

The impact of community supported agriculture: Key features & benefits

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

Our evaluation for the Soil Association of the impact of community supported agriculture in England finds that over 80 CSA enterprises are now providing multiple benefits to their thousands of members, their communities, local economies and the environment.

CSA has a significant effect on their members' behaviour, health, skills and well-being with 70% saying that their overall quality of life has improved. CSA initiatives also raise awareness of food and sustainability issues, encourage a diverse volunteer base, impact positively on the local community, benefit surrounding wildlife, and provide employment and training opportunities.

Enterprises generally trade with a core of loyal members and largely take payment in advance, providing secure income and a healthy cashflow. Many CSA initiatives are integral to wider enterprises.

Defining and describing CSA

Sharing the risks and rewards of production

The concept of *community supported agriculture* covers a very wide range of initiatives in which communities are more closely linked to the production of their food (occasionally fuel and potentially fibre), providing support beyond the conventional exchange of money for goods in the marketplace.

Proposed definitions of CSA tend to refer to a sharing of the risks and rewards of production. In our study we followed a similar description:

“ *Community Supported Agriculture means any food, fuel or fibre producing initiative where the community shares the risks and rewards of production, whether through ownership, investment, sharing the costs of production, or provision of labour.* ”

A growing movement

The concept of CSA has spread across Japan, the United States and Europe since the 1960s, becoming established

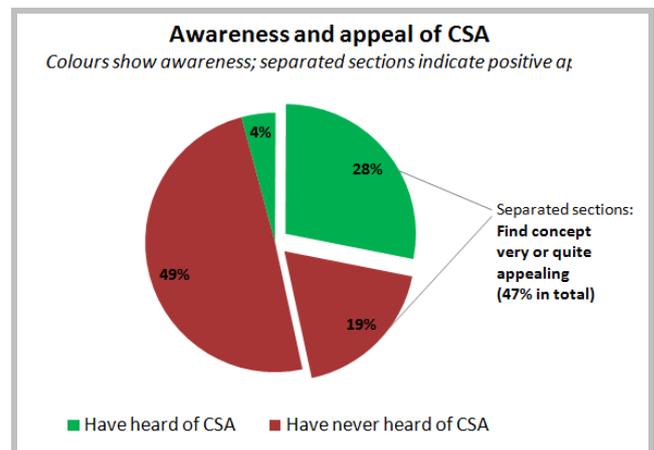
in the UK since the 1990s. With interest now growing rapidly, there are **over 80 active initiatives**ⁱ in the United Kingdom, counting thousands of members: membership of individual enterprises ranges from under 10 to the hundreds, with an **average of 69 trading members**ⁱⁱ.

While **four enterprises have been trading for over 10 years**, the **average age is just under 3 years**. At least 20 active initiatives have started trading within the last year, with over 100 in development, in part reflecting the strong support provided in recent years, particularly by the *Soil Association* through the *Making Local Food Work* programme (90% of initiatives have received external support, in 93% of cases from a social enterprise or cooperative organisation), and the availability of funding from the *Local Food Fund* and other sources.

CSA is proving increasingly popular as the mutually beneficial, supportive and close relationship they offer between producers and consumers meets growing concerns about the lack of transparency, sustainability and resilience of our mainstream food system.

Potential for further growth

Despite recent growth, CSA represents a tiny element of our food system and lack popular understanding. In a survey of 1,000 shoppers, **68% had never heard of CSA**; just 6% knew of an example.



There is however, much potential to significantly increase public understanding, appreciation and participation in CSA initiatives: when the concept is explained (using the definition above), **47% find it very or quite appealing**; 6% would definitely like to join a CSA initiative.

A diverse range of enterprises

Consistent models of CSA are found in some countries – eg *Teikei* in Japan, *Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne* (AMAP) in France or *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (GAS) in Italy – but in England it shows great diversity, reflecting enterprises' grassroots origins.

The core models are in line with those typical in the US:



Producer-led subscription CSA initiatives

A producer offers members of the community a share of production in return for a fixed subscription. The share may vary with the vagaries of production (so the risks and rewards are shared), while the subscription is generally payable in advance and for a relatively long term (providing secure income to the producer).



Community-led co-operative CSA initiatives

The enterprise is owned by the community through a co-operative or similar structure. Labour may be provided by volunteers and/or employed professionals. Produce may be distributed amongst the community and/or sold for the benefit of the enterprise.



Producer-community partnerships

Community-owned enterprise works in close partnership with existing producer (s).



Community-owned farms

Farms secured through community investment but not always trading primarily with members.

CSA initiatives in England build on and develop these core models according to local circumstances and the needs, ideas and ideals of communities and producers.



The mapⁱⁱⁱ shows the geographic spread of enterprises across England, categorized by the closest core model.

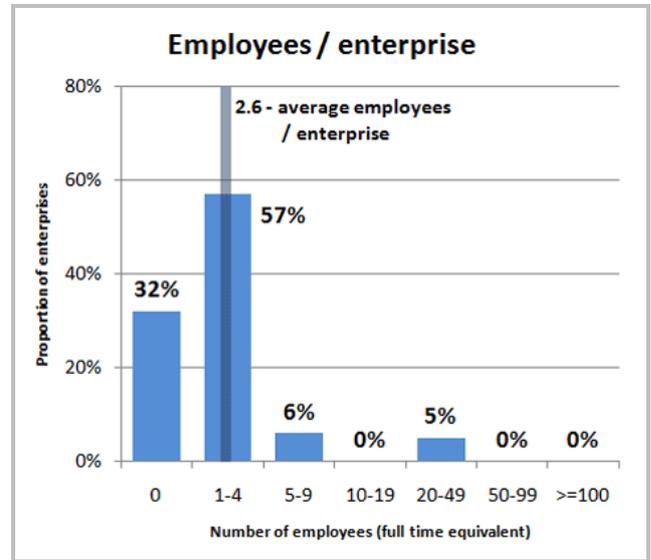
The table on the following page examines some of the variable dimensions of CSA initiatives, illustrating their diversity.

Economic benefits

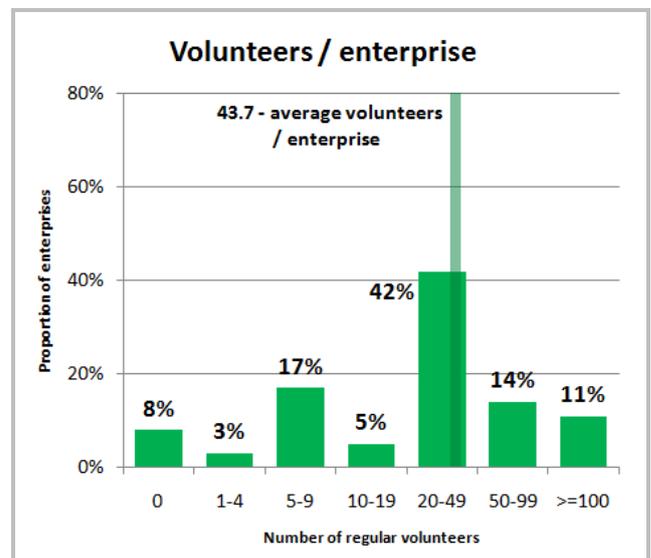
Though CSA enterprises tend to be relatively small, with notable exceptions, their economic impacts are disproportionately significant.

Providing employment and volunteering

Over two thirds of all enterprises provide employment opportunities – **averaging 2.6 full-time equivalent employees across all enterprises and over 20 in some cases** – sometimes in relatively deprived rural or, more occasionally, urban areas.



In addition, the vast majority of enterprises provide volunteering opportunities – **averaging 44 volunteers / enterprise and over 100 in several cases**.



The diversity of England's CSA initiatives

Initiative leadership		
Producer-led Producer offers share of production (<i>≈ producer's box scheme</i>) 24%	Producer-community partnership Community enterprise works very closely with one or more producers 23%	Community-led Community-owned and run enterprise (<i>≈ community allot'nt / growing scheme</i>) 53%
Number of members		
Micro: < 20 Includes very young and inherently small (eg allotment based) initiatives 20%	Medium: 20 - 100 Average across all bands: 69 members / enterprise 62%	Large: >= 100 Includes larger enterprise, community-owned farms 18%
Produce		
Food Main categories and other (eggs, milk, honey, juice, bread, wine...) very or quite important to: Vegetables: 73% Fruit: 35% Meat: 22% Other: 26%	Fuel Firewood, charcoal 3%	Fibre Wool, yarns for weaving... (<i>≈ Camphill care farm communities</i>) 0%
Production and trade		
Exclusively own production Produce entirely from enterprise itself 62%	Production and trade Supplementary produce bought in 29%	Exclusively traded produce All produce bought in 9%
Labour		
Only volunteers Average volunteering across all: 44 volunteers / enterprise 32%	Employees and volunteers 60%	Only employees Average employment across all: 2.6 FTE employees / enterprise 8%
Available land		
Micro: < 1 acre Urban growers, allotments, secondary producers - eg bakeries (no land) 20%	Medium: 1 - 100 acres Smallholdings, small farms Median, land-based initiatives: 6.0 acres 71%	Large: > 100 acres Larger farms (community-owned or CSA as one element) 9%
Land tenure		
Wholly owned 19%	Part-owned / share farmed / other 20%	Wholly rented 61%
Distribution of produce		
Entirely to members 34%	To members and non-members 53%	Largely to non-members 13%
Urban / rural location		
Hamlet or village 50%	Small or large town 34%	City or suburb 16%

Notes: Percentages give proportion of enterprises in each category where data are available. *Alternative models similar to outlying examples in italics.*

Economic benefits (continued)

Providing training

Most enterprises provide some formal or informal training (71%), and a still greater proportion (77%) count education or training more broadly amongst the products and services they provide. 36% of CSA members feel that their skills have increased through their involvement.

Integral to wider enterprises

Many CSA initiatives are an integral part of a wider enterprise: producer-led initiatives are usually one element of a wider farm business; other initiatives are run by community enterprises providing care farming, farmers' markets, training and even IT services.

Several enterprises cite the CSA element as having played an essential role in ensuring the economic viability of the wider business, either by directly contributing relatively secure income or by attracting customers and publicity for the other elements.

Growing enterprises

Many CSA enterprises, particularly the newer ones, are economically very small: **58% have annual income under £20,000**. But several are much larger: **17% have income over £100,000**, including a handful over £500,000.

CSA enterprises are largely dynamic: while 22% have no plans to develop, **38% would like to expand**, **56% to develop their offering** and **31% to diversify into other areas**. A large majority of enterprises reported growth in turnover between 2009 and 2010 – 83% of those trading in both years. 67% reported a profit in the last year, while 22% broke even. 89% of those reporting a profit invested it back into the enterprise; 17% invested in a new business or other projects in the community. None distributed profits to members.

Contributing to local economies

For the producers and enterprises involved, CSA provides a valuable and relatively secure market for production that is generally sustainable and high quality. A key feature of the model is that producers have greater certainty of their income ahead of harvest and some protection from fluctuations in yield: 85% of CSA initiatives take all payments in advance.

CSA initiatives can play an important role supporting wider farm businesses and social enterprises, providing additional diversified income and promotional opportunities. CSA can provide a market for very small scale production, which can struggle to sell elsewhere.

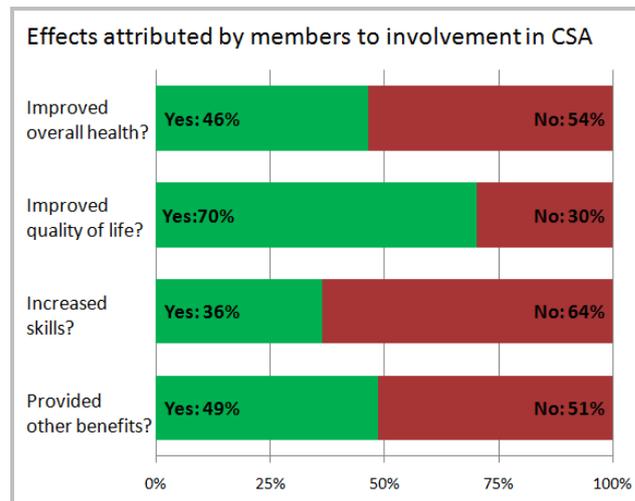
CSA enterprises also benefit other business, both directly (mainly through trade with other producers) and indirectly, through spending linked to CSA activity (eg members using local accommodation when visiting a farm or local shops when picking up produce).

Social benefits

CSA initiatives depend on their members appreciating the benefits of involvement as well as valuing the wider impacts. There is strong evidence that they provide significant benefit for members and the wider community.

Wellbeing

CSA members report a significant effect on their quality of life, health, skills and other aspects of wellbeing.



Strikingly, **70% of CSA members say that their overall quality of life has improved** through membership, with many reporting an improvement in their health and citing other benefits, primarily social (eg "new friendships") but also educational (eg "better knowledge of farming") and relating to the natural environment ("more in touch with the seasons"). The impact on wellbeing is exemplified by members' accounts:

“ It makes me feel happy - at quite a deep level - that I'm playing a small part in helping such an excellent scheme to thrive. It's good for mental health as well as farmers, food growing and the environment - being part of the box scheme and meeting the farmers at the market is really important in such a many-layered and enjoyable way. Life is better by being involved.

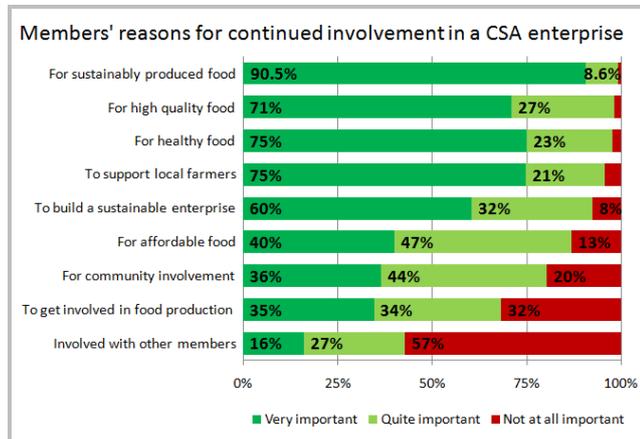
[Our CSA initiative offers] increased connection with the natural and human world.

I feel involved in the production of the food I eat and have become more connected to the land.

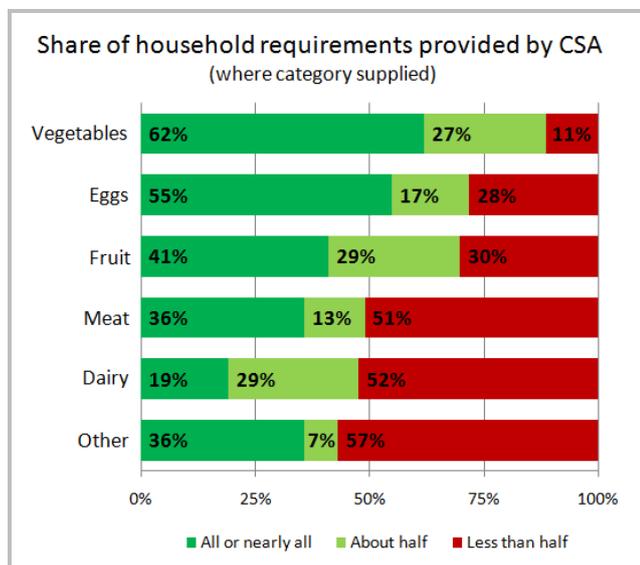
I genuinely feel a bit happier now that I know our money and support is going to farmers, and to support a community enterprise that is bringing so many benefits to the environment and our neighbourhood.

Access to quality, sustainable, healthy and affordable food

The primary aim of most CSA initiatives is to provide good food to its members. This is reflected in reasons cited by members for their continued involvement: access to sustainably produced food (very or quite important to 99.1% of members!); healthy food (98%); high quality food (98%); affordable food (87%).



CSA initiatives provide a significant proportion of their members' food needs: initiatives supplying vegetables provide 62% of their members with all or nearly all of their requirements, and a further 27% with about half; meat producing initiatives provide 36% of members with all or nearly all their meat, and 13% with about half.



For 63% of initiatives, providing a service, where private or public provision is failing, is a high or medium priority.

Income distribution for CSA members shows slightly higher percentages of middle incomes than the national average, though with representation of all income brackets: 12% of members have annual household income under £15,000; 13% over £75,000. For 37% of initiatives, providing a service for those at risk of social exclusion is a high or medium priority aim. A handful of initiatives offer

discounts to the low waged or accept Healthy Start vouchers, though more are planning to do so and several offer free or discounted shares in return for work.

Education, training and skills

As described above, CSA provides many volunteering and training opportunities: 36% of members are also involved as regular or occasional volunteers; 36% of members say that being involved has increased their skills.

Most enterprises (87%) report that their volunteers are largely representative of their local community.

Contributing to social cohesion

Almost half (45%) of CSA members feel that their initiative has had an impact on the broader community, often by bringing people together or providing a focal point for community activity.

Some longer established CSA enterprises have developed or supported other community enterprises.

Commitment to sustainable enterprises

Helping to build a sustainable enterprise is very or quite important for 92% of CSA members and most show commitment and loyalty: current members, including of new enterprises, have been involved for an average of 2.5 years. Amongst longer established enterprises, average membership is up to 5.5 years.

For many members, being involved with a CSA initiative is central to helping build a more sustainable society:

“I feel part of something that is truly pioneering, that I am contributing in some way to a different, more sustainable way of living.”

“[I am involved] to help build a sustainable economy/society”

“[Involvement means] doing something worthwhile; something that might bring about change.”

Environmental benefits

Though operating at a very local level, CSA is often motivated by an awareness of global environmental issues. Its impact is threefold: effecting change through awareness raising and encouraging sustainable behaviour; providing food of low environmental impact; improving the local environment through land management.

Encouraging sustainable behaviour

Many enterprises cite raising awareness of environmental issues as an important aim, often shared by members.

While CSA can be assumed to appeal to environmentally minded people, enterprises still effect change to more

sustainable behaviour amongst their members: 70% of members say that their cooking and eating habits have changed, primarily through using more local, seasonal and healthy food; 66% say that their shopping habits have changed, principally through a shift to more local shopping in addition to buying through the enterprise.

“ *“[Membership] changed the way we think about food and shopping, to fit with the seasons and have to know what to do with unusual produce - I should never have worried about it - it was an easy and enjoyable transition, and we love it!”*

Many CSA members with children stress the importance of their involvement in developing their children's understanding and experience of food production and sustainability issues.

Providing sustainable food

Enterprises supply a significant proportion of their members' requirements (see above) with food that is predominately local, seasonal and produced to organic or other sustainable principles – whether from own production or bought in from known sources.

Many members state that a key appealing feature of their initiative is that it provides a more environmentally friendly alternative to the mainstream food system.

Sustainable land management

CSA enterprises tend to manage their land well, many following sustainable methods of production and fostering biodiversity: 56% have increased the amount of land managed according to **organic principles**; 55% have **planted more hedges and trees**; 61% have introduced **new wildlife areas**.

Many enterprises contribute greatly to agro-biodiversity through cultivation of an unusually wide range of crops and raising rare breeds of livestock: **77% have increased diversity of production** on their land.

CSA enterprises are frequently open and communicative about their management of the land: **53% have made land more accessible** to the public. 29% consider that their approach has had a positive effect on the way their neighbours manage their land, including encouraging membership of stewardship schemes.

Opportunities

For communities

- A local CSA provides an opportunity for a community to take control of part of its food supply and to build a sustainable local enterprise that can act as a focal point for community activity and awareness raising.
- The diversity of initiatives and the individuality of the producers involved contribute to local distinctiveness, providing food of character and diversity through a genuinely local enterprise.
- Initiatives can also contribute to their local economies, through direct employment, volunteering and training opportunities, and indirectly, through trade and stimulation of other local businesses and enterprises.

For individuals

- CSA appeals to the desire of many to connect more closely to the source of their food, to know more about where their food comes from, to be confident that it is produced in a sustainable and resilient way, and to help build a more sustainable society.
- CSA members benefit from a tangible supply of food that meets many of their expectations: it may be trustworthy, sustainable, tasty, reliable, interesting, affordable and healthy.
- CSA can also provide wider benefits to members: a sense of community and social opportunities, the chance to learn new skills, a developed understanding of food issues and increased wellbeing.

For producers

- Producers can benefit by connecting more closely with the consumers of their food, helping to build a more secure market over which they have greater control.
- Availability of volunteers may provide producers with additional labour, though appropriate skills and reliability are essential.
- Community-led CSA is providing opportunities for new entrants to farming and food production, through employment of growers, apprenticeship schemes and volunteering opportunities.
- Landowners can also benefit by renting land to a community-led initiative, deriving rental income and increased engagement with the local community.



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ⁱ All figures are for CSA enterprises, members or non-members, where data are available: of 80 identified enterprises, 37 completed a survey; other data were gathered from published sources; 440 members of 20 enterprises, and 249 non-members, responded to online surveys.

ⁱⁱ This figure excludes two community-owned farms with very large numbers of non-trading members.

ⁱⁱⁱ Google Fusion map reproduced under Google's terms of use: <http://www.google.com/permissions/>