



Swillington chicken and pork Community Supported Agriculture case study

Introduction

Initiated in June 2008, Swillington CSA provides a monthly supply of meat – either one whole chicken or a selection of pork – to its members via farmers markets in Leeds. The CSA has approximately 55 members in total, and uses 15 acres of land on a farm owned and run by Jo Cartwright, five acres of which are used for the chicken enterprise with the remaining 10 occupied by the pigs. Members commit to receiving their shares by prepaying for a six month period.

Getting Started

Growers at Swillington farm had previous experience of setting up a vegetable CSA in 2007, which uses the farm's two acre walled garden to supply 30 shares to members. The idea of forming a meat CSA was proposed by a group of consumers within Headingley Development Trust (HDT) – a community group in Northwest Leeds. HDT has been established for a number of years with the aim of developing a sustainable community in both the environmental and social sense. The trust started a farmers market five years ago, and approached Swillington Farm with the offer of becoming involved. Helen Seymour of HDT first suggested the use of the CSA scheme to Jo in 2008, and from this point it took only three months of assembling a list of interested people before the scheme was applied to the poultry and pork.

Due to the experience gained through the development of the vegetable CSA, during which the team received guidance from the Soil Association, the core group was already aware of logistics regarding customer meetings, forming a committee and recruiting members. In addition, seeing as Jo was producing pork and chicken which was already traded at Headingley farmers market, the scheme was relatively easy to set up. Jo and the other growers received a list of members from HDT, and set about making sure production levels were sufficient for the weeks of the farmers markets – which only required a small initial increase. The chicken co-op was established first, followed by the pig co-op in Spring 2009, and the farm now runs a pork and chicken CSA at Headingley Farmers' Market, as well as chicken only groups and York and Otley Farmers' Markets.

The project was promoted through HDT publicity and featured on a page on their website, as well as on the farm's website. The scheme is also promoted to all customers at farmers markets and at the farm shop. The members themselves give the project promotional exposure by promoting the scheme by word-of-mouth.

Membership

The members of the CSA are split between various groups. Headingley Fowl Coop has approx 30 members, the Pork Coop 7 members, with membership for the other chicken CSAs totaling about 20. Shares are collected at farmers' markets, with the

occasional home delivery if a member is unable to attend. Alternatively, produce can be carried over into the next month.

Members receive a discount on produce – approximately 20% - and also tend to collect bigger chickens for the price of 1.5kg smaller chickens, which can sometimes provide £4 or £5 better value. For the Headingly Coops, members must join the Headingly Development Trust in order to join the scheme, at a cost of £5 a year. The trust takes all payment from members and pays Swillington CSA directly. Shares for the Fowl Coop are £60 for six months and for the Pork Coop £96 for six months.

Members are motivated by their wish to find an alternative to supermarkets and to buy their meat from a quality, local supplier. The farm is keen to live up to expectations and provide members with a greater connection to the food they eat, and so encourage participation in farm walks to see how the meat is produced. Shareholders are usually given preferential treatment when they are ordering other produce; ie special deliveries, small discounts, and guaranteed turkeys at Christmas. The CSA members are committed to the farm for their produce and often buy more produce on top of their shares, providing the farm with a guaranteed outlet for the produce. By paying six months in advance, membership ensures a steady cash flow and the certainty that production costs will be covered.

Shareholders have regular monthly contact with the CSA team at the markets, where they often offer feedback and can request certain requirements for the next collection; ie a portioned bird or a belly joint instead of the usual leg joint. In addition, feedback can be left through messages, emails or direct phone calls. A farm newsletter forwarded by HDT keeps members up-to-date with events on the farm.

Land and Produce

The CSA works on 15 acres of the 160 acre farm which has been owned by Jo since 1975. The farm has been organically certified 1997, although the pigs and some chickens are reared free range due mainly to feed costs. Members were consulted about the change from organic to free range pork, although the team would have continued with the change even if it had meant ending the scheme. According to Jo, however, members very much trust the team to rear the stock in an environmentally responsible way.

The wider farm produces lamb, beef, pork, chicken, eggs, honey, fruit and over 50 varieties of vegetables, although not all the produce is sold through a CSA scheme. Current turnover for the Headingly schemes is approx £5k per year, which enables the growers to make a small profit.

The scheme employs one lead farmer and a full-time farmer, Kate Edwards, who recently completed the Soil Association Organic Apprenticeship Scheme. Kate receives a full-time minimum wage, and Jo covers living costs. Jo and Kate are responsible for the day to day care of animals, and Jo's brother helps out with the horticultural tractor. Jo has the lead on the husbandry decisions and tells the butcher (who works full-time) what is required each week. Despite a committed group of members, the core group is finding it difficult encouraging people to come and help. There is a regular flow of volunteers with learning difficulties; however,

their involvement is limited to helping in the walled garden for health and safety reasons.

Funding, Legal Structure and Admin

No extra funding was required to start the scheme, as Swillington was already an established farm, producing and selling meat locally. The regular income provided by membership has allowed the CSA to invest in the future of the enterprises, covering the cost of buying new chicks in each month and feeding the flocks. Jo has obtained funding for a poultry slaughterhouse and butchery, using the funds from the CSA to help pay off the loans for this venture.

As the CSA is part of the wider farm, insurance for all aspects of the business, including public liability, is held by Jo.

The legal structure of the business is in the form of a simple agreement written by Helen Seymour which all members sign.

Helen Seymour at the HDT is in charge of all work on promotion, membership, finances and legal issues. She contacts the farm if there are any changes to membership numbers, and also communicates any changes from the CSA side to members, ie when the share price needs to rise if feed prices increase. As such, the core group - who have been members from the start of the schemes, and are fully committed to the ideals of CSAs - have no responsibilities other than a six month commitment.

Community Involvement

Individuals with learning disabilities regularly visit on the farm and carry out tasks such as weeding and sowing transplants. Most are able to complete the majority of tasks, although the quality and therefore value of their works depends on the commitment of their carers. The volunteers benefit hugely from the physical work, and find enjoyment and satisfaction in completing tasks and making their own way to and from the farm.

Workdays are on the first Saturday of every month where more complex tasks such as hedgerow planting or raised bed restoration are planned. There are often informal BBQs at the end of these days and every year there is party in the barn for members. The CSA team finds that attendance for work days is not supported by all members; there are some who come every month regardless of the weather and others who are usually busy.

Plans for the future

Future plans for the CSA include building a classroom in order to expand upon work with local schools; although the farm encourages school visits, most outings are currently just tours of the farm with a few small tasks.

The core group is keen to find a way to run the beef herd on a CSA format and are currently planning to expand their sheep flock using a CSA model. They are also interested in starting new buying groups - a previous successful buying group at a local government office folded when government cutbacks were made. However,

limited resources may mean it is easier to cater for a fixed share each month rather than picked individual orders.

Obstacles, achievements and lessons learnt

Swillingford CSA sees the successful continuation of the schemes, with a small dropout rate, as one of its main achievements. This is attributed, in part, to the simplicity of the scheme – the growers know what is expected and the members in turn know what they will receive each month. The core group is committed to allowing the local community to have increased contact with the food they eat, and would ideally like to work towards having the whole farm supported on a CSA format as a way of reaching a wider audience in this way.

Kate highlights the importance of having a lead member whom everyone is coordinated through, maintaining that on occasions when this has not been the case, the administration of the scheme has become complicated and mistakes more common, ie with supply and payments.

Despite difficulties arising with the increase of feed costs, this was overcome by consulting members and explaining the differences between organic and free range pork with the help of a lead-member. Consequently most members were happy to continue their commitment to the scheme.

The feedback from members is extremely positive; people are very happy with current set-up, the produce and value the connection with the farm highly- particularly those with children. Kate says; 'It's good for us as farmers to get the regular feedback that people love the produce and value what we do. However, I would like to have more members so the majority of our produce has a secured outlet before the end of production – to give us peace of mind. The recession and subsequent job/income security has meant people have not been as willing to commit to paying in advance and recruiting new members has been difficult.'

Those involved with the project are confident that they provide the community with an insight into the process of producing quality meat, and an example of the environmental and social benefits of their method of farming – including increased wildlife, low food miles, supporting local producers etc. For the growers themselves, the satisfaction of feeding the local community, and the stability generated by a fixed income are just two of the widespread benefits of the scheme.

Kate highlights the importance of sharing the ways in which different CSAs work in order to help each other and develop the CSA movement. 'Eventually, and as more and more people become interested in the provenance of their food, I can see the format of the schemes growing to encompass all of our enterprises. In effect, the whole farm becomes a community farm.'