

# Access to land

**If you want to start up a CSA one of the first things you will need to do is to find suitable land. This can be hard because of a lack of suitable agricultural land and high land prices, particularly in more populated areas. Even when you find land, it can sometimes be difficult to arrange long-term agreements.**

Whether you buy or rent land will depend on what type of CSA you are setting up and your financial situation. If you are renting you should try to get as long as lease as possible. Your CSA members are more likely to invest time and money in a farm if they are sure they will also reap the long-term benefits. It also takes time to become familiar with the capabilities of a piece of land and build up its fertility.

## How to find land?

If you are looking for land you could first try an internet search for “farm land for rent” or “smallholding for rent” or “land to buy” and the area you are looking in, and it will come with a list of websites and agents with land advertised. You can also look for land in adverts in the farming press.

Existing small-scale organic growers who are selling their land and want to sell to like-minded people may also advertise in environmental publications such as Permaculture Magazine, through local smallholding societies, or websites like [greenshifters.co.uk](http://greenshifters.co.uk). You can also check for available land on the Organic Market Place on the Soil Association website [soilassociation.org/organicmarketplace.aspx](http://soilassociation.org/organicmarketplace.aspx)

The National Trust pledged to create 1,000 new growing spaces on their land, giving local communities the space to grow their own fruit and veg. In recent years it has leased land on its properties to a number of CSAs including Gibside Community Farm and Grace and Flavour. They also have “full-scale” farms which come up for let occasionally, but also attract a large number of applicants [nationaltrust.org.uk/features/farms-to-let](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/features/farms-to-let)

Many CSAs have found land by approaching existing farmers to find out if they have any spare land, that they can no longer farm themselves. You can also ask other local landowners e.g. your local council, church, or anyone who might have spare land available. If you know of some potentially suitable, unused land but don't know who it belongs to, check the Land Registry. They charge a search fee, so narrow down the plot of land you are interested in before searching [gov.uk/government/organisations/land-registry](http://gov.uk/government/organisations/land-registry)

## Buying land

Buying land or a farm has the benefit of long-term security, as long as it can be managed as a viable business. Some individuals setting up CSAs are fortunate to afford property with suitable land attached, or have inherited land. If you are a grower or community group setting up a CSA from scratch and want to buy land outright you will need to raise a lot of money. You may need to do a community share offer or alternatively take out a bank loan or mortgage (see Funding section).

It is considerably cheaper to buy land without a home on it, but think about the issues of running the farm without living on site before choosing this





option. Many CSAs go down this route however, and it can offer a valuable separation between personal life and work life, which can tend to get blurred when running a CSA!

Land close to urban centres may be sold with an “overage agreement”. This is a legal agreement which would entitle the previous owner to an uplift in the value of the land were planning permission to be obtained on it within a specified number of years following the sale. Seek legal advice, and think carefully about any possible future plans, before agreeing to such a contract.

## Renting land

For those new to farming or wishing to trial a CSA initiative, renting land may be a more sensible option than buying. Some CSAs rent land on an existing farm and if you find a willing farmer they may be able to offer their expertise and experience as well as use of machinery. This can also benefit the farm which could sell its own non-CSA produce to your members.

The disadvantage of renting is that there is less scope for long-term projects, and if you have to move site after a few years it will take up a lot of your time having to search for land again. There may also be little recompense at the end of the tenancy for any increased value such as improved soil fertility, organic status or better infrastructure. Some tenancy agreements also forbid the involvement of third parties, which could restrict rentals from tenant farmers or the inclusion of investing CSA members. Look very carefully at the legal arrangement.

## Take over a farm tenancy

A few county councils own farms as part of their estate, although many have been sold off in recent years. These are leased out to tenant farmers for approximately ten years. A quick internet search will reveal what’s available in your county. There is a statutory requirement of at least five years farming experience, but three of these can be time spent in education. Potential tenants have to submit three things in a tender:

- ▶ A formal tender of rent
- ▶ A financial statement demonstrating that you have the assets to purchase the required stock and machinery, to take on the previous tenants’ fixtures (their improvements) and have sufficient funds to complete the first year of trading
- ▶ A description of how you plan to farm the holding with an account of your farming experience and history. This can be as little as one page stating a continuation of current approach, or it can be quite a detailed business plan. A proposed CSA, although possibly giving some financial reassurance, is a less than traditional farming arrangement and would need a clear description with forecast budgets.

Private land owners have similar requirements to county councils and advertise in the same way. The Tenant Farmers Association is a membership organisation that provides support and advice for tenant farmers [tfa.org.uk](http://tfa.org.uk)

## Land Trusts

The purpose of a land trust is to purchase land and remove it from the market to protect its integrity for a specific purpose. Community farm land

trusts enable the purchase of land for sustainable agriculture and horticulture, controlled by and for the benefit of local communities. The following trusts may have land to rent out to CSAs:

**The Soil Association Land Trust** “safeguards legacies of productive land, providing a safe haven and preventing land being lost from farming and growing”. Land is donated by retiring farmers and landowners, often those with no dependents, who wish to see their life’s work continue into the future. The Field in Dunkeld CSA is set up on such land. [soilassociation.org/the-land-trust](http://soilassociation.org/the-land-trust)

**The Biodynamic Land Trust** “secures UK land in trust for community owned ecological growing, bringing communities together to create living working farms and forging connections between land, food and people” Stroud Community Agriculture and Stroud Micro Dairy are two of their current tenants [biodynamiclandtrust.org.uk](http://biodynamiclandtrust.org.uk)

**The Ecological Land Co-operative** was set up to address the lack of affordable sites for ecological land based livelihoods in England. They are creating small clusters of three or more affordable residential smallholdings. As well as land, they provide smallholders with permission to build their own sustainable home, with utilities and road access. Their model allows them to keep costs low, both through buying larger sites at a lower price per acre and through distributing the cost of infrastructure, planning applications and subsequent site monitoring across a number of smallholdings.

The co-operative retains the freehold on each smallholding in order to protect it for agricultural and ecological use, and as affordable land in perpetuity. They raise money to purchase suitable land through community share offers. They already have one site in Devon where Steepholding CSA is based and have just purchased another site in East Sussex. If you would like to register interest in becoming a smallholder on ELC land and be added to their potential smallholder database then please email [communications@ecologicaland.coop](mailto:communications@ecologicaland.coop).

**The Scottish Farm Land Trust** aims to increase access to land for small-scale, ecological agriculture by purchasing land to be held in trust and rented fairly to new entrants and young people. [scottishfarmlandtrust.org](http://scottishfarmlandtrust.org)

## Allotments and other urban sites

If you are new to growing one way to develop your skills could be to get an allotment. However an allotment plot would not usually be big enough to run a CSA. An allotment is designed to be big enough to supply a family with food, although there are many people and groups that share allotments and garden together.

Most allotment associations, both council-run and private, have rules preventing allotment holders from selling produce commercially. But there are many community groups running shared community gardens or orchards on allotment sites. Some local authorities see this as a way of regenerating run down sites. So if there are lots of spare allotment plots available, the council may consider renting more than one plot, or even a whole site, to a CSA. Norwich Farmshare is currently growing on an allotment site while it looks for more farmland and Organiclea was originally set up on a derelict allotment field.

There are of course other opportunities to produce food in the urban environment and depending what you want to produce you may not need that much land. Sustain’s Capital Growth project and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens both provide support to urban farming projects (see also Urban agriculture section).

## Issues to consider when choosing land

You need think carefully about the future needs of the CSA when considering your land requirements. What do you need in terms of accessibility? In particular, make sure you think carefully about any potential restrictions or uncertainties over rights of way on to the land. Do you need buildings for packing, meetings or accommodation? Are there any planning restrictions? Are you able to erect

one or more polytunnels? A lot of CSAs have had problems with getting planning permission when they have wanted to put up new buildings (see Rules and regulations section).

## Land quality and suitability

Whether you are buying or renting land, it is wise to check the quality and suitability of the land before making a commitment - it could, for example, be contaminated by heavy metals or simply not be fertile enough. Both scenarios can potentially be overcome but require a lot of time and effort. Ask a local grower or farmer who uses chemical-free methods to take a look, and they will be able to give you a lot of insight very quickly!

## Soil testing

One way to find out about the quality of the land is to have soil analyses carried out. If you have limited funds you may be able only to get a basic test. NRM Laboratories is one company that conducts basic soil testing [nrm.uk.com](http://nrm.uk.com). Laverstoke Park, an organic and biodynamic farm in Hampshire, has an analytical lab that can also assess the soil bacteria, fungi and microflora [laverstokepark.co.uk/about-us/we-believe/analytical-chemistry-lab/](http://laverstokepark.co.uk/about-us/we-believe/analytical-chemistry-lab/) So does SoilBioLab [soilbiolab.co.uk](http://soilbiolab.co.uk)

## Water

You must ensure that you have access to water 365 days of the year from a mains water supply, a well, a spring, or borehole. You also need sufficient means of getting the water where you need it via pumps, hoses, sprinklers, trickle irrigation systems, bowsers, to ensure you can water crops as required.

You may want to consider storing water in water butts or storage tanks, or maybe even creating a pond or dam. The former may require planning permission if large, and the latter will definitely require permission from the landowner and, almost certainly, the Environment Agency. Be aware of the enormous quantity of water you will need during a drought.

If there is a watercourse crossing the land, you may be allowed to abstract a controlled amount of water with the landowner's permission and buy a licence if necessary. To learn more about whether you will need a licence to abstract water go to [gov.uk/guidance/water-management-abstract-or-impound-water](http://gov.uk/guidance/water-management-abstract-or-impound-water). You should be aware of your/ the landowners' responsibilities, for instance not allowing invasive species to grow [gov.uk/guidance/river-maintenance-and-drainage-charges-farmers-and-landowner](http://gov.uk/guidance/river-maintenance-and-drainage-charges-farmers-and-landowner)

If you are on a mains water supply water pressure will not be an issue. If you use any other source of water then you will need to pressurise the water using a pump or by lifting the water in order to gravity feed it.

If you need to pump water you will need electricity to power the pumps, which can be provided by a mains electricity supply or a generator. It is possible to use renewable energy sources such as solar power for pumping water if you don't have a mains electricity supply. Bear in mind you would need an enormous bank of expensive and relatively short-lived batteries to store sufficient power to cover peak water needs at times when electricity is not being generated.

You can lift water tanks to supply sufficient pressure to feed small-scale drip irrigation systems. Seek the advice of a fellow grower who has done this in your area: much will depend on your local rainfall pattern and the absorbency of the soil. It is virtually impossible to lift water tanks enough to provide sufficient pressure to run a sprinkler based system: the tanks would need to be raised to around the height of a two story house above ground level. [gov.uk/guidance/water-management-abstract-or-impound-water](http://gov.uk/guidance/water-management-abstract-or-impound-water)

## Other issues for a CSA are:

### Accessibility

How easy will it be for members to get to the farm, is it on a bus route or easy to cycle to? How visible is it? If people can see the veg growing or livestock, and

you can put up notices in the fields that lots of people will see, this can be a great source of new members.

### Is the site attractive and/or quiet?

It is easier to attract volunteers and members to an attractive, peaceful site. Busy roads or a view of an industrial estate are an unwelcome reminder of modern life for people seeking refuge in a natural setting.

### What buildings are available?

You may need buildings to house animals, shelter volunteers and members, and store tools. You will need somewhere for the veg to be stored and packed (and possibly to be collected by the members). Having a building on the farm where

you can hold member meetings and social events can be more effective in building community than renting a room away from the farm.

### How supportive is the landlord (if you are renting)?

Can you get a long-term lease on the land? Is the landlord willing to have large numbers of people on the land?

### Parking

If you have lots of volunteers or public events then you will need somewhere for people to park on your land or nearby. Some landlords and neighbours do not want lots of people coming to and fro all the time.



## OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES

- ▶ The Community Land Advisory Service (CLAS) was set up specifically to help community based projects access land, and is a useful first port of call. CLAS is no longer funded but the website remains a useful source of info: [communitylandadvice.org.uk](http://communitylandadvice.org.uk)
- ▶ These Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens films look at how an allotment group, a CSA and a city farm each found their land and got started  
[youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=255&v=iGYOfwcPs8c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=255&v=iGYOfwcPs8c)  
[youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=20&v=TOSAF4K4bRO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=20&v=TOSAF4K4bRO)
- ▶ The European Access to Land project has lots of useful resources from other countries:  
[accesstoland.eu](http://accesstoland.eu)  
[accesstoland.eu/film-Land-for-our-food](http://accesstoland.eu/film-Land-for-our-food)
- ▶ Shared Assets has done policy work on access to land and has also produced a website to help you find information on land  
[sharedassets.org.uk/policy-area/access-to-land](http://sharedassets.org.uk/policy-area/access-to-land)  
[landexplorer.uk](http://landexplorer.uk)
- ▶ The Land Justice Network (formerly Land for What?) is a network of groups, individuals and networks who recognise the need to change the way land is owned, used, distributed and controlled in the UK  
[landjustice.uk](http://landjustice.uk)