



Annual report 2022/23

Common Soil was established as a community farm and Community Benefit Society with seven founding members in December 2021, after several years of informal, collective food growing at the Swifts View site. Written at the time of our first AGM, this is a reflection on our major achievements, challenges and learning from the first 15 months as a formally constituted organisation.

Major achievements

- **Establishment of farm and supportive community**

The farm was kick-started by funding from a crowdfunder that raised £6,000 and also garnered support of local people; some who bravely pre-paid for veg that was yet to come and others who joined as community members to support us.

- **Whole new area converted from pasture to food growing and planted with produce.**

We began with around 0.5 acres under cultivation (near the shed) and have at least doubled this with the new area beneath the natural amphitheatre.

- **Production of 22 veg boxes per week for our first growing season**

100% of vegetable members who responded to our member survey in Jan 2023 agreed that they:

- have reduced their carbon footprint in buying local food and in the way the food is grown.
- feel more connected to where their food comes from.

Members also told us that they're cooking differently at home, as a result of receiving our veg boxes: with more seasonal produce and more veg in general.

"It feels good getting fresh produce from the farm at the end of our road. And eating more seasonally feels more nutritious and sustainable." (Common Soil member)

- **Grant secured for erecting first commercial-scale polytunnel and collection shed.**

- **Engagement of a range of volunteers and trial of some work placements for young who were people not in education, employment or training.**

We're hugely grateful for, and reliant upon, the contribution of our volunteers and have built up some wonderful new relationships with people. In addition to the volunteer hours of founding members, we have:

- 10 regular volunteers (helping around once a week)
- 12 semi-regular volunteers (helping around once a month)
- Around 20 other people who pop along for one-off sessions

Our volunteers also tell us that they get significant benefit from being involved. 100% of regular volunteers who responded to our survey agreed that they:

- Feel welcome at Common Soil and feel supported in tasks
- Feel part of a community doing purposeful work together
- Are doing more physical activity outdoors or feel more connected to nature
- Have learnt something about food growing and/or the environment

“Volunteering at Common Soil means I’m more connected to the land, nature and the seasons, and working as a team is fulfilling and fun.”

- **Established a group of committed growers and administrators**

We now have a stable group of three growers and an administrator, who are now paid as contractors for some of their work. However, a large proportion of hours (around 50% for each person) are still on a voluntary basis. In addition, one grower offers three days per week on a voluntary basis. We have not yet been able to provide the stability of employment to any individuals.

- **Held some really enjoyable community events on the field**

This included a summer camp out, harvest celebration with shared meal, open day with tour and an Imbolc/Candlemas ceremony planting candles in the ground. We also hosted a weekly parent and child group who gathered at the field every Friday while the weather was fine and cooked soup with the produce.

People tell us that they've really valued these events and met new people.

- **Establishment of initial partnerships with Food hubs**

We made contact with the food hub network and donated excess produce to Middle of the Hill community hub. We have also started discussions with Trinity Rooms community hub about a future partnership (see plans).

Major challenges

- **Working with the natural layout of the site**

Access is narrow, with little turning space, meaning access for machinery or lorry deliveries was challenging or impossible. The path to the growing areas is steep. Wheelbarrowing compost down for no-dig beds was a huge community effort! Transporting veg up the hill is a physical challenge.

- **Wire worm**

As is common when land is turned from pasture to food growing, we have a lot of wire worm resident. They like to eat little holes in the vegetables.

- **Weather**

It was a very hot, dry summer and we didn't yet have irrigation systems set up. This meant one of our growers having to camp out next to his vegetables to water them throughout the night when things were very dry!

- **Water/bog in the polytunnel**

Since erecting and planting up our large polytunnel, we have discovered that the middle section gets very waterlogged and the vegetables do not like it.

- **A lot of effort put into challenging funding applications that were unsuccessful.**

- **Planning permission restrictions**

We have had refusals for permission to make the path into a track and for a roundhouse shelter.

- **Stopping veg in February and losing connection with members**

As we didn't have our big polytunnel until September, we had to stop veg boxes during the 'hungry gap' and didn't want to buy-in from other sites. This meant asking members to cancel standing orders (administratively heavy) and connections are less strong without the regular visit to collect veg.

- **Balancing finances**

Budgets are very tight and operation of the farm relies on lots of volunteer time and support from grants, so is not yet very sustainable.

Learning for future

- When we asked our members what we could change, they said they'd like more salad veg (e.g. cucumbers) and Mediterranean veg. Also, that we could do more to communicate about how best to store and use veg (e.g. squash).
- Our collection shed is poor quality and in future we will aim to secure more grant funding to purchase better quality infrastructure that will last longer.
- Find a way to keep providing year-round veg to members.

Plans for next year 2023/24

- **Increase to 50 veg members for regular veg boxes**

So we can reach more people, build the community around the farm and move closer to sustainability. We're still reliant on grants though, until around 80-100 members. We have already secured one grant for work in 2023/24.

- **Provide year-round veg – weekly for six months then fortnightly**

This will provide members with year-round connection to the farm, whilst also providing them with substantial veg boxes and not buying produce in from elsewhere. It does require a year's commitment as standing order payments are split equally across the 12 months. We will also increase the variety of veg.

- **Trinity Rooms partnership**

Seeking grant funding for a partnership to provide food for their community lunches and food hub and host some community meals at our site to connect people to where the food comes from and build community connections.

- **A second large polytunnel, a pond, a shelter and track**

We will seek grant funding and planning permission (again) for new infrastructure.

- **Increase access to the land for people who might not normally access it.**

We will seek funding and new partnerships to enable us to run groups and reach out to members of the community who may be socially or economically disadvantaged, less likely to have access to such a site, or likely to particularly benefit from being part of food growing groups.