



## Organic vegetable box schemes and CSA

Some box schemes have been struggling to maintain consumer numbers in recent months. Quality, price and customer service are critical. Some enterprises have taken an additional step by strengthening their relationship with consumers and have increased loyalty and support as a result. An asset you can offer that a supermarket cannot is a relationship with the person growing their food based on understanding and trust. Many people are seeking a connection to the land, farm animals and farmers - services you can provide and your competitors cannot.

In many cases, customers have what your business needs - they can provide a committed and reliable market, they can provide capital, they can undertake administration for your scheme, they are the best people to promote your enterprise, they can even provide labour. How can your enterprise harness this support?

Some box schemes are exploring how to relate to their customers as partners or members. They have identified what their business needs and what more than the sale of produce they can provide. They have made a proposal to customers which goes beyond exchanging food for money. At its best, a committed group of consumers have entered into partnership agreements with farmers which protect the farm business from risk, guarantees a steady income, frees the farmer from the bureaucracy of running a business and brings the farmer into the centre of a thriving social scene.

Each arrangement is unique to the farm, and farms need to draw up a proposal that suits their circumstances and their local people. Some features might include :

- Consumers sign a membership agreement with the farm, committing both the consumer and the farm to provision of money, food and other services
- Consumers pay in advance for a year's food
- Consumers offer labour at the farmers direction eg at busy periods or packing boxes - either voluntarily, as part of an annual agreement, or in exchange for food
- Consumers commit to a year's subscription
- Consumers commit to taking a share of the harvest, eg 100th of everything produced, regardless of the vagaries of the season, and between them buy the whole crop in advance
- Farmers offer open days, events or social days
- Consumers organise social events and open days
- Farmers offer regular family friendly workdays for volunteer members
- Farmers allow open or regular access to the farm for walking
- Farmers provide members with a BBQ space, picnic space, swing etc

- A small organised group for consumers eg from a workplace, street or school make a regular bulk order and accept a single drop of several boxes for a single payment
- Consumers pay a separate membership fee above the price of food which covers social events, newsletter, administration etc
- A member writes a newsletter, recipes etc
- Members produce publicity materials and recruit new members
- Farmers share their farming skills either formally as courses, or informally
- Open meetings with consumers to hear about the farm and discuss their views
- Farmers take on apprentices or informal volunteer trainees
- The farm hosts and is paid for outdoor care work
- The farm offers a group land for allotments, a volunteer orchard etc
- Consumers or local people lend money or buy shares in the enterprise as an alternative to a bank loan
- A larger organised group of consumers rent land and employ a grower on a regular wage to produce food for them
- Consumers weigh, collect and pack their own boxes
- Consumers pick some of their own produce
- Consumers provide holiday cover for farmers, weekend watering and animal feeding cover, etc

Not all of these arrangements will suit every business, of course. It is for each enterprise to consider what they need and what they can offer. Some take small steps, perhaps beginning with a newsletter and recipe card, then starting some conversations with consumers and meeting some enthusiastic local supporters. Others begin by seeking interested local community groups, such as transition groups, and arranging a public meeting with them to understand how much a community group can undertake. Others have a clear proposal in mind and approach their potential market with an offer.

Most of the arrangements above fit within the Soil Association's concept of *buying groups* or *Community supported agriculture*.