

How Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and small-scale farming can help address the health, food justice and environmental objectives of the National Food Strategy (NFS)

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The National Food Strategy (NFS) sets out a vision to make healthy food accessible to all and reduce the climate and environmental impact of the current system. We strongly support this and believe small and medium scale organic and agroecological farms, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and peri-urban horticulture farms have a significant contribution to make. They can support the delivery of the four strategic objectives in the NFS: health, food justice, land use and food culture change, while also contributing an array of additional benefits as outlined below.

They can also help achieve some of the priority recommendations that were laid out in the NFS:

- **Recommendation 1:** Introduce a sugar and salt reformulation tax.
- **Recommendation 3:** Launch a new “Eat and Learn” initiative for schools.
- **Recommendation 7:** Trial a “community eatwell programme” to support better diets.
- **Recommendation 9:** Create a rural land use framework
- **Recommendation 11:** Investing in an innovative model to create a better food system.
- **Recommendation 13:** Ensure taxpayer money is spent on healthy and sustainable food.

CSA, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), organic and agroecological farms and urban and peri-urban horticulture can contribute to achieving the objectives of breaking the junk food cycle to protect the NHS, reducing diet related inequality, making the best use of our land, and creating a long-term shift in food culture.

- They are **productive** per hectare of land and produce healthy (local, fresh, nutritious) food for their local community without the subsidy support that most farm businesses receive in the UK.
- **Sustainable farming** is their focus, with most working to high **organic** standards and delivering multiple environmental and social public goods through the use of agroecological farming approaches.
- Due to their **short, farmer-focussed supply chains**, they have strong connections with local communities, building **public understanding** of food, farming and the changes necessary to create a more sustainable food system.
- They **provide jobs, skills and livelihoods** and present great opportunities for **new entrants** into the farming sector, as well as multiple volunteering opportunities.

- Some CSAs and peri-urban schemes offer **more affordable access to organic produce than supermarkets** through solidarity box schemes, low marketing and transport costs, and offering “ugly veg” to members for free or cheaper, to reduce waste.

Agroecology - The combining of ecological and social justice principles in food production and distribution to create a more resilient, fair and regenerative food system.

Community Supported Agriculture - a partnership between farmers and consumers (CSA members) in which the responsibilities, risks and rewards of farming are shared. Member involvement may be through investment in the farm, sharing the costs of production, accepting a share in the harvest, providing labour or attending social events.

New entrant - A person who is new to the farming sector and does not have access to a land through an established family farm.

How can the White Paper enable CSA and small-scale agroecological farms to increase their capacity to meet health, social and environmental objectives?

1. Design and implement the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes in a way that does not exclude farms under 5 hectares (less than 5% of CSAs receive support from public schemes and grants) and offers adequate financial incentive to support the valuable public engagement role provided by CSAs and peri-urban market gardens.
 - a. *This should be a condition in recommendation 8 on guaranteeing the agricultural budget up to 2029.*
 - b. *The White Paper should urge the ELM team to specifically reward the health and educational benefits provided by CSA member involvement, training and volunteer coordination on peri-urban farms.*
2. As a clear objective of the ELMs scheme is to support farms in delivering public and educational access, integrate the valuable public engagement work that CSAs and other urban/peri-urban farms already offer into the 'Eat and Learn' initiative, and support ELMs proposals so that farmers are adequately resourced to deliver public engagement.
3. Design productivity grant schemes that have a lower monetary threshold and include access to equipment, machinery, infrastructure, and technology appropriate for small-scale farming, including the purchasing of second-hand equipment.
 - a. *Recommendation 11 (Innovation Fund) could be a catalyst for developing and supporting an increase in the number of CSAs and small-scale agroecological farms.*
 - b. *An example of this could be using part of the Innovation Fund to help start-up CSAs and small-scale farming (we estimate the cost of starting a market garden or micro-dairy to be somewhere between £50,000-£250,000)¹, alongside training and resources, with a clear link to achieving goals of a land use framework.*
4. Identify and recognise the critical role that agroecological small-scale farming can play in delivering multiple public goods and services across the UK in rural, peri-urban and urban areas, in a joined-up way.

¹ Landworkers' Alliance, 'New Entrants to Agroecological Farming': <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/New-entrants-costs-website.pdf>
www.sustainweb.org

- a. *Recommendation 9 on a rural land use framework must achieve this and integrate CSAs and small-scale farming into its creation, as well as having a clear objective to increase the number of opportunities for new entrants.*
 - b. *A rural land use framework could, for instance, identify larger landowners who could support the incubation of new entrant smaller-scale farming businesses.*
 - c. *Alongside prioritising agroecological farming and small-scale farming, a land use framework must have a clear objective to ensure that agricultural land is not lost to development (through planning policy) or hedge funders; only one-third of CSAs own the land they farm compared to half of farms as a national average.*
5. Use more innovative ways of procuring food to public services, like dynamic procurement and healthy start vouchers, that makes these contracts accessible and workable for smaller and medium scale farm businesses.
- a. *CSAs and small-scale farms can support the delivery of recommendations 1, 3, 7 and 13 in the National Food Strategy.*

Annex and further information to the briefing

How can CSA and SME agroecological farming businesses help achieve the objectives of healthier and more sustainably produced food as set out in the National Food Strategy?

Productive and viable businesses that deliver on food and more

CSAs are highly productive per acre of land in terms of food production and other public goods and services. A recent study found that small-scale farming can outcompete the productivity of larger farms both in terms of food and amount of biodiversity supported.²

Smaller-scale farming is a much more real prospect for new entrants starting a new business. Between March 2020 and September 2021, the CSA Network in the UK saw their membership double from 89 to 170 as more people sought a route into farming. With the right support from government and local authorities, the network of CSAs across England and the rest of the UK could grow considerably more.

The two biggest barriers to new entrant farmers are access to land and start-up capital. CSAs are self-reliant, the model supports existing CSAs to train and incubate new starter CSAs that can 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 CSAs accessible for new entrants who have little or no start-up capital.

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 the average farm 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 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.

² Ricciardi, V. *et al.* (2021) 'Higher yields and more biodiversity on smaller farms'. *Nature Sustainability* 4, 651-657. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-021-00699-2>
www.sustainweb.org

Sustainable farming is key to smaller-scale farming with most working to organic standards

Small-scale farm enterprises are more likely to practice agroecological farming approaches, like organic or agroforestry, in comparison to larger ones.³ As already referenced above, a recent study highlighted how small-scale farming can be better for biodiversity. Other studies have also shown how CSAs contribute to agro-biodiversity through cultivating a much wider and more diverse range of crops and native livestock breeds, with 77% of existing CSAs increasing diversity of what they produce.

Community, access and education

CSAs connect with their local community by putting those people at the heart of their business.⁴ They also offer opportunities for their local community by providing jobs, space to grow food, and ways to learn land-based skills. Most CSA farms have an 'open door' policy and welcome people onto their land at any time, not just on a specific day(s) of the year, providing 30,000 farm visits a year.

Over three quarters of CSAs offer training programmes to help others learn new skills and prepare for starting their own farm enterprise. Local employment is also boosted within the food system, with CSAs showing higher levels of job opportunities relative to other land-based food businesses. For example, a horticultural CSA farm employs twice as many workers per hectare compared to a large scale intensive horticultural farm.⁵

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.

Producing healthy food that is accessible to all

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. Several CSAs have started Solidarity Schemes to make their produce more affordable for people and households on lower incomes.

Delivering multiple public goods: environment, education, access, health, and wellbeing

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. Most produce little or no waste.

Many 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

³ Sustain and RSPB, 'Making the Case for Local Food'. <https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/the-case-for-local-food/>

⁴ Community Supported Agriculture UK, 'Policy Proposals for Defra'. https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CSA_DEFRA-Policy-Brief_final.pdf

⁵ Community Supported Agriculture UK, 'Community Supported Agriculture Network UK 2020-21 at a glance'. <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/At-a-Glance-20-21-Final.pdf>

school groups.⁶ We believe that at a minimum, CSAs should be fairly rewarded for delivering these goods through government schemes.

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.

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⁶ Soil Association, 'The Impact of Community Supported Agriculture'. <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/The-impact-of-community-supported-agriculture.pdf>
www.sustainweb.org