends. Our mission: exist to promote understanding, enjoyment and sustainable use of the land, do that largely, but not exclusively by growing: veg, fruit, herbs etc.

(2) Overview – RR [00:30-01:30]

Going to give you a 15 minute whistlestop introduction to our co-op. We'll cover:

- Who we are and what we do
- Why a co-op? What help and support did we get in setting up?
- How we work in practice
- Some of the benefits of being a co-op and what our members say
- Fairly typical example of a recent challenge and how we overcame it.
- A take away we hope will inspire your own co-operative endeavours.

Very brief introduction only.

Be around for the networking sessions and very happy to chat more and answer any questions.

(3) What's EGC and what to we do? – RR [01:30-03:30]

About 35 members, with access to 5 acres of beautiful land in Shillingford, edge of Exeter.

We aim to:

- **Give people opportunities to produce their own food locally, organically and in a sustainable way:**
 - Use no chemicals, sustainable energy, water capture, composting, compost loo
 - Grow regeneratively: try put more into the soil than we take out; increasingly 'no-dig'
- **Facilitate the learning and sharing of skills:**
 - Work collectively on a crop rotation system, don't have individual allotments
 - Experience ranges from new to growing, to life-long experienced growers and people with training.
 - Crop champions – have or develop more knowledge, guide/steer work
 - Areas of interest/skills – mowing; infrastructure development; maintenance
- **Offer people of all ages the opportunity to benefit from being on the land:**
 - Membership age profile is generally older: retired people have time. V valuable backbone/leg work.
 - Have members who bring their families, children, and grandchildren, and younger members in 20s/30s.
- **Encourage diversity of wildlife and care of the environment**
 - Created a sizeable wildlife pond, bees, green manure for pollinators and soil improvement.
 - Moth survey in May.
 - Planted hedges, willow, orchard, trees. Bat and bird boxes. Hedgelaying.

Here are some of those lovely things...

(4) Picture slide – RR [03:30]

(5) Why a co-op? And help and support in setting up? - DD [03:30-07:30]

Early days....influenced – and still influenced by desire to be:

- Open and accessible
- Financially sustainable; not a trading model
- Make decisions by consensus.

Help setting up early on.....people, land access, grants.....started with a bare field.

Incredible transformation in x years. Connections to other local projects – The Real Food Shop.

Co-op model offered flat structure, minimal bureaucracy (eg v charity model; community supported agriculture then in its infancy). Legal identity, basis and structure: proto-co op.

Access to amazing organic land – rented then bought (and now owned by the EGC entity).

Superb location: proximity to Exeter – c1/3 members cycle to the field, still while wild

Trial and error: settled on minimum management committee of 3 – Chair, Treasurer and Secretary

(6) How do we work in practice? – RR [07:30-09:30]

Lots of effort goes into planning and managing the growing: small market garden.

As a co-op: very light-touch, flat structured and pretty relaxed. No one monitors your two days a month in the field; members discretion how much to harvest and leaving enough for others (though keep a harvest log).

Conduct business via:

- Consensus, non-voting decision-making
- Monthly member meetings in the field – bring issues, ideas, proposals. Members can add to the agenda; notes of meeting for the record.
- Standing agenda item to go around the circle – everyone asked if they have AOB or anything to add – event info, crop developments, days for specific collective tasks.
- Annual review meeting in Nov – take stock of the year, lessons learned and inform growing plan and priorities for following year.
- Tuesdays and Saturdays collective workdays: make a brew; sit have lunch together in the field. Lots of informal discussion.
- Work together – casually or specifically on particular time critical project/need/areas of interests/preferences/abilities; sometimes alone.
- Formal socials: Christmas and Wassail
- Some strategic planning 2021: reviewed and set some medium and long terms projects, still implementing – wildlife pond extended and flourishing, a forest garden in the offing
- Celebrating our successes; acknowledging achievements, people's contributions and collective endeavours.
- Recognising always more to do and more that could be done – and accepting that

(7) Benefits of being a co-op? DM&RR [09:30-12:00]

Double act here and run through quickly:

- Collective endeavour - keeps us going; flexibility when life gets in the way.
- Shared responsibility – all have a stake and all care about it; passion; work together.
- Mutual aid – very powerful to help yourself, work with others, make something happen – politically liberating; sense of agency.
- The sum is greater than its parts: powerful when people come together and create
- Engenders trust, and compromise – not always easy
- Learning from others – different backgrounds and life experiences; different growing knowledge; tend to stay off politics! Lots of recipe sharing.
- Learn from our successes, and our failures – space for ideas to be tried.
- Make friends – welcoming and friendly community; won't be best mates with everyone.
- Abundance – crops come and go, but delicious, organically grown produce.
- Helps meet cost of living and access to fresh produce (now: squash, onions, garlic, winter salads, cauli, PSB, bottled blackcurrants, cucumber pickle) £2 per week.
- Access to outdoor space for people without gardens.
- Physical and mental health benefits – exercise, connection to the land, nature, cycle of life. Be with others, or on my own.
- Share the abundance – St Sidwell's, Exminster project, surplus to Stage – cash went to Exeter Food Bank.

(8) Don't just take our word for it.....what our Members say about EGC - RR [12:00-12:30]

(9) Example of a challenge....and how we overcame it – DM [12:30-14:30]

Pest control in the polytunnel??!!

Typical example

(10) Wonky veg pic - RR [14:30-15:00]

So, in conclusion. Why end on some comedy wonky veg and holey fruit?

Nature is amazing, but isn't perfect. We're human – we're not perfect.

We work with each other, and we work with nature.

EGC's certainly isn't perfect - far from it! But, as we hope to have shown, by working together we are far bigger than the sum of our parts. And much of that is down to cooperation.

We hope you feel inspired.

And we'd be delighted to talk more in the networking session, or for you to get in touch. Thank you.

(11) Gate slide: Website address – more info

14/03/24