

## **A revolution at Slow Food UK**

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Catherine Gazzoli, chief executive, Slow Food

**The Slow Food UK Trust is hoping to be granted charitable status shortly. But it has been through upheaval and conflict before finding the formula it thinks is right, as Cath Janes and Stephen Cook report**

The Slow Food movement took off fairly quickly in much of Europe and the US, but it was bound to take longer in the sceptical culture of the UK. Slow Food? What's that? Some kind of high-flown continental stuff?

But gradually it has taken hold here, as it pursues the cause of what it calls "good, clean and fair" food. It now includes nearly 60 groups with a total of more than 2,000 members, and it expects its recent application for charitable status to be successful.

The past year, however, has been bumpy. The organisation has faced problems with governance and fundraising that would have sunk many a third sector organisation. But now, helped by a dash of philanthropy, it considers itself past the worst.

In earlier days, there was no UK organisation - people simply joined the international movement and formed local groups. When the membership reached 2,000 in 2005, [Slow Food UK](#) was launched at a national congress on the Isle of Skye.

Shortly afterwards, it set up a limited company in Ludlow, Shropshire, but failed to gain charitable status because it was deemed that not all its work was charitable.

Its income came mainly from membership fees, but in 2006 it received a boost: Peter Kindersley, a committed environmentalist who made his fortune with the publishing company [Dorling Kindersley](#), offered to donate £500,000.

A former member of the SFUK board, who asked not to be named, says £200,000 was received soon afterwards and the rest was to come later in two tranches. SFUK pressed on with activities such as 'taste experience' events and building vegetable gardens for schools.

But income remained sluggish, and in 2008 Catherine Gazzoli, a member of the London group whose family comes from the area in Italy where Slow Food was founded, was asked to review the organisation's funding. "Some basics for fundraising were lacking," says Gazzoli.

Events then moved rapidly. Gerry Danby, another member of the SFUK board, says that a meeting of seven of the eight board members in March last year was told the organisation was on the verge of insolvency. The meeting reached a unanimous decision to cease trading, and a proposal to transfer the assets and liabilities to a new company, the Slow Food UK Trust, was carried by a majority of one.

Gerry Danby and two other SFUK board members, Alan Roe and Silvia Monasterolo, who represents Slow Food International, moved onto the SFUK Trust board. A few weeks later, about 50 members attended an extraordinary general meeting called by the three dissenting SFUK board members and passed a resolution not to cooperate with the trust.

But the trust was already in existence, and Gazzoli says: "The EGM considered a proposal that could not properly be implemented and the proceedings were flawed." She was appointed chief executive of the trust, which opened an office in Covent Garden in London.

"It was a coup," says the former SFUK board member. "The new body was set up overnight by what I believe to be devious means, because while the SFUK Trust took on our assets and liabilities and the old SFUK still existed, the new board of directors was chosen secretly. It left a lot of people unhappy and several of SFUK's local groups abandoned the movement."

Gazzoli, who used to work for the United Nations, denies any impropriety. "The parlous state of SFUK meant that the work to establish and secure the ground and funding for the trust had to be expedited," she says. "This would not have been possible without the support of previous board members and the encouragement of local groups."

The former board member says half of the 2,300 members left because of the changes. Danby, who is now chair of the SFUK Trust, says the total was less and the drop was nothing like half. "But the trend of the early part of last year has been reversed," he says. "There were about 50 groups at the time, and now there are 58, if not 60. We are now in a very different state, with a bright future."

Gazzoli says that after her appointment as chief executive she arranged to meet each group. "We have groups from the Isle of Skye to Jersey, so it was quite an undertaking," she says. "It was critical they had a direct say in what the new trust would do."

"We have been open and transparent at every step of the process, encouraging input from members and local leaders to establish the kind of organisation they want to belong to and believe in." The tour was followed by a meeting of group leaders last October that resolved to broaden the member profile and start a youth section.

Gazzoli's other big challenge, she says, was to diversify the organisation's financial base, learning partly from the experience of other Slow Food national associations. Kevin Kibble, an experienced fundraising consultant, became a board member. Charitable status is expected to help the organisation financially by opening access to tax breaks, Gift Aid and funding from charitable trusts.

Danby says the structure of the trust lends itself to charitable status. It has a trading arm that donates profits to the trust and purposes that are charitable, including the promotion of education, the agricultural industry, biodiversity and public health.

Some former supporters remain alienated by the revolution at Slow Food. "I agree there needed to be a shake-up, but no one in Ludlow was told it was happening," says another former board

member, who also wants to remain anonymous. "I've gone from helping to run the organisation to never wanting to get involved with Slow Food again."

He believes that the second two tranches of Kindersley's donation were conditional on SFUK handing over to the SFUK Trust, and notes that Kindersley's wife Juliet is a member of the SFUK Trust board.

Gazzoli and Danby decline to comment on whether the remaining £300,000 of Kindersley's promised donation has now been received. They say he has recently left the UK to travel for a month and cannot be contacted. Emails to Kindersley's office have produced no response. If Kindersley imposed conditions on further donations, however, many observers would no doubt find it perfectly understandable.

Sarah Lyon, leader of Slow Food Rutland & Lincolnshire, feels the revolution has been positive. "I believe that the original SFUK did its best, but that it just wasn't good enough and decisions had to be made about taking the movement forward," she says.

"The organisation needed someone with the determination and strength to do that, and Catherine Gazzoli is dynamic enough for the job. In fact, I think the board is well-rounded and realistic, and its members are focused and intelligent, which is why I have supported these changes from the start.

"In a democratic organisation there will always be people who oppose change. But I also believe that their voices are outnumbered by those that support the trust. There are many members who have been right behind its development, and that's why the organisation will go from strength to strength."

### **WHAT IS SLOW FOOD?**

The Slow Food movement, started in Bra in northern Italy by food activist Carlo Petrini in 1986, aims to be everything fast food is not. It wants food for everyone to be tasty and flavoursome, farmed without straining the world's resources or harming human health, and socially just, with fair pay and conditions for producers. It aims to protect traditional and sustainable quality foods and primary ingredients, to conserve different methods of cultivation and processing and to defend the biodiversity of cultivated and wild varieties of produce.

The movement, which has the snail as an emblem, has about 100,000 members in 132 countries, with national branches in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, France, Japan and the UK.

"We're very keen to get away from the idea that it's elitist," says Gerry Danby, chair of the Slow Food UK Trust. "In our culture, unfortunately, there's never really been a feeling that good food is for everyone - unlike in Italy, where it's seen as an entitlement."