

pop·up wholefoods

Starting and Sustaining a Bulk Buying Club – A ‘How To’ Guide

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Starting and Sustaining a Bulk Buying Club: A 'How To' Guide

Pop-Up Wholefoods Collective, 2018

This is an evolving pamphlet at an early stage. Regular updates
will be made available at popupwholefoods.ie



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Contents

Introduction	5
What is a bulk buying club?	5
‘Pop-up wholefoods’ in action	6
About this pamphlet	7
Starting	8
Beginning with some basic questions	8
Six things to consider	8
People	10
Start small	10
Begin with people you know.....	11
Jobs and responsibilities	12
Adding new members	13
Member development	14
Principles	15
Agreeing core goals and values.....	15
Creating a written reference point	16
Product policies.....	16
Suppliers	18
A few wholesale basics	18
Choosing a supplier	19
Contacts for sourcing organic wholefoods	20
Co-op wholesalers.....	20
Independent wholesalers.....	20
Importing: pros and cons	21

Working with direct producers	22
Venue	23
Establishing a regular location	23
What you need from a venue	24
Detailed considerations	24
Finding a good venue	26
Being clear about your proposition	26
Supporting an alternative community space	27
Schedule	28
A few considerations	28
Setting a regular pattern	29
Systems	30
Stage 1 – Starting the cycle	31
Product listings	31
Applying a Deadline	32
Stage 2 – Wrapping up the group order	32
Collating individual orders	32
Decision – Allowing split cases?	33
Decision – A wrap-up meeting?	34
Stage 3 – Organising and preparing for delivery	35
Finalising the order	35
Volunteering shifts	35
Stage 4 – Delivery and distribution	36
The delivery note	36
Preparing for and taking delivery	37
Checking-in and allocation	38

Decision – Collection or delivery?	39
Paperwork and record-keeping	41
Finance	41
Reconciliation.....	41
Maintaining member balances	42
Surplus and reserves	43
Dealing between Sterling and Euro	44
Meetings and decision-making	44
Sustaining	46
Avoiding problems within the group	46
Work sharing issues	46
Founder member syndrome	47
Maintaining consistency	48
Conflict	49
Legalities	49
Data Protection	50
Growth and change.....	51
References and Further Reading	53
Acknowledgements	54

Introduction

What is a bulk buying club?

A bulk buying club combines the purchasing power of a group of people, allowing them to save money on retail prices by going straight to a wholesaler or producer.

Clubs of this type have been organised to purchase a wide range of products, from fresh fruit and vegetables to heating oil. The most common option is long-life *wholefoods*, like rice, pasta and pulses. These tend to be known as ‘dry goods’, reflecting the fact that they are relatively easy to manage and store, in contrast to more perishable products. This pamphlet is particularly aimed at people interested in operating a group with this focus.

In contrast to health food shops, with their full-time premises, shelves of stock and paid staff, bulk buying clubs do things very differently. Members receive a list of available products from which they *pre-order*. In most cases, they also *pre-pay* to create the funds to place a combined order for delivery. This is then divided amongst participating households at a convenient venue. In essence, these groups co-ordinate a simple ‘pop-up’ operation, suited to people who are happy to plan ahead and work collaboratively.

Bulk buying clubs are often seen as the most informal kind of food co-op. They are organised to suit their members and may be incredibly loose, such that a group of friends, neighbours or workmates come together ‘as and when’ to place an order; or they may operate on a fixed cycle, such as weekly or monthly deliveries. Whatever the specifics, they represent a means by which small groups of people can take collective charge of organising their own food supply, generally trading their volunteer labour for significant savings.

‘Pop-up wholefoods’ in action

It’s 1pm Thursday and a pallet stacked high with organic wholefoods is delivered to a low-key Dublin venue. There, a handful of buying club members assemble to check-in and split up the contents in line with individual orders. Thus, as the afternoon progresses, a space allocated to each person is gradually filled with an array of produce. Much of it could be found on the shelves of a good health food shop – organic grains, pulses, nuts, tinned tomatoes, eco-friendly washing up liquid, etc. – but the club’s ‘mark-up’ to cover costs is just 5%, whereas a business paying for full-time premises and staff might add 50% to wholesale prices. Moreover, many of the raw wholefoods, like rice and lentils, are being shared out amongst members as splits of 3kg pouches or 25kg sacks, far better value than the standard 500g bags generally found in a store - and less wasteful of packaging, too.

Into the evening, with the volunteer almost work done, further members of the group will arrive to collect their orders and, by 7pm, the space will have been tidied away, all trace of the day’s activities gone... until the next time.



This gives a flavour of a group in action, but the model is highly flexible. All bulk buying clubs differ – and all change over time, evolving to suit what works best for their members and the particular circumstances in which they operate.

One useful distinction is between stand-alone groups, concerned with bulk buying pure and simple, and those which make up one part of a wider project. Both can work just as well and there are plenty of good examples of each.

A second distinction in how groups are organised centres on whether a club is fundamentally aiming to be a *collective*, where decision-making and work responsibilities are shared by all, or whether it is structured with one or more people who are essentially its *managers*, the key do-ers, decision-makers and ‘owners’. Each approach has its upsides and downsides. The first is generally more complex to operate overall and this pamphlet considers some of the challenges around **sustaining** a group on these terms.

Finally, it’s important to mention that some bulk buying clubs use the format as a stepping stone to establishing a full-time food co-operative store. Thus, present day food co-ops in Dublin and Limerick have been through this evolution. However, most clubs have nothing like this in their sights. They are content to remain small-scale, nimble and free of the responsibilities attached to forming a limited company, hiring staff, maintaining premises and following all of the regulations attached to commercial food retailing. In short, the appeal of doing ‘pop up wholefoods’ lies precisely in its relative simplicity and modest demands.

About this pamphlet

Ireland is dotted with bulk buying clubs that are essentially hidden from public view – and from one another. Each has taken what is a straightforward idea and, for the most part, learnt by doing. This pamphlet comes out of the experience of people active in running bulk buying clubs and aims to provide an accessible DIY guide that might ease the path for others.

It forms part of a wider project at popupwholefoods.ie with three main aims:

- To raise the profile of the bulk buying club model in Ireland
- To actively assist the emergence of additional clubs
- To support better networking of groups in Ireland

This is an ongoing collaboration and work in progress and all feedback via the site is very welcome.

Starting

Beginning with some basic questions

Any prospective group will need clarity on several key points before it can think of attempting a first order.

Important issues fall under each of the six question words: Who?, Why?, What?, Where?, When? and How? The ease of addressing them will partly depend whether you are starting from scratch or looking to develop a club out of an existing project, where some of the necessarily building blocks may already be in place.

To organise the pamphlet, we’ve turned these question areas into six headings: **people, principles, suppliers, venue, schedule and systems**. We’ll set them out briefly below and in greater depth in the corresponding sections that follow.

Six things to consider

PEOPLE: Under this heading, we look at considerations around **who** might be part of your group at the start and who might be eligible to join later (i.e. what conditions you will have for membership). We also discuss the potentially thorny questions of: ‘Who will do the work?’ *and* ‘How can it be shared fairly?’

PRINCIPLES: This might sound very grand for a handful of people who want to save money buying good food together, but it’s important not to neglect properly talking through **why** you’re starting the group and agreeing a few core goals and priorities. Getting these clear – and written down – at the start can save a lot of trouble later. (See *Sustaining*)

SUPPLIERS: Choosing **what** products you’re going to source and who is going to supply them may be a straightforward decision or it may need quite a bit of

time and research. We discuss a range of supplier options and some pros and cons to consider.

VENUE: Securing a good location to receive your deliveries is at the very heart of both getting started *and* keeping things going. It's likely that **where** you base your group will be key to your success and may well form a big part of your identity as well.

SCHEDULE: A number of factors will shape **when** you'll start ordering and the frequency of your ongoing deliveries. We suggest that you should aim to maximise consistency and predictability in how you plan your schedule.

SYSTEMS: The practical mechanics of **how** you're going to gather and assemble orders, collect and make payments and receive and process deliveries need to be mapped out alongside getting the other foundations in place.

Of these six areas, what requires much time for one group may not greatly delay another, but it is unwise to skip over any of them in your initial planning. The better your foundations, the easier it will be to **sustain** your group once you're up and running.

People

The idea of forming a bulk buying club may sound like it would involve recruiting lots of people, but that’s probably not the case. Two related pieces of advice shine through forty years of published guides to running such a group:

- Start small
- If you can, start with people you already know

Start small

To make an order, you only need a few households willing to pool their spending power. In researching suppliers, you’ll find that the ‘minimum order’ levels they require for a delivery are not huge – all will come in at a few hundred euro. Thus, the baseline for your group could be five households – or three – or seven – so long as they want to significantly stock up on wholefoods. Seven orders averaging €200 each would be sure to cover the highest supplier minimum you’ll encounter; others could be reached with only half that level.

Along with a handful of friends, you could easily think in terms of making a ‘pilot’ order as you develop ideas about a more long-term approach. Taking up an account with a wholesaler is not like signing a contract that ties you to an ongoing arrangement. You order, you pay, you get your stuff. Maybe it’s the start of a beautiful relationship - but fidelity and ongoing commitment are not required. In short, what this means is that you don’t need to be overly cautious about trying out bulk buying. However, it’s wise not to move forward from any pilot without thoroughly addressing all of the key issues covered in this pamphlet, like sketching out some principles as your foundation.

To go beyond a single order, you need to take a different perspective on how many member households will be ‘enough’. In essence, you need to try and maintain a membership pool that’s sufficiently large that you can be confident

of always reaching the minimum level with your supplier, even if some members skip an order and others scale back after an earlier stock-up. Consistently reaching your minimum order level is key to keeping a **schedule**.

Begin with people you know

Trust will be a big factor in your bulk buying club. It’s something you can deepen over time with people you don’t know well, but starting with a group of friends or colleagues at the outset offers the benefit of building on an established bond.

One of the defining things about a bulk buying club is that it’s based on *pre-ordering* and, usually, *pre-payment*. From the perspective of the group, there’s a need to be confident that each person placing an order will come through with the funds to back it up. From the member angle, everyone needs to feel confident paying over a significant amount up-front, perhaps a week in advance of receiving anything.

Similar considerations apply if your club is aiming to operate as a collective and fairly share the work involved in managing orders and handling deliveries. This means your group won’t suit everyone attracted by the savings - each household that joins needs to be willing to commit time and energy in return. In a classic book, Tony Vellela gives an important caution against watering down the principle that *membership = volunteer work*:

“It is true that ... you need a certain number of orders to combine into a bulk order equal to a wholesale quantity. It is also true that you may experience some delays in locating the number of people required in order to begin. It is not true that someone who cannot contribute volunteer time would be doing your group a favour by purchasing from you” (1975, p24)

None of this is to say that you must make the *same* demands of everyone and cannot consider factors like childcare responsibilities or disability in allocating

work tasks. Everyone should be expected to make a *fair* contribution. While various operating tasks are suited to flexible timings, you are sure to need a team of daytime volunteers ‘mucking in’ on each delivery day. It is important to establish this core need with all members, including those who work full-time. Achieving a fair allocation of shifts may mean they need to occasionally take leave to cover their commitments to the group.

Thus, for a bulk buying *collective*, work-sharing is something you are best to embed as one of your **principles**. In essence, the basic requirement of *all* members is that they trade volunteer time for the savings they receive. If this is not clearly understood, you risk a situation where the bulk of work will quickly fall on members who are retired, studying, unemployed, etc. In turn, this can become one of the biggest challenges in **sustaining** a group.

Jobs and responsibilities

Specific areas of responsibility that one or more people in your group will need to cover in relation to each order include:

- Distributing the product listing and notice of the order deadline
- Assembling and finalising the group order from individual orders (which may involve co-ordinating splits and sharing)
- Placing the order with the supplier
- Organising volunteers and shifts for delivery day
- Generating totals for each household’s order, overseeing payments and keeping track of any credit balances (e.g. for items out of stock)

Other jobs may be needed less often:

- Recruitment and welcome of new members
- Facilitation of meetings and minute-taking

Several of these tasks will be further discussed under **systems**. However, it will be clear that not all are well suited to simply being rotated and that there is a case for a group having some ongoing ‘officer’ roles, such as that of a treasurer.

TIP: Although the convention of having the roles of a chairperson, secretary and treasurer might not suit the way your group wishes to work in practice, it may be necessary for these positions to be nominally held by specific individuals to meet the formalities of opening a bank account for the group.

Ultimately, whatever terms you prefer to use, it is likely that you will need two or three members willing to serve as co-ordinators and commit some volunteer time in relation to every order, as well as **systems** for making sure everyone does a fair share of delivery day volunteering and other tasks that can be rotated.

Thus, in establishing your group you need members who are willing to fulfil specific anchor roles and also to consider how you avoid a situation of ‘lock-in’ so that different people feel confident to learn and take on these roles in future to avoid undue dependency on the same people.

Adding new members

If you gather a solid core as your initial membership, it may be some time before you need to consider adding new members. Nevertheless, you are best to think ahead to this stage from the outset and be very clear about the criteria that will apply for bringing in further households and what they will need to know.

Bringing on board new members should mean providing them with a good understanding of the group they’re joining, not just in a practical sense but in terms of established priorities and **principles**. Thus, time should always be set aside to ensure that each new member receives a short but thorough introduction. Although recruits who are friends of existing members may have been primed with *some* information on the group, there is no substitute for a

clear and consistent run-through for everyone. Overlooking this type of ‘orientation’ when expanding the group can sow the seeds of confusion over its identity and direction at a later stage.

TIP: Drawing up a short handout to back up a new member introduction has several advantages. It can provide a standard structure to the session, summarise essential practicalities (e.g. the pre-order, pre-pay model and accompanying deadlines) and set out the group’s ethos.

Member development

Education and member development is a core principle of co-operative organisations. Those in your group can gain useful skills and confidence through their active involvement in running it. The more members you have who are able to share the range of tasks and appreciate what’s involved in running the group, the stronger it is likely to be. Regular trainings and skill-sharing sessions are therefore something that you should consider adopting as a feature of your group from an early stage.

It is quite possible that you’ll have members of the group who pass through quite briefly, perhaps moving on for new jobs. If they relocate with a good sense of a bulk buying club in operation they may feel confident to take the initiative elsewhere.

Principles

Agreeing core goals and values

The *mechanics* of running a bulk buying club are straightforward enough. However, the reasons **why** a group of people choose to do these things together are what define its identity and purpose.

Possible motivations for starting a bulk buying club include:

- Saving money
- Minimising environmental impacts
- Sourcing high quality food
- Learning more about the food system
- Supporting personal beliefs (e.g. veganism)
- Socialising with like-minded people
- Buying organic / gluten free products
- ...

Spending time identifying the things that are **most** important to your members at an early stage can bring people together and guide the way forward. Even amongst people starting with much in common, discussion and consensus-building will be beneficial. Failing to establish basic principles can sow the seeds of later problems.

A LESSON LEARNT

Bulk Buying Club X began in a multi-use building that hosted café nights serving vegan food. It only sourced plant-based products. Two years in, some members wanted the group to actively promote veganism while others didn't share this motivation. The founders had never put clear goals and principles on paper at the outset and, ultimately, the issue led to a split. This could probably have been avoided – or at least better handled – if they had.

Creating a written reference point

It makes a lot of sense to agree and write down a set of goals and values when establishing your group. This could form part of a ‘constitution’ or simply be a brief stand-alone list. The important thing is to have it available as a reference point for what has been agreed when needed. With this type of document, you have a good basis to ensure that any new members are familiar with the basic consensus points that the group has agreed and can sign-up accordingly.

Putting a set of common understandings and priorities on paper when starting your group is not about setting down ‘rules’ that become highly fixed. Instead, it’s a way to create a clear framework that can evolve over time to best serve your group. Having such a document can remove much of the potential for problems and make space for the fun aspects of the group to dominate.

TIP: If a bulk buying club is being started as a stepping stone to building a food co-operative store, it is very important to set out a clear statement of the planned direction of travel and to introduce all new members to the long-term goal as well as the operations of the group as they might first encounter them.

Product policies

Wholesale **suppliers** operate product policies that guide the lines they sell and how they source them – something your group may want to play close attention to. Ultimately, however, any wholesale catalogue will contain an array of options, from wholefoods to supplements, some ticking far more environmental and ethical boxes than others.

A health food shop may simply ‘stock what sells’ and, equally, a buying club could give members the discretion to buy any listed item at a standard ‘mark up’. However, as a group, you may well wish to take a more selective or weighted approach to what’s available. In essence, this means agreeing a few basic product policies of your own. Thus, you might opt to steer clear of whole

categories (e.g. bottled water), to avoid specific brands with negative associations, and/or to focus on products that meet certain criteria (e.g. only purchasing organic foods). Again, these decisions and the reasoning behind them are best clearly written down. In a world where ‘choice’ is held up as a universal good, limiting choice through a more conscious approach calls for explanation.

Suppliers

A few wholesale basics

A wholefoods wholesaler will buy thousands of products in large quantities for onward sale, usually to retailers like health food stores. When a bulk buying club begins dealing with a wholesaler, there are a few key ideas to become familiar with. First of all, a wholesaler’s catalogue will list prices for a *case* of a particular item, as packaged by the producer. For example, passata is likely to be listed as a case of 12 bottles, many plant milks will be listed as a case of 6 tetrapacks, etc. Quantities of 6 and 12 are the most common case sizes you’re likely to encounter overall, but there is a plenty of variety with the type of item. You will need to adopt the language of cases with a wholesaler because you will need to place your order in those terms. That’s true even if your supplier permits orders for less than a full case (i.e. a split). Thus, purchasing 3 from 6 is a case quantity of 0.5.

Another key thing with a wholesale listing is that prices are shown *excluding* VAT. Although most food items are exempt, that isn’t the case for personal care and household products. Items liable to VAT will be indicated with a code or symbol and this add-on needs to become part of your thinking - and your price calculations for these type of products.

Wholesale catalogues are designed for retailers, not members of bulk buying clubs so, if you’re circulating a copy to members ‘as is’, you should anticipate needing to give them extra written information and guidance on how information is presented.

Moreover, you should expect a wholesaler to want payment up-front when you first place an order, something that may relax when you have a well-established history with them.

Choosing a supplier

Bulk buying clubs in Ireland have multiple options when it comes to suppliers so finding one needn't be a worry. However, it's also wise to avoid jumping in too quickly without researching the pros and cons of different choices.

The best supplier for your group will largely depend on what and how you want to bulk buy and factors related to your location. Most wholesale suppliers will arrange free delivery in return for a substantial sale, which is precisely what your group purchase is able to offer them.

TIP: The best way to approach choosing your supplier is simply to pick up the phone and make some calls. It's best to write down a few simple notes before you start as a memory prompt for any questions you want to cover. Think of these conversations as a bit like private interviews. You shouldn't share information from one supplier when you make enquiries with another.

If you're located close to a supplier and have someone in the group with a vehicle suitable to collect an order then this may give more flexibility than arranging a delivery according to a supplier's fixed schedules. However, having the option to receive a delivery will be important unless you're absolutely sure someone will be able to collect every order.

Some questions to explore with a possible supplier would include:

- what is the minimum order amount for free delivery?
- what scope is there to order split cases?
- how far in advance would an order need to be placed?
- what day of the week would you be able to receive a delivery?
- how much can you narrow down the 'time window' during which your goods might arrive?
- how would you organise payment for the goods?

You should also discuss your planned location for receiving a delivery and check the type of vehicle that would be used (which will usually be a big truck, not a van). If there is limited access or frequent parking congestion issues, you need to explore these factors and get clear what will work. The next section discusses **venue** considerations in more detail.

Contacts for sourcing organic wholefoods

Co-op wholesalers

There are a number of wholesale suppliers in Britain operating as workers’ co-operatives which are familiar dealing with buying clubs in Ireland. Linking with a co-op is often a good proposition as they will have the clearest understanding of groups based on people collaborating together and sharing the work, which is just what they do themselves. They’re also likely to have the strongest ethical values underpinning what they do.

- **Suma**, Elland, West Yorkshire, England – suma.coop
- **Infinity Foods**, Brighton, West Sussex, England – infinityfoods.coop
- **Essential Trading**, Bristol, England – essential-trading.coop
- **Greencity Wholefoods**, Glasgow, Scotland - greencity.coop

Independent wholesalers

Although it isn’t a co-operative, Ireland does have a good independent supplier of wholefoods:

- **Independent Irish Health Foods**, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork – iihealthfoods.ie

IIHF primarily serves the small health food shop sector. As such, buying clubs are not their target market and receive less favourable terms than retailers. Nevertheless, it's the best option amongst wholefood wholesalers *based in Ireland*. Unfortunately, two of the three major companies in the market are simply small parts of vast global food corporations and, as such, do not represent any kind of alternative supply chain.

Given the large number of organic producers across continental Europe, you may also be able to find a Eurozone wholesaler in, say, France or the Netherlands whose offering is attractive, although this may call for additional language skills within your group, depending on how multilingual the supplier's operation is.

Importing: pros and cons

Having an order shipped across the sea may seem a big deal compared to using a supplier linked by the road network, but ultimately this may involve less food miles than opting for a wholesaler based at the other end of the country. Receiving a shipment may have other advantages, too. While an Irish supplier will want to fit your delivery into their established weekly transport schedule, which may not be ideal for your group, a non-Irish supplier will simply book a haulage company and this can give you much greater control over the drop day and time. You should be able to narrow this to a two hour window (e.g. 2pm-4pm) on a date of your choosing.

Small-scale importing from another EU country raises no customs issues. However, for any supplier who you'll be unable to deal with in English, you should consider issues of dependency on those individuals in your group with the necessary language skills.

With a *British* wholesaler, the catalogue will obviously be priced in Pounds Sterling and orders will be payable in that currency. Thus, for a group in the Eurozone this necessarily involves a little more complexity and will also make

operations subject to currency fluctuations. This is further discussed in the section on **systems**.

Naturally, a non-Irish supplier will not place any focus on Irish sourcing so exploring some direct producer links may be necessary to balance this.

Working with direct producers

Dealing directly with growers and other producers in your locality is definitely an option if your group can make orders at the kind of level that represents a good financial proposition for such a supplier.

For example, one Irish producer of organic rapeseed oil was able to offer a bulk buying club a good price on a purchase of 4 x 5 litre containers, with delivery by courier included.

Clearly, when compared to simply working through a wholesaler, assembling a number of options from local producers for your listing will require particular effort in terms of establishing contacts, negotiating arrangements and making payments. However, for groups keen to support producers on the island and who are operating at sufficient scale, there are great possibilities for establishing these type of relationships.

Venue

For a new, stand-alone group without a venue, this section explores the key issue of finding one. A good choice may prove absolutely central to your success.

If you are considering starting a bulk buying club as part of an established project with its own premises, this section points to a number of things to consider.

Establishing a regular location

Although doing ‘pop-up wholefoods’ means avoiding the cost and commitment of permanent premises this doesn’t take anything away from the importance of **where** you will receive and handle deliveries.

Some groups starting out will need to pay for a venue, others may have access to a space they can use for free, albeit one that may not be an *ideal* venue when factors other than expense are considered.

Securing a *consistent* location for a series of delivery dates can bring several benefits:

- It means you can plan ahead in a relaxed way and keep to a schedule, rather than always being ‘ad hoc’
- It allows you to evolve and develop systems that can get the most out of the venue, potentially reducing the work for everyone involved
- It provides a straightforward arrangement for your supplier/haulier, avoiding the potential confusion of frequent chopping and changing.
- It contributes to the identity of your group

What you need from a venue

A delivery location will need to be available for several hours on the scheduled day. Volunteers will need significant clear space for checking-in a delivery and a few creature comforts, such as access to a bathroom and tea making facilities. Whilst this could, in theory, be provided by a members’ home or garage, this approach may also create an unhelpful dependence on a single individual and an awkwardness that a more neutral space would avoid. Moreover, many residential streets and addresses would simply be unsuited to the role. Crucially, your venue needs to be one where a large truck can stop very close by and where you will *comfortably* be able to get the contents of one or more pallets inside for checking-in and allocation.

Detailed considerations

From the point of view of access, the outside of your proposed venue is as important as the inside. Some things to consider about the location are:

- How near can a lorry pull up in a best case scenario? Are there possible issues to consider with congestion or parking obstructions on certain days and times?
- After unloading, how far might a driver need to haul a pallet truck of your goods to get them to the doors of your venue? How flat is the terrain? (Getting it from a main street to a side road on good surface may be okay, provided it’s not too far).
- Is there wide, flat (or gently ramped) access to the venue suited to getting a 1.2m x 1m pallet inside? Or will you have to site a pallet outside and get all of the boxes and sacks indoors?
- What safety issues do you need to consider while your team is receiving unloading the pallet? Will there be other users of the building as well?
- Is there scope to recycle cardboard on-site or must it be taken away?

Within the building, an ideal space would be at ground level with no steps and very close to the access doors (ideally double doors). Health and safety again

needs to be a key factor and, particularly if you will be splitting and weighing out from wholefood packs, it's important to carefully think through practicalities in terms of food hygiene.

Things to consider about your indoor space:

- If the pallet can't be brought directly to space you will actually use for checking-in, how far away will it be dropped? Is equipment available (e.g. a load carrier) that could help relay the goods? Will they be secure?
- Will there be plenty of space in your sorting area to spread out all the boxes and sacks from the delivery and create distinct areas to allocate each member's goods?
- Is there plenty of extra room for members to move around safely and work on the order? (A table or two may be handy, but too much furniture is likely to make the space less usable – unless it can be temporarily moved out)
- Are there good facilities for washing and drying measuring equipment (e.g. pans for weigh scales, scoops and jugs)?
- Are there facilities for making hot drinks? Nearby toilets and hand washing?
- Is any form of storage available for items you'd otherwise have to transport back and forth for each delivery?

Doing 'pop-up wholefoods' means creating something as near as possible to a small warehouse for a few hours, as and when needed. It's unlikely you'll find anywhere without some significant issues that you'll always have to work around, but time and effort is well spent on securing the best base-building you can.

Unless you have access to a suitable space for free, paying to use a venue may well be your group's most significant regular cost. The need to cover this expense could well influence other key decisions for the group.

Finding a good venue

First of all, keep an open mind.

Commercial spaces tend to come with commercial costs, but you may drop lucky in finding somewhere affordable due to limited demand.

More likely, community venues of various kinds will be most workable and affordable – church halls, community centres, art and dance studios, yoga studios and so forth.

The more structured the venue, the more you may need to fulfil specific requirements – like having public liability insurance for your group (which can be a significant expense). This may be true of many council-funded community centres, for example.

Since nicely polished floors can be marked by a load carrier or muddied by lots of back-and-forth on a wet day, practicalities may well mean you’ll get on best with a somewhat *relaxed and less than pristine* venue.

Being clear about your proposition

Consider what kind of proposition your group represents *from the point of view of a venue*. You want to pay very little and use them only occasionally, yet your operation could be quite dominant and disruptive of a multi-use space while you’re getting a delivery inside. From this perspective, your group may be hardly attractive, yet maybe it could offer something more positive. Is the organisation running the building interested food, health or social justice issues? Could your group provide the venue with something useful – like organising supplies of Fairtrade coffee, bulk cleaning products and recycled toilet roll?

TIP: You’ll probably find it helpful to write up a sheet that covers what your group needs and what it can offer, plus contact details, and take this with you when trying to start conversations with potential venues. If you find someone

you can speak with directly, it’s a handy aid. If you need to settle for leaving a message for someone else, your sheet could work as a basic introduction to your group.

Supporting an alternative community space

All bulk buying clubs are shaped by their venue - and some are able to support or even anchor an alternative space in their locality. Thus, from small beginnings, a group can go on to play an active role in *creating* a new, non-profit community amenity.

A great example is Common Ground in Bray, Co. Wicklow, where the monthly bulk buying club is a core part of the make-up of a multi-use community space, operating alongside other activities with a focus on arts and wellbeing. Membership fees from dozens of local people plus the mark-up on their purchases of bulk foods form a big part of the regular income needed to sustain the venue. Order collections are organised to coincide with a Saturday afternoon market event that provides a strong social dimension and helps link the various strands of Common Ground together.

For more see: commongroundbray.com

Schedule

Some bulk buying clubs operate weekly, especially where fresh produce is involved. Others may spring into action just a few times a year to stock up on long-life goods.

It's quite possible that **when** your group should order will only become clear with time and evolution. Thus, a buying club may begin with monthly orders but, as members become familiar with planning ahead, they may come to favour bi-monthly deliveries as sufficient (and less work!) Equally, a group may begin with less frequent orders and build towards a monthly schedule as it grows its membership and can be more certain of sustaining this pattern.

For a very small group, it's possible to simply conduct an online poll to decide the next delivery date that best suits. For larger numbers, a more structured and predictable approach is likely to serve you better once you've identified the day and time that will most suit your members. Thus, a good way forward is to plan and circulate an advance schedule covering several months that gives everyone certainty about what will happen when – and then review how it has been going a few orders in.

A few considerations

Consistently reaching your supplier's minimum order level is key to keeping a schedule. You need to be confident that when the product listing is circulated to members of your group, the orders you receive by the deadline will comfortably exceed the required total. Aiming to order too frequently at the start can make this difficult. If your members use their first order to stock up, it may be a while before they need big quantities again. At the same time, if they know they can place another order soon after, they are more likely to opt to spread their purchases. Scheduling is therefore a balancing act, with the goal

of making sure your ordering doesn't falter and that you can proceed on your planned dates.

A major factor in planning your schedule is your supplier's own pattern of issuing their catalogue, which are often bi-monthly, and available perhaps two weeks in advance. Thus, the March/April issue may be available around mid-February. The prices and special offers become applicable for orders made from 1st March and will hold good only to 30th April.

Setting a regular pattern

Giving key dates a regular pattern in the calendar makes them easier to remember and may well assist securing a regular booking with a venue.

The less frequently a group orders, the more important it becomes that members know the dates well in advance so that they can plan ahead and get dates in their diaries to avoid missing an order.

One group orders bi-monthly, on odd-numbered months (January, March, May, July, September and November). Their delivery day is always the fourth Thursday, and they finalise the group order a week prior on the third Thursday. All member orders are due by 8pm on the Sunday before that – with a two day period in between for what they call ‘splits and shares’, to try and make up full cases of any items not fully covered.

In this way, the group can issue its members with a summary table setting out all the relevant dates for the full year - when orders are due, when payments need to be made and what the delivery date will be.

To allow for fine-tuning, a new draft schedule is projected forward and reviewed at their annual meeting before the next series of dates is firmly set. However, the initial date pattern was chosen to steer as clear as possible of bank holidays and little adjustment has been needed over several years.

Systems

Groups can manage the different stages of an order cycle effectively with a few basic systems. This section will discuss the main possibilities on **how** tasks can be accomplished and also look at some practical decisions facing a bulk buying club which will shape the potential steps needing to be taken. Core processes can be considered in terms of 4 stages:

STAGE 1 – STARTING THE CYCLE

Make product listings available – **potentially after customisation**
(Allowing a period for members to draw up their orders to a deadline)



STAGE 2 – WRAPPING UP THE GROUP ORDER

Bring together individual orders – **potentially including managing case sharing**
Finalise and communicate individual member totals



STAGE 3 – ORGANISING AND PREPARING FOR DELIVERY

Collect / await payments
Place order with supplier and confirm delivery date / Pay up-front
Co-ordinate delivery day volunteers



STAGE 4 – DELIVERY AND DISTRIBUTION

Receive, check-in and allocate delivered goods – **potentially handling splits**
Facilitate collection / arrange distribution

Stage 1 – Starting the cycle

To begin an order cycle you'll be looking to provide all members with listings of available products, a means of placing an order and a firm deadline by which they should do so if they want to be included.

Product listings

Although a copy of your wholesaler's catalogue can simply be circulated to members of your group once available, this may not be an ideal document in various ways. It is likely to include sections that may be impractical for you to handle, e.g. chilled and frozen goods. In addition, there will be further qualifiers if your group has identified any **principles** or policies that rule out certain product categories or brands. Ultimately, the sheer range of options presented may feel overwhelming. Thus, there may be benefits to circulating a pared back version of the full catalogue to members, something that could be an option if your supplier makes available a version of the list in Excel format or you can make use of a PDF editing tool to trim away irrelevant pages. Working from an Excel sheet is especially useful for handling formulas such as converting prices between Pounds Sterling and Euro or incorporating VAT on applicable items, giving members the clearest possible pricing.

Naturally, you should only consider creating a custom listing if it is something you are confident can be sustained and the task is one that several group members could readily take on. Failing that, it may be more viable to circulate the supplier's listing and a clear covering note that outlines which sections are applicable, the exchange rate that will be used and a note on things like VAT, special offer prices and split cases (see **suppliers**).

The most important thing is offering a high level of clarity to everyone participating so that they can put together orders that are complete, unambiguous and as easy as possible to handle for the person who will take charge of collation, rather than creating a need for lots of follow-up.

Applying a Deadline

A *meaningful* deadline for ordering is vital to keep a group’s **schedule** on track towards a delivery. It also establishes basic fairness across the membership. Once the group’s established deadline passes, the volunteer taking charge of collation should be able to complete this work in a time limited period, something that all members should respect by meeting the deadline – or at least only hoping for a small amount of latitude such as an email trickling in five minutes beyond.

Accepting late orders can mean significant extra work for a collator. While discretion is obviously needed for exceptional circumstances, a somewhat rigid approach to dates and times for submissions will generally need to hold as core part of a group’s culture.

Stage 2 – Wrapping up the group order

Collating individual orders

A core system that your group will need is a means of collating individual orders from each of your members into one overall order that can be placed with your supplier. This is so central to bulk buying clubs that specialist software has been created to do the job. However, purchasing or subscribing to this type of package will obviously add to your costs. Especially for a smaller group, the task may be perfectly manageable through a spreadsheet format document (a row for each item, a column for every member and the cell representing their order quantity). If the spreadsheet is shared online, e.g. GoogleDocs, then all members can input their items in real time and see what others are ordering. In this way, the group as a whole can essentially manage the collation process, save for someone assuming responsibility for a little oversight and final tidying. However, the larger the numbers collaborating, the more unwieldy this becomes and it can be difficult for members to check what

they have signed up to. It is also very easy for a number to be accidentally entered on the wrong line as an unintended order.

An alternate approach is that the group nominates a volunteer collator for each order cycle to receive individual orders and draw them together into a whole. Various systems can be adopted to accomplish this, but obviously any such solution puts greater responsibility on a single individual.

TIP: More technically sophisticated ways of collating orders may be available to you if your group has the capacity to customise existing online tools available as free / open source utilities. These include:

<http://foodclub.org>

<http://www.openfoodsource.org>

Decision – Allowing split cases?

The simplest bulk buying club model avoids taking on splitting packs and sacks, with each household needing to buy full case quantities of items outright. This is administratively straightforward but can be limiting for member households. That’s why many groups look to find ways to bring together people with an interest in the same item so that they can share



a case between them that can’t otherwise be split. (For those items where a wholesaler is willing to provide a split quantity as part of a delivery, e.g. half a

case, this may remove any need for multiple members to share these products to make them viable to order).

With tinned goods, bottles and jars, breaking up and sharing out cases on delivery day can be part of the general allocation process into individual orders. To split bulk pouches of rice, oats and nuts is a bigger step, requiring weighing equipment, the allocation of dedicated volunteer time and a few clear procedures. Dealing with splits of heavy sacks or large bulk containers of household products, like washing up liquid, raises yet further practical issues and hazards to be managed.

Since splits involve more work (both on delivery day and in terms of finance) a key question for your group is the capacity to take them on relative to members' general desire to have as much flexibility as possible.

Decision – A wrap-up meeting?

One approach to handling splits and shares is to have a specific meeting to finalise the order, working through the list of items that still need more sharers in pursuit of a little collaboration and creativity to get as many items as possible over the line. Such a meeting can also be used to confirm final balances due and collect payments.

On the plus side, this type of meeting can strengthen the social aspect of the group and sense of working together, as well as ensuring that all money due has been secured by the time it ends. Conversely, attending a meeting is an additional time commitment for everyone involved and, if there are quite a number of cases for sharing, it is difficult to make the meeting short. If funds are collected as cash, all payments will need to be receipted and careful consideration should be given to the security of the funds collected.

It's equally possible to look for all payments electronically and use an online forum to work through items needing more sharers (at least if your group has the technical capacity to set one up). On balance, this may outweigh the

benefits of a ‘splits and shares’ meeting, especially once your group is well established. However, early in the life of your group, a meeting that allows all members to connect and address any issues is likely to be more valuable.

Stage 3 – Organising and preparing for delivery

The third stage is concerned with committing to the order with the supplier (usually a web-based process) and organising the necessary volunteers to meet the delivery.

Finalising the order

Adopting a rigid principle of pre-payment is fundamentally about securing the funds to pay a wholesaler *before* goods are ordered. Almost all groups operate this model when getting started and most stick with it, even when a supplier may offer greater latitude and is willing to invoice for payment after delivery. By only ever including a member’s order once payment has been fully received, the group as a whole is shielded from risk. In cases where payment doesn’t materialise to the required schedule a member should rightly expect that their items will be dropped.

Volunteering shifts

For a group running as a collective, it’s wise to establish the principle of everyone volunteering at an early stage and evolve clear systems where hours worked are recorded and can be referenced against whatever baseline requirement your group needs to operate. First and foremost, this is information each member needs about their own volunteering so they can self-monitor. If there are group members who are falling down on their commitment and not addressing it, taking it up as a group becomes easier if there’s an objective measure of the problem.

TIP: In introducing new members, always be clear and direct that volunteering is at the core of the group and that everyone needs to play a full part. If possible, try and get every new member to volunteer on the delivery day for their first order so that it becomes a firm part of their first experience of the group, one that combines working together and socialising with others.

If you’re working to a firm delivery schedule then there is no reason to wait to line up shifts until everything else for the order is in place.

Stage 4 – Delivery and distribution

The delivery note

Before the delivery arrives, your supplier should send you details of what has been packed for dispatch as an electronic delivery note. This will let you know if any items were out of stock or short on quantity and, thus, exactly what to expect. With this information, you can produce paperwork for delivery day as a reference point for working through your goods when they arrive. Ideally, you’ll want two types of document – firstly, an overall list showing each item you’re expecting, with information on which members have ordered it and how much; secondly, an individual ‘pick sheet’ for each member of what they ordered and how much. In this way, you can use the first list to check-in the delivery *and* allocate items around the room. The pick sheets would then be used at the end of sorting as a double-check for each individual to make sure all items have been allocated to them correctly.

TIP: Although the supplier’s delivery note gives all the information needed to check goods in, it provides nothing useful for allocating them to individuals. It’s not efficient to do these as two separate stages (literally handling everything twice) when they can be combined. However, you will need to generate your own paperwork to do this.

Preparing for and taking delivery

Set up the room you'll be using so that you'll have as much space as possible to spread out the delivery for checking-in. Also create a distinct place for each member's goods to be allocated to (e.g. a series of labelled produce crates).

TIP: Sequence the allocation spaces alphabetically so that the layout is easy for anyone working on checking in and distributing produce around the room. The relative areas needed may differ significantly by order size.

If you will be doing any weighing out, site a table in well-lit spot to act as your weigh station with scales, bags, tape, etc. Make sure there is sufficient space beside it to gather the items that are for weighing and which therefore can't be immediately allocated to individuals. This is all part of the preparation you can do before any goods actually arrive.

It's possible that a smaller delivery from an Irish supplier won't have needed to be stacked onto a pallet and will come to you more loosely, but any bigger load that has been transported any significant distance will have been tightly stacked and covered in an a special wrapping film to keep it secure.

Unless you can get the pallet directly into the space where you'll be checking in and sorting the goods, you'll need to break down the assembled pallet first and transfer goods into the space in manageable loads. At first you'll be dealing with the lighter items that were placed on top, while the heaviest items will have been first onto the pallet and so will come off last. Use of sound manual handling techniques is important and load carriers or other types of wheeled trolleys are especially useful.

Checking-in and allocation

To prepare for checking in, it's good if you can cluster similar types of items together as you unload them from the pallet and bring them into your space – e.g. an area for canned goods, jars and bottles, another for plant milks, one for pouches of wholefoods, another for household and personal care items, etc.



Laying boxes out with the product information uppermost can speed along identifying what you have, so some may be best on their sides. This basic organising need only be relatively rough and ready, not concerned with the detail but more the accessibility of what you have to smooth along checking it in and getting it allocated.

At this stage, one person can take responsibility for reading down the list of items for checking in and the names of who they should be allocated to while other team members take the more active role of locating and distributing these items around the room.

TIP: To organise the pallet for transportation, it's likely that there will have been a number of boxes specifically used to bundle together the looser oddments in your order. Thus, pouches of wholefoods (e.g. 1kg, 2.5kg) are likely to be gathered together in this way and the same applies if your wholesaler allows you to order split cases. These oddments boxes may have originally contained other items and been re-used at the warehouse for efficient packing. To spot them look for signs of their having been resealed by hand rather than having a standard factory seal on them. It's important to

identify these boxes at an early stage of checking in because what’s inside them may bear no relation to what the outside of the box says and they will likely contain a miscellany of different things. Whereas you’ll want to keep factory sealed boxes intact unless your check in list says you need to share out the contents, the resealed boxes need to be opened up at the outset so that you can be sure to include what’s inside in your checking in. If you’re checking in and find you’ve question marked a few items on your list as not found, it’s very possible that you’ve missed an oddments box that combines them.

Once *all* items have been checked in and allocated to distinct crates or spaces for each member household an important second step should be followed. Every household allocation should be reviewed and marked off against its printed pick sheet to make sure it is correct and complete. Only then is it time for collections or home deliveries to begin.

TIP: Whether you incline toward a collection or delivery model, as discussed in the next section, it’s wise to operate a policy that no-one’s allocation of goods leaves the venue until everyone’s allocation has been fully checked-off as matching their pick sheet. It’s inevitable that items will occasionally be misallocated. So long as everything that arrived on the delivery remains in a single space, this can generally be quickly resolved. However, if the goods allocated to some members have already begun their onward journey before a query arises, this could mean that a misplaced item is already on the move. Resolving the issue at this stage will become a lot more hassle. The possibility is therefore best avoided by prioritising checking *all* orders over moving any out of the space.

Decision – Collection or delivery?

It is most common for a bulk buying club’s delivery venue to also act as the collection point for member households to pick up their orders. However,

some groups operate on the basis of arranging onward delivery rather than pick-ups.

There are a number of factors to consider around these two models. In addition, the availability of the venue you are using may be a key factor. Operating on a collection basis will require you to have space available well beyond the time the actual sorting of the order is complete, so that you can offer a defined time window during which members who have not been volunteering can come to the venue and pick-up their order (e.g. in the early evening to cover the period after many of your members will be finishing work). As you'll need someone to commit to remaining present with the remaining orders, it's best to try and make this collection window as tight as possible without it becoming inconvenient. You also need to be clear what flexibility might be available if someone can't make it on the delivery day itself. If there is some secure storage available at the venue then this may offer an option – but may also mean an extra volunteer trip to the venue to facilitate a pick-up outside of the defined time. Under a collection model, you are essentially looking for a strong commitment from your members to prioritise collecting during the defined window and very limited expectation of special arrangements. In practice, your members will likely help one another out so that not everyone needs to turn out every time.

A delivery model means that once all orders are fully checked, you are able to move them out swiftly for delivery. This minimises the time you need to have a dedicated space available at your venue, which may be especially desirable if someone is offering their home as the sorting space. However, the downside may well lie in all of the flexibility needed to drop deliveries to individual homes at suitable times and the back-up planning needed if anything goes amiss. Naturally, there are more logistical issues to consider with this model than each household simply being responsible for pick-up.

Paperwork and record-keeping

Each member household should get a copy of their pick sheet, with any items marked as not having arrived or being short quantity, etc. However, it's also important for the group itself to retain a duplicate record of this information, so that any credits can be applied and there's a reference for any later queries. Scanning or photographing pick sheets can provide an easy solution.

At the end of the delivery day sorting process, the group's overall check-in sheet should be marked up to show each item as arrived and allocated, with any absences or discrepancies clearly marked. Records of the completed pick sheets will provide a cross-reference from the perspective of each member household. These documents will become very important for the volunteer(s) with the task of tying up finance for the order.

Finance

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the accounting term used for the process of working through differences between what was ordered, what was billed and what was actually delivered. There is no glamour to be found here and sometimes the task is downright fiddly and calls for a good deal of patience.

As soon as the group receives the delivery note from the wholesaler, it's possible to see from the zero quantities any items which were out of stock at the warehouse and for which credit will need to be given to the member who ordered it. Occasionally, an item may not be strictly out of stock but less than the full amount ordered is being sent – e.g. your group ordered two cases and the wholesaler only had one in stock to send. These are not easy to spot on a

delivery note unless clearly flagged so these differences may only become obvious during check-in on delivery day.

The delivery note reflects what the wholesaler *believes* they have sent. It will give a final total accounting for any zero or short quantities at the warehouse. However, checking in on delivery day may well turn up the odd human error through mispicks – the wrong item sent or the wrong quantity. Your wholesaler will have a system for making a claim to register any such discrepancies and adjust your final balance. This needs to be done within a specified time. Credit will be given on your next order if your group has already paid for anything not received. Keep in mind that the delivery note only deals with a specific order and the total shown won't reflect any credit the group may have from the previous occasion. Thus, your group needs to keep a clear record of what was paid to the supplier and any balance carrying forward.

Maintaining member balances

This need for keeping careful track of the group's credit balance also applies at the level of individual members who may have missed out on items they ordered. Thus, as well as recording payments received from members before the order was placed, it's also important to have good, clear records around any revisions to members' final totals after the delivery so as to keep track of credits due. Making sure that this is done efficiently and that accurate credit balances are notified is important in cementing trust around the way money is handled in the group.

Naturally, running finances tightly and keeping everything as transparent as possible is a bigger challenge for larger groups. However, even a small buying club can readily have a five figure sum pass through its accounts in the course of a year. Thus, the role of treasurer should not be entered into lightly. There is no getting away from the need for the post-holder to be someone to who is good on detail and able to be patient and methodical in ironing out discrepancies. However, rather than fall too heavily on one member's

shoulders this area of work can benefit from good supportive oversight, such as someone acting as a financial checker to regularly give everything a second look.

Surplus and reserves

Applying a percentage add-on to all members’ order totals is a common way for a group to generate a surplus on the money that will be needed simply to pay for the order itself. These funds may be particularly needed to cover venue hire costs. However, even a group with very limited overheads should still look toward having sufficient money available for minor running costs like banking charges, rolls of sticky tape and printing, while also building up a ‘rainy day fund’ in the form of reserves. Such funds can cushion the group against the unexpected, such as losing use of its regular venue and needing to pay more to cover alternate arrangements.

A key finance role within the group therefore lies in keeping on top of the funds needing to be raised from operations and those actually being generated so that it’s possible to adjust tack on a timely basis. There is no need for a group to carry significant reserves but it is equally important that they do not become depleted below a certain target level that has been agreed. Reserves equivalent to the operating costs of three orders might be seen as a good safety net.

TIP: It’s vital to make a distinction between reserves and any credits held on behalf of members for items not delivered. Credit funds belong to the individuals concerned, not the group, and therefore money in the bank will not be a direct reflection of the group’s reserves without first allowing for these.

Dealing between Sterling and Euro

If your group works in Euro but opts for a **supplier** working in Pounds Sterling, or vice versa, you will need some systems for dealing with currency rates and the way these fluctuate. Although prices for a product listing can be converted using an estimated rate, the final exchange rate payable will only be known when payment is made. It is quite possible to adjust final pricing of members' orders once this is known, but this makes their final totals unpredictable and creates significant additional finance work. A more streamlined system is to fix on an estimated rate, allowing for bank transfer fees, and absorb any difference from the final figure. This needs to be approached cautiously. It is important to consider what kind of rate a bank will apply, as opposed to the market exchange rates that can be looked up online. A bank rate is likely to be in the region of 3% higher than market rate. Unless the group is carrying decent reserves that can readily absorb fluctuations, it's wise to build in an extra buffer on top of this rate to avoid any risk of gathering insufficient funds. However, where a group has healthy reserves the exchange rate can be approached with less caution and the rate set at a level which may well result in giving back to members rather than accumulating further funds.

TIP: The information members receive should state what conversion rate is being used. By also explaining why it may be somewhat higher than the rates often mentioned on the evening news, you can help avoid any mistaken assumptions.

Meetings and decision-making

Some bulk buying clubs are highly practical, aiming to be streamlined and take up as little of their busy members' lives as necessary. Others have more of an orientation toward discussion and education around food issues, so put aside more time for members to meet and engage. Each group is unique and will necessarily evolve its own character. However, the small scale and collaborative nature of the model is one that creates a ready opening for use

of consensus-decision making, an alternate approach to merely voting on any issues that arise and having whatever forms the majority position hold full sway over minority views. Anyone seeking to explore the possibilities of a consensus-based approach will find useful additional materials via popupwholefoods.ie/resources

Sustaining

The pop-up wholefoods model described in this pamphlet is fairly easy to start and can certainly be approached with only a short lifespan in mind. However, assuming that a group is aiming to sustain itself over an extended period then its members will need to stay attentive to a number of possible risks. These mainly come from a gradual slippage into patterns and routines that become undermining, such as a narrow reliance on too few people or a relaxation of important group agreements.

Avoiding problems within the group

Groups that strive for an equal and democratic culture are swimming against the grain of the way that so many organisations in society work. Despite very strong and sincere efforts from those involved, it is all too easy for a buying club to be pulled toward imbalances and inequalities over time.

Work sharing issues

If everyone is a co-owner of a group, then everyone also needs to be a co-worker. The principle that everyone volunteers should be put at the heart of establishing such a group and how it is explained to anyone recruited to it. Thus, no-one should be signed up to a group without consciously and clearly subscribing to the principle of contributing their fair share of volunteering – and no-one should be able to hold continued membership without delivering on it in practice.

A strong, clear group culture can avoid the need for members to do much self-policing in terms of delivery day volunteering. Even without a formal rota system, transparently recording and circulating who has volunteered on recent

orders, perhaps in a simple visual form, makes it plain to all who is due to take their turn.

However, rotating *ongoing* roles within the group will tend to be more challenging. Therefore, it's important that all members have the best possible insights into what's involved in the work of operating the group beyond delivery day volunteering. This may be far from obvious. Thus, it can be extremely helpful for anyone who has undertaken a particular role for the group to be part of maintaining what's effectively a written 'job description' that sums up the various tasks involved. It is a lot less daunting for someone to step up into a role if there is a good sketch available to them of what would be involved. Encouragement and support to take on an unfamiliar role should also be firmly part of a group's culture.

For the long-term health of a group, it is important to avoid a situation where two or three highly active members are, in effect, 'service providers' for a layer of largely passive consumers. If a group veers towards this situation it risks locking in a range of problems from over dependency on certain individuals to lingering resentment at the load not being fairly shared to feelings of weariness and 'burn-out'.

Avoiding a situation where members feel reluctant to step up goes hand-in-hand with guarding against undue reluctance to step down...

Founder member syndrome

This refers a situation where those who began the group struggle to let their 'baby' go and seek to keep hold of disproportionate control and influence. This is common across all kinds of groups. Sometimes it is addressed with a provision in a constitution document that limits how long someone can hold office before they need to 'retire' and take a time out. However, this is creating a formula out of something that should ideally be more instinctive within a small group.

The key initiative-takers in starting a group deserve to be acknowledged as such and they may have plenty of wisdom to share, but part of that wisdom needs to be recognising their own need to step back and let others shape the future direction.

As a minimum, a group’s structures should ensure that its annual meeting always includes a proper discussion around who takes on key roles so as to avoid responsibilities simply rolling forward because someone remains willing and able to keep fulfilling them. When that person is seen to have done a good job, making a change to someone unfamiliar with a role may not be the obvious option but it could well be to the group’s benefit in the long-run.

Maintaining consistency

Trust is a key ingredient in the culture of a bulk buying club but there are real dangers if it is allowed to outweigh established agreements. Thus, a group requiring pre-payment should always be willing to drop orders not paid on time, even from established members with no previous issues. To do otherwise is to risk not being able to pay a supplier in full or badly denting group reserves to be able to do so. Without a safeguard in place, a difficult personal issue could easily hurt the group as well and lead to a range of knock-on issues.

To a new member, there’s no reason why having a pre-pay rule need seem like they’re being treated with mistrust or suspicion, simply that they’re signing up to a collective responsibility that applies equally to everyone – no exceptions. When it’s clearly understood that an order not paid up-front is going to be dropped – whoever has placed it – then a group has a strong internal culture. In practice, this builds respect and means there’s almost never the need to actually drop an order.

It must be acknowledged that some bulk buying clubs do not operate a pre-pay model but run on a collect-and-pay basis, thus accepting a degree of risk. However, even in these cases, a resilient group will be one with a certain ‘steel’ in its operations and consistency in applying established agreements.

Conflict

Working through difference and disagreement can be part of the healthy lifeblood of a group run through consensus decision making. However, it may be difficult to resolve a situation where a group has become fragmented into polar camps around an important issue. In this case, the way forward could be to pursue an amicable split into two viable groups that can take different paths. Far from being a sign of failure, this is ultimately part of the flexibility of the model.

However, the possibility of needing to sub-divide, other than by positive choice, can be minimised by starting with and continuing to maintain written group agreements, like core principles and a constitution. Whatever the founders agreed isn't set in stone for all time – it can be democratically amended at any stage and should be regularly reviewed. However, if effort is made to ensure that every new member understands and agrees to these written principles then everyone should be on the same page. Failing to agree principles or failing to actively reinforce them is where problems of conflict tend to lie.

Legalities

Your group doesn't need a trading licence, inspection or anyone's permission to collectively source bulk wholefoods. As long as it sticks to serving members and does not purchase stock for resale to the general public then it is no more than a means of pooling money and sharing out goods that participating households have paid for in advance. It is an administration mechanism, not a retail operation.

Keeping this clear and making it something you can demonstrate is therefore a wise approach for your group. A members' club is essentially unbound by all kinds of provisions that apply to retailers and the activities that happen in retail premises.

These are a few suggestions that can help maintain clarity in your operations:

- Have every person who takes part in the group fill out a member application form before they order with you.
- Supply goods to members at cost price but charge a *membership and administration fee* in proportion to their order total to reflect and cover the group’s operating expenses.
- Avoid using group surplus funds to buy stock for subsequent resale beyond the membership.

Should any questions ever arise about the nature of your operation, these kind of measures present a clear distinction between a bulk buying club and an entity that is *trading* with the public.

Please note that the information in this section does not amount to legal advice.

Data Protection

One important area where a bulk buying club does fall under the regulations that apply to commercial organisations, charities and public bodies is in the area of data protection. As a matter of good practice groups should always take a careful approach to the personal information they hold about their members, such as phone numbers and email addresses. Ireland’s Data Protection Commission – dataprotection.ie – provides a good deal of supporting information on the tightened regulations since May 2018. In brief, there are 8 basic ‘rules’.

You must...

- Obtain and process information fairly
- Keep it only for one or more specified, explicit and lawful purposes
- Use and disclose it only in ways compatible with these purposes
- Keep it safe and secure

- Keep it accurate, complete and up-to-date
- Ensure that it is adequate, relevant and not excessive
- Retain it for no longer than is necessary for the purpose or purposes
- Give a copy of his/her personal data to an individual, on request

For a bulk buying club, key compliance measures would include:

- Having a membership form that seeks minimal details, clearly explains how data will be used and obtains opt-in and signed consent
- Deleting any information held once people drop out of the group
- Limiting who in the group has access to members’ contact details, e.g. club officers
- Implementing strong passwords on databases and online resources
- Circulating information in ways that avoid accidentally disclosing the email details of other members, e.g. use of BCC (not CC) or mailing list software.

While heavy fines can be imposed for serious data protection breaches, slip-ups by small groups are more likely to result in a loss of goodwill and trust within the group itself – a significant enough outcome to want to guard against.

Growth and change

If you regularly have enough members ordering to cover your costs, there is no reason why your group needs to grow in size. You may well prefer to stay small and friendly and may choose to place a cap on the number of places in your group to reflect this.

By contrast, if your group has set a goal of ultimately building a retail co-operative, your period as a buying club may be squarely about building numbers and momentum to take on this transition.

Both are sound choices. However, this pamphlet is keen to counter any idea that a bulk buying club is simply a stopping point on a journey to somewhere

else. Whilst a group’s membership and energies will inevitably ebb and flow over time, once started there is no reason why a bulk buying club cannot sustain for the long-term in that format.

References and Further Reading

You'll find more on our suggested resources and links at the Pop-Up Wholefoods website – see popupwholefoods.ie/resources

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The Pop-Up Wholefoods Collective aims to raise the profile of the bulk buying club model and also support the formation of additional groups. Further development of this pamphlet will seek to better draw on the voices and experiences of projects operating outside Dublin. We offer thanks, in advance, to those who will become part of this collaboration. **Please get in touch through popupwholefoods.ie**

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