



## Annual report 2023/24

We have just completed the second full financial year as a Community Benefit Society (registered Dec 2021) and formal Community Supported Agriculture project. Written at the time of our second AGM, this report is a reflection on our major achievements, challenges and learning from the last year.

### Key achievements

- **Increase to 50 vegetable members and year-round veg that is benefiting people and the earth**

It was a large jump from 20 vegetable members the year before to 50 members this last year. For the first time, we continued to provide veg fortnightly through the winter and spring as well, although did end up needing to buy some UK organic veg in from Global Organics and another local supplier to supplement our own. This does give us some flexibility though and assurance that we can always provide a complete veg box at 6 to 8 items, which we achieved. In addition to vegetable members, we have 14 community members.

100% of vegetable members who responded to our member survey (almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of members responded) in Jan 2024 agreed that they feel more connected to where their food comes from. 94% feel they have reduced their carbon footprint in buying local food and in the way the food is grown.

Vegetable members also added the following changes they have seen in their lives, as a result of being a member of Common Soil:

- Eleven people mentioned that they're now **eating more healthily, using more or different vegetables or new recipes.** *"I've tried new vegetables, been excited about vegetables!" "We've tried out different recipes, eating things we wouldn't otherwise buy if we saw them in the supermarket."*
- Seven people wrote specifically about feeling **more connected to the seasons and seasonal food.**
- Six people said that a key benefit for them has been the **community element and feeling more connected to people and the area.** *"I've felt part of a community with like-minded ethos."*

- Three people said that they're feeling **healthier or have better wellbeing** as a result of eating Common Soil veg: *"Even though I have a high veg diet, I feel so much more nourished after this year on Common Soil veg, at a much deeper level!"*
- Two people mentioned simply **enjoying the experience of collecting the veg**: *"Our toddler loves coming to collect the veg! Loves the space/freedom to run down the path!"*
- People also benefited from the **potential for volunteering and learnt about food growing**, noted that they've **reduced their plastic waste and** appreciate that they can **support local employment**.

*"It has definitely changed the way I cook and eat for the better. I love feeling more connected to my food, and the seasons. It's also lovely to feel connected to the Common Soil community."* (Vegetable member)

*"Cooking more seasonally, loving collecting my box, feeling so nourished by the quality of the veg and feeling the connection with the veg and land so local."* (Vegetable member)

- **Abundance of some summer crops**

Last year we had particular success with French beans, cucumbers and some of the tomatoes in the polytunnel. Our salads and greens have been a reliable staple year-round.

- **Joyful celebrations**

We held our first extended community camp for 10 days last summer with work sessions on the land, campfires, workshops, activities and shared meals.

We hosted our usual harvest celebration, Imbolc gathering and our first Spring Equinox celebration. Some of those events and ideas were boosted by linking with Leigh and Morwenna from Oakbrook.

People tell us that they enjoy and value these chances to connect to the land, the season and each other.

*"Really enjoyed the celebrations especially the harvest festival one with the lovely poem around the fire and delicious food."* (Vegetable member)

- **Establishment of regular therapeutic sessions and funding for educational sessions**

We have begun a weekly food growing session for members of the Gannicox community to come and work together with us at the site. After three months of sessions, the growers are seeing increased trust between them and the individuals and changes such as new confidence to work on tasks and individuals having new understanding of what they're capable of. Even those who were initially unsure about attending are coming regularly.

We have secured two small grants to now run some education sessions with young people (aged 11-18) in 2024. We're in conversation with Stroud College about hosting their students.

- **Establishment of regular volunteer programme and new employment**

Common Soil couldn't run without the contribution of its team of volunteers.

This year we have set up a more formalised regular volunteer programme – we have 5 new people who commit to half a day every week. In total, the organisation is now supported by:

- 12 regular volunteers (helping around once a week)
- 10 semi-regular volunteers (helping around once a month)
- Around 20 other people who come 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

*"I've met new people and built community, learnt more about growing organic food and how a CSA works. It really helps my wellbeing on a Monday (through volunteering) as it's really fun and great to be outside and more connected to what we eat." (Regular volunteer)*

This last year we have been able to offer two part-time roles on permanent employment contracts.

- **First workshops on food preservation and using plants**

In partnership with the Trinity Rooms community centre (and thanks to funding they secured from the community fridge network), we ran the following workshops at a low cost (£5 - £10) for members of the local community:

- Food preservation techniques (jam, chutney, pickle etc.)
- Sauerkraut making
- Working with nettle and cleavers

Participants reported that they learnt new skills for working with local, seasonal produce during the workshops. They also enjoyed cooking communally and meeting new people and felt inspired to try out new techniques at home.

*“The workshop was beautifully informal, and I think limited to the right number. The facilitator was very sensitive to everyone’s needs and was easily able to adapt accordingly. She mixed in activities to maintain interest and encourage observation and learning. Her teaching skills were very evident, and creative. It would be very hard to improve on what we experienced!”* (Workshop participant)

- **Infrastructure improvements**

Over winter it was a huge task to dig the ditches to drain the excess groundwater out of the polytunnel, one that we gratefully received support from volunteers to complete. Fortunately, the new drainage seems to have successfully cleared the polytunnel of ‘the bog’.

The shelter that was erected last year outside the packing area has been so valuable in creating new space for packing veg boxes and protecting the veg (and us) from sun and rain.

New woodchip paths have been created that are suppressing the weeds and allowing easier movement between beds.

We have secured planning permission for a new commercial-scale polytunnel, a tool shed near the field growing area and a root store by the packing shelter.

## Key challenges

- **Losing Alec and recruitment**

We were all very sad to lose Alec from the team to his travels. He was instrumental in setting up the veg box growing area with Ama and we have since struggled to recruit someone with the skills and experience in commercial vegetable growing to share the role with Ama, who carried it through the winter and spring. We have now recruited two new growers.

- **Communication and roles of different growing areas**

It has been hard to keep communication up between growing areas and individuals, when we're all very stretched. We spent time exploring the roles and responsibilities of the different growing areas and growers this last year.

- **Rain**

It was a very wet autumn and spring. As a consequence, we've lost entire beds of newly planted out veg this spring to slugs. Access to the site in the mud is a challenge as we cannot bring vehicles on site when it's wet.

- **Balancing finances**

Budgets are very tight and operation of the farm relies on lots of volunteer time and support from grants. We struggle to purchase the equipment needed for the expanding food growing operation.

## Learning for future

- When we asked our members what veg they'd like more of they said onions, garlic, parsnips and baby spinach. They'd like fewer Jerusalem artichokes and chard.
- When we asked members what we could improve one person said that they find collecting the veg in the dark at 4pm difficult in the winter (we will now offer a 3pm winter collection) and another said that they find the washing and sorting of veg tricky.
- We need to get a succession plan in place to take pressure off existing growers so we are training people up and aren't left without one of the main growers again.
- We will continue to need to source grant funding so that we have a diversity of income sources, particularly when food growing conditions are tough.

## Plans for next year 2023/24

- **Increase to 65 veg members for regular veg boxes**

This way we can reach more people, build the community around the farm and move closer to financial sustainability.

- **Induct new growing team**

The new employee and contractor are to get up to speed and settled in. We have intention to search for funding so that we can also offer a traineeship at some point.

- **Work with Stroud College to get young people down to the site**

We will run sessions for young people around food growing, in partnership with Stroud College. Our intention is for these young people to get to know the farm over time and feel like they belong within the community.

- **Infrastructure**

We will seek grant funding and donations for a second large polytunnel and a root store. The root store will be run as a community build.

Build of a tool shed for the field growing area is underway.

- **More therapeutic and volunteer sessions**

Building on the success of the Gannicox sessions, we will look to offer more group food growing sessions.

We notice that people derive the most benefit from engaging with the site over time, developing a relationship with the growers, the land and the plants and learning about their own skills and potential. This could be through individual volunteering or through group sessions. However, it takes grower time away from tasks to support this engagement, so we will search for funding to enable this.

- **More community events and reach**

We are now a funded *Hubbub Community Nature Hub* and as part of this we aim to expand our community events and workshops and reach out to people who might not otherwise access the site or haven't in the past.