Community supported agriculture in the UK

Key policy proposals for DEFRA

- Recognise and support CSA as an innovative farming model that addresses a wide range of policy benefits beyond the production of food. These include:
  - Access to local fresh and nutritious food
  - Offering communities direct connection and engagement with UK farmers and farmland
  - Mental and physical health and wellbeing benefits for communities and volunteers
  - A short supply chain local retail model which cuts transport and marketing costs and is competitive on price
  - Providing exceptional environmental public goods

- Fund the CSA Network UK to administer and deliver start-up support, training and resources to increase the number of CSAs in the UK.

- Remove the 5-hectare minimum agricultural land criteria from all support and payment schemes including Environmental Land Management, Farming Investment Fund and New Entrants Support schemes.

- Make small low interest loans, start-up capital and alternatives to payments in arrears accessible to CSA farms.

- Ensure that capital grants are accessible for small farms and that there is specific support for infrastructure and equipment, including second-hand machinery, and community facilities that can be shared by a number of farms.

- Ensure the New Entrants Support scheme is applicable to small scale farmers and CSAs.

- Enable councils to enhance their county farm estates and create new farms by subdividing land for new entrants and protect and reallocate land for food production.
What are CSAs?

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an innovative farming model which provides fair, stable incomes for farmers and increases access to locally-produced food while strengthening communities and increasing understanding of how sustainable farming protects, restores and enhances biodiversity and addresses climate change.

CSA is a partnership between farmers and consumers in which the responsibility, risks and rewards of farming are shared. CSA consumers (or members) are closely linked to the farm and the production of their food and often commit to buy produce for a whole season – rather than on an ad hoc basis as you would with a standard veg box or shop. This upfront commitment makes CSA an accessible option for new entrants who have little or no capital to start-up a farm enterprise.

Farmers receive a more stable income and guaranteed market in addition to a closer connection and support from their community. The whole farming pound goes directly to the farmer, so staying within the local economy. Members benefit by eating fresh, fairly-priced, healthy produce from a known, local source with whom they have a relationship of trust and mutual openness. CSA farms also deliver added value through increased local employment, support for other local food businesses, skills development, improved health and wellbeing as well as significant environmental benefits delivered by all farms and communities practising agroecological farming.

CSA offers a powerful approach to reconnect people and agriculture. It is a growing answer to concerns around sustainability, resilience and transparency in the food system. The movement is growing in the UK, there are currently around 200 diverse CSA farms in the UK feeding thousands of households. The CSA Network supports over 150 farm members, a number which has risen by more than 50% in the past 12 months, and is seeing huge interest from new entrants wanting to set up CSA farms.
Case study

Chagfood

Chagfood is a community-supported three-hectare market garden supplying a seasonal ‘share of the harvest’ to 140 households across the north-east edge of Dartmoor.

As a Community Supported Agriculture farm, Chagfood’s customers become ‘members’ and commit to support the farm with an annual subscription. This subscription supports the farm with a guaranteed market and shares the risks as well as the rewards of the enterprise with their customers. In return their customers are more connected to the people, the fields, the weather, and the seasons that deliver their share of the harvest each week.

Average annual yields include potatoes – 8 tonnes/acre, onions – 3.5 tonnes/acre, carrots – 9.5 tonnes/acre, cabbage – 9,500 heads/acre and squash – 6 tonnes/acre.

Chagfood runs regular well-attended courses on setting up and scaling-up CSAs to inspire others to do the same in their communities across the UK.
The benefits of CSAs

1. Economic

- **CSAs are an invaluable part of the UK food system and offer food supply resilience:** during the pandemic CSAs remained resilient and continued as normal due to the long-term partnership between producers and members, with most CSAs seeing a huge increase in demand. If the CSA model were to be replicated in every community, this self-supporting, diverse network would be able to keep local, fresh and healthy produce flowing to most citizens in times of crisis.

- **CSAs have short supply chains, no or low retail, transport and marketing costs and direct sales to members so the whole farming pound is retained in the local economy, particularly by the farmer or grower:** This is compared to just 8% of the food pound (£) retained by average farmers in the UK. CSAs have the potential to produce **direct routes to market** for existing landowners and larger-scale farmers (if they were to open up a part of their land to a CSA model). For these landowners, CSA creates a **productivity bump** because it generally turns small areas of low productivity into high productivity land.

- **CSAs are first and foremost productive businesses.** They are **highly productive** per acre of CSA farm in addition to income from traded produce and other services.

- **Community Supported Agriculture schemes help people to develop and share skills.** with over three-quarters offering training programmes. **Local employment** is also boosted, with CSAs showing high levels of employment relative to the land available - employment per hectare in Community Supported Agriculture systems is higher than the agricultural average.

- **The two biggest barriers to new entrant farmers** are land access and start up capital. CSAs are self-reliant, the model supports existing CSAs to train and incubate **new starter CSAs** that can then set up with minimal investment as they already have a trusted customer base and place in the local community. The upfront payment commitment from members makes CSA accessible for new entrants who have little or no start-up capital.

2. Environmental

- **CSAs practice agroecological farming, including non-certified organic or organic techniques, which studies have shown support more biodiversity than conventional systems and protect soil health.** Many CSAs contribute to agro-biodiversity through cultivation of a wide range of crops and raising rare and local breeds of livestock, 77% of CSAs have increased diversity of production on their land.

- **Most CSAs already provide many environmental public goods** - 55% of CSAs have planted more hedges and trees on their farms and 61% have introduced new wildlife areas.

- **CSAs contribute to the mitigation of climate change** through reduced food miles/fossil fuel use/agrochemical use.


3. Social benefits, education, health and public access

- The majority of CSAs offer public services free of charge and with no public funding - 77% of initiatives count education or training among the services they provide and many host community groups and school groups.

- Many CSAs engage in social prescribing and care farming, using referral systems to welcome volunteers from local health or social care services to access the farmland. All CSAs welcome volunteers to gain experience, training and skills on the farm, improving communities mental and physical health, reducing social isolation and reducing strain on the healthcare system.

- CSAs provide healthy, fair-priced fruit and vegetables and other produce. Many CSA members report feeling significantly happier, with over 70% saying their quality of life and health has improved and that their cooking and eating habits have changed through using more local, seasonal and healthy food.

- CSAs are in a unique position to connect with members of the public and invite them to get involved in agricultural activities and increase engagement with the environment. Most CSA farms in the UK have an open-door policy and welcome people onto their land.

What is the CSA Network UK?

The CSA Network UK:

- Facilitates communication and cooperation between CSAs in the UK
- Supports new and existing CSAs through resources, events, training and advice
- Promotes and raises awareness and understanding of the CSA model amongst farmers, growers, the wider public and government

The network supports over 150 farms and counting in the UK, feeding tens of thousands of people.

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