

## The impact of community supported agriculture: Introduction for farmers, growers and landowners

This paper provides an introduction to community supported agriculture (CSA) for farmers, growers and landowners. It draws on and refers (where starred\*) to the headline findings of the Soil Association's evaluation of CSA in England, outlined in *Key features and benefits*.

### Understanding CSA

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a growing movement offering communities the opportunity for a stronger, closer and more meaningful relationship with the production of their food.

CSA provides an opportunity for producers to develop a relatively secure market, and a close relationship with the community they supply. The initiative may be led by the producer or in partnership with a community enterprise. For landowners, an opportunity exists to provide land for a community-led initiative, providing a diversified income stream and closer engagement with the local community.

### How it works for farmers & landowners

Farmers can be involved in CSA in various ways, according to the alternative models behind the diverse approaches\*:

#### **Producer-led subscription CSA initiatives**

A producer offers members of the community a share of the produce in return for a fixed subscription. The producer manages and administers the initiative.

The subscription is generally payable in advance and for a relatively long term, providing secure known income to the producer. Subscribers to a lamb CSA initiative might pay in the spring and receive a butchered lamb in October. Subscribers to a vegetable initiative often pay at the beginning of each month for a weekly share of produce, sometimes with a longer seasonal commitment.

The share may vary with the vagaries of production, so the risks and rewards are shared. For example, the final size of a lamb, or weekly produce shares, will vary.

Subscribers may also visit the farm to provide volunteer labour (perhaps reflected in lower cost produce) or for events, training or education.

#### **Producer-community partnerships**

A community enterprise manages the initiative, developing a close relationship with one or more producers and agreeing a mutually supportive and

beneficial trading arrangement, perhaps including provision of volunteer labour. Such an initiative may operate in a similar way to a producer-led initiative, but with the community enterprise managing and administering the community side of the enterprise.

### **Community-led CSA enterprises**

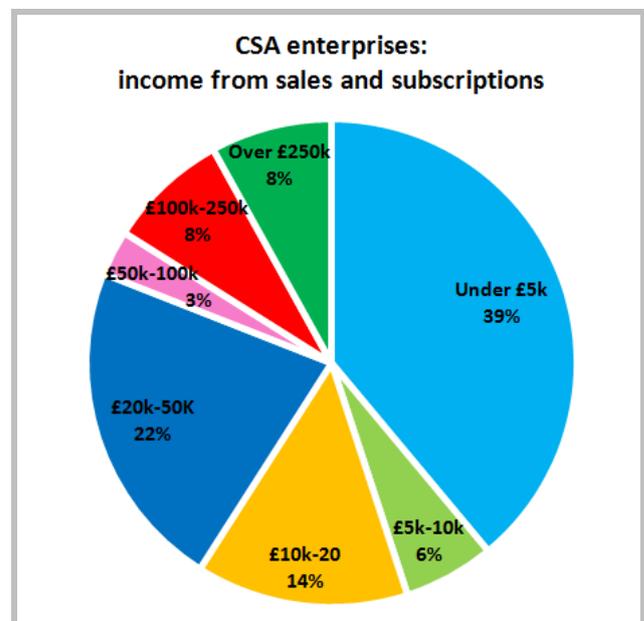
In most community-led CSAs, a community enterprise undertakes the growing itself. Land is a fundamental requirement and access to land can be an obstacle for developing enterprises. A good relationship with a supportive landowner is ideal and should provide the landowner with a reliable diversified income stream.

Many CSA initiatives buy in additional produce to supplement their own production, providing an alternative opportunity for farmers and growers. Such trading may be less close than a full partnership but enterprises are inclined to establish long-term, mutually beneficial trading relationships.

### The opportunities and benefits

#### **The size of a CSA initiative**

Initiatives vary greatly: annual income from sales and subscriptions varies from under £5,000 to over £250,000:



Many of the lower income enterprises are very new, while others have inherently limited sales, often by limited

This paper introduces CSA to farmers, drawing on Provenance's evaluation for the Soil Association's project to support CSA – [www.soilassociation.org/csa.aspx](http://www.soilassociation.org/csa.aspx) – part of Making Local Food Work.

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access to land. The larger turnover and longer established enterprises demonstrate the potential for a CSA model to provide a viable basis to build substantial sales.

### Positive cashflow

Enterprises generally trade with a core of loyal members and largely take payment in advance, providing secure income and a healthy cashflow. The average price of a *small* produce share is £7.59 / week, with larger shares typically around £12 / week. The average length of membership across all enterprises is 2.5 years, but up to 5.5 years amongst longer established enterprises. 60% of enterprises have a minimum membership period of one year or season; 85% only take payment in advance.

### Volunteer labour

Involvement in food production is a motivating factor for many CSA members. Most initiatives offer members opportunities for volunteering; some require members to contribute a certain amount of work. While reliability and appropriate skills are essential, CSA may provide producers with additional labour.

### Training and education

CSA can also provide opportunities for new entrants to food production, through employment of growers, apprenticeship schemes and volunteering opportunities.

### Additional trade

38% of all CSA enterprises buy in additional produce, largely from local producers. Bought-in produce is primarily vegetables, followed by fruit, eggs, dairy products and meat. Volumes can be significant: one enterprise sold almost £400,000 worth of traded produce in 2010, while also running a weekly farmers' market with annual sales of over £430,000.

### Community engagement

Involvement with CSA –through trade, provision of land, or leading an initiative – offers farmers and landowners an opportunity to engage with their local community.

### Awareness raising and behaviour change

CSA is a powerful approach to raising awareness\* of the issues of food production and has a significant effect on the shopping and eating habits of members\* beyond the CSA initiative, principally towards more local and seasonal purchases from local shops, farmers' markets etc.

### Promotion

CSA initiatives provide opportunities for publicity and promotion of CSA as part of a wider enterprise. The alternative approach they represent – to land management, food production and supply – offers appealing stories for local and national media.

### Land rental and management

61% of CSA enterprises rent all the land they use and a further 20% are in share farming, part-rent or other

arrangements. Only 19% own all of their land. Many enterprises cite access to land as a limiting factor in their plans for the future and this is a critical issue for developing enterprises. There is potential for CSA to take on more land.

Enterprises tend to manage the land they occupy well with a particular focus on environmental aspects\*. Besides improvements to the environmental value and accessibility of the land, many enterprises claim to have a positive effect on their neighbours\*, including encouraging participation in stewardship schemes.

### Community investment and ownership

An alternative CSA approach can also be taken where community investment can secure the tenure of a farm or provide necessary capital.

## Examples of CSA working for farmers

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### Dragon Orchard Cropsharers

A long-established producer-led CSA initiative, where members subscribe yearly for a share of the orchard's produce and regularly visit the farm.

### Canalside Community Food

Community initiative working in close partnership with landowner / grower, now providing vegetable shares to over 100 members and developing further production.

### Transition Cambridge Onion CropShare

Community-producer partnership, where community group provides labour for organic farm's entire onion crop in return for onion harvest of additional plot.

### Growing Communities

Community-led urban initiative, producing salad on sites in east London and sourcing produce from network of farms through "community-led trade". Helping to establish similar initiatives through "start-up programme".

### Bungay Community Bees

Community-led beekeeping initiative, using small area of donated land in return for pollination and other benefits of maintaining bee colonies.

### Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

Two linked biodynamic farms of 800 acres under ownership of community co-operative and secured to provide local food, training and more.

## Resources and case studies

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Further information on many of the subjects of this paper, and case studies, can be found in the many free resources available from:

- Soil Association CSA project: <http://j.mp/CSAresources>
- Making Local Food Work: <http://j.mp/MLFWresources>



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