

Local Food Buying Club Toolkit

A guide to launching a local food
buying club in your community



Climate
Action
Team

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The Good Food Club (GFC), a much-loved buying club serving Winnipeg's West Broadway neighborhood, was used as a key source of inspiration for this toolkit and is referenced throughout to provide readers with concrete examples.

What is a Buying Club?

A buying club is a group of people with similar food preferences who purchase food in bulk together. By combining their buying power and volunteering their time, members can often get food at wholesale prices directly from farmers or distributors. While buying clubs come in all shapes and sizes, this toolkit looks specifically at those that purchase local food.

A buying club can either be:

- 1) coordinated by an organization (i.e. a food box program) OR
- 2) spearheaded by a group (i.e. neighbours or friends) who share the workload.

While how they function may differ, the benefits are often the same and include:

Benefits to the consumers

Increased access to a wider variety of fresh good food;

Increased opportunity to connect with others in the community;

Increased connection to farmers and the local food system.

Benefits to the producers

Reduced time packing and distributing orders;

Reduced packaging costs and waste;

Increased market opportunities and guaranteed sales.

Why Local Food?

While not all buying clubs purchase local food, we will focus on those that do. This detail is important. Agriculture in Manitoba, which is dominated by industrial, large-scale, high-input farming, produces about 29% of our emissions and contributes to air and water pollution and biodiversity loss.

The good news is that there is a sustainable alternative. Organic and regenerative farming can increase biodiversity, improve watersheds, and enrich the soil while also capturing carbon. Many small and medium farms use these practices but need our support. Eating local, in-season, chemical-free food also has many health benefits, and localizing our food system can help build community and strengthen the local economy.

Learn more about the climate impact of agriculture and what needs to change in [Manitoba's Road to Resilience report](#).

Initial Questions to Consider

Before starting a buying club, it's important to agree on the purpose.

Is it to access local food and connect with the community, or simply to buy "cheap" food?

If the goal is only low-cost food, reconsider whether sourcing local food is the best option.

Is there sufficient interest to start a buying club?

Conduct a quick assessment in your community to see if something similar already exists, gauge overall interest, and determine what other features are important to include.

Case Study:

During the Good Food Club's (GFC) initial consultations, community members wanted more than just access to local food; they wanted to feel connected with their community and food system. This led GFC to offer food skills workshops, social events, and farm visits in addition to weekly food shares. Community buy-in from the start has been crucial to their success.

Forming a Group

Once you've generated interest in the buying club, it's time to solidify participation. Below are some key considerations when recruiting members.

Existing Community: Start with communities you already belong to, like seniors groups, daycares, faith communities, sports teams or offices. Existing relationships often make logistics easier and help sustain commitment.

Vicinity: Having members in the same area simplifies packing and pickups. Partner with the local community centre to connect with others in the neighborhood.

Shared Priorities & Expectations: Ensure prospective members have similar food preferences and spending expectations.

Commitment: Communicate upfront about what is required as a member and what your values and goals are as group. Prioritize building relationships to help foster long-term commitment.

Tips

Start small: Begin with a smaller group to work out the kinks, fine-tune logistics, and build trust.

Summer start: Consider starting in summer when fresh produce is abundant to attract members.

Finding a Location

Finding a suitable venue to store, pack and distribute food shares is crucial. If the buying club originated from a specific community, such as a parent group, there might be an obvious location to base your operation, like a daycare or school. Small buying clubs can also operate out of someone's home. Otherwise, consider the following when searching for a space:

- **Accessibility:** Choose a venue that is convenient and meets the accessibility needs of members.
- **Storage:** Ensure there is cold storage for perishable items and additional space to store equipment.
- **Size:** The venue should have enough space to sort and pack food safely, with ample tables and countertop space.
- **Affordability:** Opt for a free/ low-cost venue. Partnerships might unlock access to affordable space.



Possible locations

- **Community centres**
- **Faith buildings**
- **Offices**
- **Schools**
- **Universities**
- **Daycare facilities**

Developing Policies & Procedures

Before launching, your group will need to develop some essential policies and procedures. Keep them simple and easy to follow! Consider these questions to guide you:

Schedule:

- What will the ordering and pick-up times be?
- **Tip: Work with members and suppliers to set a firm schedule with flexibility built in.**

Ordering:

- Will everyone get the same order each week, or will there be some customizability?
- **Tip: For simplicity, consider a standard bundle with optional add-ons like eggs and meat.**

Packing Orders:

- Will members pack their own orders at pick-up, or will packing be done beforehand?
- How many volunteers will you need?
- **Tip: The first option is more streamlined but less accurate. Remember to have weight scales.**

Receiving Orders & Payments:

- How will you keep track of everyone's orders?
- How will you receive payments? E-transfers? Pay upon arrival?
- **Tip: Be consistent. Consider using a POS reader (e.g., Square) so people can pay upon arrival.**

Governance:

- How will decisions be made?
- **Tip: Consider whether a structure is needed and explore governance models like Sociocracy.**

Accessibility:

- How will you ensure the club is accessible to all members?

Dividing Roles & Responsibilities

Once your group is formed, divide responsibilities for running the buying club. How this looks depends on the structure. For instance, a community organization's employees may handle most tasks with volunteer support, while grassroots clubs may evenly split tasks among members. Here are key areas to have covered before launching:

Finances:

- Track the budget.
- Collect member payments
- Ensure timely payments to producers.
- Manage grants and funding.

Membership:

- Share important information.
- Collect food orders.
- Organize activities and events.
- Orientate new members.

Producers:

- Place orders and handle communication.
- Organize delivery with producers.

Packing:

- Coordinate packing upon order arrival.
- Maintain a clean, compliant environment.

Volunteers: If you are an organization, try recruiting volunteers for packing and pick-ups.

Building a strong volunteer base can be crucial for a buying club's success and longevity.

Case Study:

The Good Food Club owes its success to the commitment of volunteers. In exchange for work, volunteers earn 'sweat bucks' to subsidize food share costs. Volunteering also provides members facing barriers to employment an opportunity to work and connect with others.

Securing Funding

A buying club's level of involvement often hinges on finances. Even bare-bones buying clubs have unavoidable expenses like equipment. Explore these funding sources:

Membership Fees: Fees can be paid one-time or recurring but should remain affordable.

Example: GFC uses a sliding-scale membership fee structure based on income level.

Grants: Many grants require incorporation and maintaining accurate financial records.

- [The Manitoba Government Grants](#) portal lists available provincial grants.
- [The Winnipeg Foundation](#) offers grants to support community-based projects.

Fundraising: Effective but time-consuming. Examples: bake sales, community feasts, and raffles.

Partnerships: Form partnerships to share the workload or provide access to space. Example: GFC partners with the Broadway Neighborhood Centre to host indoor markets in their gymnasium.

Sponsorships: Seek sponsors for monetary or in-kind support. Example: a local salon donated a passenger van to GFC to support home deliveries and organize farm visits.

Sourcing Local Food

As a group, decide what local food to buy in bulk. Consider your facilities and time for packing and storing. Remember food safety regulations might also impact what you can purchase.

Two Main Sources:

1. Local Farmers: Directly working with farmers offers access to fresh, quality food and the opportunity to build connections. Contact farmers through the member directories of [Direct Farm Manitoba](#) and the [Prairie Fruit Growers Association](#).
2. Local Food Distributors: Wholesale distributors simplify sourcing from multiple producers and the logistics. Consider [Fireweed Food Hub](#), a cooperative wholesaler of local food.

Tips

- Arrange food orders ahead of the growing season so they can plan accordingly.
- Assign max. two people to manage communications with farmers.
- Determine with farmers their order minimums and order/delivery schedule.
- Be as consistent as possible and flexible; small farming has many uncertainties.
- Respect the pricing. Small producers work with thin margins.
- Consider ordering whole animals and divide the cuts evenly to reduce cost and waste.

During Off Season

- Local food like meat, grains, eggs, and cheeses are still available year-round.
- Root vegetables can last well into winter with [proper storage](#).
- Coordinate storage with producers ahead or switch to a wholesale distributor during off-season.
- Consider biweekly or monthly distributions.

Additional Activities

Besides purchasing local food, members might seek hands-on activities or social events tied to the club, like food-skill workshops. Opening these to others can boost interest in the buying club. Here are some ideas, inspired by organizations in the community:

Farm Trips: The Good Food Club organizes visits to Slow River Gardens in the summer for a fun and educational day away from the city.

Workshops: Topics could range from seed saving to cooking skills. Local experts could host, or members could swap skills.

Community Dinners: Rotate dinners at members' homes or host an annual feast to maintain enthusiasm for the buying club.

Other Ways to Access Local Food



Starting a buying club from scratch isn't for everyone, nor is it the only way to get local food. Here are some other options:

- Existing Buying Clubs:
 - a. [The Good Food Club](#): Open to all and subsidized to ensure affordability. Members have access to all GFC food boxes and programming.
 - b. [Fireweed Buying Club](#): Members order online and pick up at central WPG locations.
 - c. [Valley Pantry Organics Buying Club](#): Members order online and pick up in Howden, MB.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Buy shares of a farmer's harvest in advance for weekly local produce at a lower price. Find Manitoba farms through [CSA Manitoba](#).
- Farmers' Markets: Meet local producers and buy directly. While prices may be higher, markets offer community spaces and often extra activities. [Direct Farm Manitoba](#) has a list of farmers' markets, or search online for your local market.
- Local Grocery Stores: [Organic Planet](#), [St. Léon Jardins](#), [Country Roots Market](#), [Kurbis Country Market](#), [The Little Red Barn](#), and more.
- Other Programs:
 - a. [The Veggie Van](#): A mobile market offering fresh, affordable produce in neighborhoods with poor access from July to September.
 - b. [The Manitoba Community Food Currency Program](#): Provides market currency to those in need to buy fresh food at farmers' markets.

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