

## What next after the public meeting

### So you've had your first public meeting - what next?

Some budding CSAs find themselves in a muddle after the initial launch. They have a general proposal about what they want to do. They may have attracted a lot of enthusiastic support but now have mismatched offers of land, with a jumble of ideas about anything from allotments, Peak Oil, farm shops, pig co-ops, social justice and vegetarianism.

If you have the patience, some wide ranging debate with large groups at this stage may be helpful – if everyone feels heard and part of the search for a viable model, people are likely to learn about the issues, make relationships, and sign up to the emerging proposal. Even with an open agenda, a good facilitator to manage the meetings is useful. In a well managed meeting everyone will feel that views are heard and valued, and people will feel that there is some progress.

The group is likely to need the skills of a community development worker, facilitator and project manager. If these are not already in the group, it might be wise to seek advice.

### Devising a plan

There are several components to a viable plan. Some early steps towards developing a plan, and one which might unite and inspire the group include:

- Agreeing values and principles – why do you want to set up a CSA? What matters? Eg 'to ensure every one in the area can afford organic food', 'to protect the biodiversity of x farm' etc
- Agree a vision – this can be a long term ideal, not easily achieved. But if the group agrees a long term direction, it helps inform the choices about immediate opportunities. It will also help people to tolerate the imperfect steps along the way. Eg 'We would like to own and run a mixed farm providing for all the food needs of the people of x village'

A large group can contribute to both of these steps, though a smaller group might have to find the exact words.

Another early step is to identify and spell out the factors that are *not* up for negotiation. For example, the present tenant farmer must continue to get an income, the landlord requires that the land retains its organic certification, the project will be vegan, etc. There is a separate sheet available from the Soil Association, helping the farmer/ landowner to define their offer.

It will be helpful to list all the unanswered questions as well. You may not be able to answer them all yet, but to list them and have some idea of the order in which they need to be answered will help. Some of the answers will only be found by trial and error, and by responding to the actual opportunities and events that present themselves.

The chair at each meeting should seek a clear decision on the issues discussed. It will be helpful to have agreed at the start of the meeting how decisions will be made – by

a small group or whole group, by voting, by consensus, or by some other group exercise (there are books about facilitation which suggest some of these exercises. Try '50 Ways to reach group consensus' )

Once the group has taken a decision, someone in a coordination role should take careful note of it, and remember to stick to it, so that the group does not become frustrated with repeated discussions.

### **Dealing with contributions that don't fit together**

There may be one or two people in the group with strong views on a related topic such as educating children, animal welfare, alternative energy, etc If you find that their contributions are distracting the group from the planning agenda, you might like to have a separate open meeting with speakers and debate, merely to air views and explore the topic. A 'conversation café' (see CSA action manual for details) can be a helpful way of managing simultaneous exploratory discussions.

It is possible that the most constructive way forward is to form more than one group. For example if some people are keen to pursue an urban community garden addressing food poverty, whilst others are keen to support a rural livestock farm.

It may also be helpful to have a 'parking space' where unresolved issues are noted for later.

People come to meetings for different reasons. The business meetings need to be efficient and effective, so you might like to make a clear distinction between social meetings, creative and learning meetings, and business meetings. See CSA action manual for guidelines for effective meetings.

### **Getting organised**

A large group needs a lot of patience to cover all the areas of work. Some CSAs have formed workgroups with responsibility for different areas eg land, finding and communicating with members, a farm plan, fundraising, etc. A strong co-ordinating group which oversees the process towards making a plan is also important.

At this stage, it may be helpful to seek any skills that are missing from the active group eg a farmer/grower, financial expertise, good networker, etc

Beware of exhausting one or two leaders. They may have started with great vision and made the original proposals. If they continue to be the only focus for the project, they may become overwhelmed with work and restrict the wider group from being able to take responsibility.

### **Quick action or proper planning**

For some groups there is a tension between those that are working on a comprehensive plan, and those that want to begin producing food immediately.

The 'planners' want to avoid chaos, debt, personal liability, and conflict. The 'doers' do not want to be restrained and may be bored by red tape and meetings. An immediate activity can inspire people and keep them engaged. Consider perhaps an easy immediate action that will not detract from the longer term proposal – eg a one season pig club, a public picnic on the site, a scrumping day, a clearing day, a barn dance and feast.

As a rule the projects that start small and grow gradually tend to do better.

Until you are formally incorporated and insured, you will be personally liable for any mishaps. This is all very well if you are doing low risk work with small sums of money but more risky if you leap into bigger projects. It will take time to work out a structure and legal form.

### **Starting on a business plan**

Having formed a vision, a rough structure and general direction, the next step is to begin to set realistic and clear medium and short term objectives. 'We will seek 2-5 acres of land within 5 miles of XXXX place.'

There is a lot of literature available about forming a good project plan and business plan. Once the group is roughly established, you can begin with this work.

### **On the other hand...**

You might take a completely different direction to the one suggested in this paper and still do well! Each group is different, and will find it's own way.

**[www.soilassociation.org/csa](http://www.soilassociation.org/csa)**

The Soil Association is part of an England-wide partnership programme called Making Local Food Work. We are working with 6 other national organisations, funded by the BIG Lottery Fund, to explore the potential for a range of local food 'community and social enterprises'. Social enterprises are concerned with the need to deliver financial, social and environmental benefits.