



Annual report April 2024 to March 2025

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

Key achievements

- **Increase to 65 vegetable members and year-round veg that is benefiting people and the earth**

We expanded our vegetable members again this year, from 50 to 65. We've got into a regular pattern of supplementing our winter/spring veg boxes with UK organic produce through Global organics, to ensure members get a good veg box all year round and can stay engaged with the project and still get their food needs met, then able to receive veg boxes with produce fully grown at Common Soil in the summer/autumn. In addition to vegetable members, we have 15 community members.

100% of vegetable members who responded to our member survey in Jan 2025 (half of members responded) agree that they:

- feel they're making a positive environmental contribution by buying local food and in the way the food is grown (21 strongly agreed, 8 agreed)
- feel more connected to where their food comes from (22 strongly agreed, 7 agreed)

93% of vegetable members who responded agree that they:

- Are eating more in line with the seasons (14 strongly agreed, 13 agreed, 2 disagreed)

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

- Seven people mentioned that they're now **eating more local veg, using more or different vegetables or new recipes**. For example:
 - "Using veg I wouldn't necessarily buy has made me discover new recipes."*
 - "Feeling well nourished by the veg."*
 - "Not buying supermarkets veg at all."*
- Seven people said that a key benefit for them has been the **community element, meeting new people and feeling part of something locally**:
 - "I do love the community/collective, all in it together part."*
 - "We enjoy meeting people and having a chat at the farm when collecting veggies."*

- Two people mentioned **enjoying the experience of collecting the veg:**
“Enjoying the moments on the land with the view and smells of the shed.”

We had a particularly good year for tomatoes, thanks to particular focus on them from our grower, compared to previous years:

“The toms were really great this year.” (vegetable member)

Members also praised the salads, potatoes, wildflowers and felt there was a ‘good balance’ of veg.

We have planted willow onsite to increase biodiversity and continue to allow wild borders, plants to flower and we’re not using any slug deterrent this year due to the possibility of having rescue hedgehogs released at the site.

“It is just so great that we have this local resource.” (member)

- **Infrastructure developments – polytunnel, root vegetable store, tool shed**

We managed to secure grant funding through the Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme, supplemented by donations, and excellent contractors and volunteers who all pulled together to erect a second commercial-scale polytunnel, a tool shed near the crescent growing area and a cob-insulated root vegetable store. These have all been put to good use already and are making a difference to our growing and storage.

We secured grant funding through the Rural England Prosperity Fund for a canvas awning that has allowed school groups and parent/child sessions to happen even when the weather is wet. We also secured funding for a two-wheeled tractor, which is making our work much more efficient.

- **Joyful celebrations**

This year, we have funding from Hubbub as a member of the Community Nature Network, to support our events and workshops and people’s engagement with the site generally. Through this we held a busy open day in May 2024, supported by a craft activity from the Growing Places project and live harp music. There was a buzzing August camp-out with amazing food cooked by our grower and lots of music around the campfire. We shared a meal and lots of games for the harvest-time celebration and had our largest attended Imbolc gathering to plant earth candles and encourage the return of the light to the ground in February. We also hosted several family volunteering sessions at the farm on weekends or school holidays.

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

“Lovely atmosphere at events, food is always amazing and I’ve enjoyed the craft activities e.g. making nettle bracelets.”

- **Continuation of therapeutic sessions**

We have continued the weekly food growing session for members of the Gannicox community to come and work together with us at the site. Relationships between growers and attendees have really had a chance to strengthen over the last year and there's a core group of attendees who come every week. They have developed new skills and a sense of connection to the site and the tasks that happen through the seasons. Grant funding from Educational Services has enabled this to continue.

- **Work with young people - Outdoor cookery workshops and school/College visits**

In summer and autumn 2024 we trialled three outdoor cookery workshops for 11-18 year olds combining exploring the farm, harvesting the produce, preparing it, cooking it and eating it together around the fire with two local chefs. These were fully booked in just a few days. We hit on something needed in the community and parents told us that they struggled to find things that their young people wanted to do in the holidays, particularly for boys (that their parents also wanted them to do!).

In an evaluation following the sessions, parents reported that their young people had learnt the following things:

- What a community farm is and how it works
- How food actually grows (e.g. green bean vine, root veg below the soil etc.), what grows well in the UK and how it's different to what's found in the supermarket
- How to harvest produce
- A new recipe and working with a new food
- How to cook over an open fire outdoors
- How to use knives and other tools safely in cooking

Many of the young people also reported trying a food for the first time and making new friends and following up with them afterwards.

Parents noted that this was a new and special experience for the young people, that they returned home 'inspired' to work with food more outdoors and all had fun:

"Thank you so, so much for this afternoon – he really enjoyed it! What a wonderful experience for him" (parent of attendee)

"It's hard to find things that my boys can do over the summer. Your cookery sessions have been my children's favourite thing this summer" (parent of attendee)

"My son loved it, which is encouraging as he isn't usually that interested in cookery." (parent of attendee)

"My son was so excited by the whole process. He doesn't cook at home but has since been showing an interest. I think they felt a sense of ownership of the meal as they had harvested the food themselves." (parent of attendee)

We also received some suggestions that the wide age range was harder on the older people in the group as they felt at a different level of maturity or skill to the younger ones. In future, we plan to split the age groups 11-14 and 15-18.

Separately, we held three farm tours for 15-year-old students from Thomas Keble school (topics – seed saving, composting, planting garlic) and two tours for 16-18 year olds from Stroud College, including having them get involved in harvesting and packing for the Christmas veg boxes.

The visit went really well. What was particularly pleasing was how engaged the students were and how well they worked together. They really got stuck into the tasks... For many of the learners their only experience of sourcing fruit and vegetables was from the supermarket - so for them to see food that was grown locally and also learn a bit about organic food and the ethos of Common Soil was both inspiring and informative. (College tutor)

We also supported two young people to complete work experience at Common Soil and two of the College students who attended the visits asked if they could carry out their work experience with us in future.

- **Child and parent/carer group formalised and really well attended**

We had grant funding to trial running formal sessions for children and their parent/carer. These were really well attended. We aimed to engage between 8 and 20 people per session and engaged an average of 22 people per session – with some attended by over 30 people. People were very appreciative of the sessions and of the grower's manner with the children.

Session topics included sowing green manures, digging beds, harvesting squash, planting garlic and applying cob plaster.

In evaluation forms at the end of the sessions we asked specifically about changes people experienced as a result of the group:

- 100% of those who responded said that they feel more connected to the landscape at Common Soil as a result of the sessions
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they, or their child had learnt something new about local food growing at the sessions
- 100% of respondents strongly agreed that they now feel interested to attend sessions or get involved at Common Soil in the future.

“it has been a really valuable time here for my child and I – a really welcoming group in a beautiful setting. The sessions are extremely relaxing and my child gets the opportunity to play outdoors in a way he rarely does otherwise.”

“We’ve loved it. Very welcoming and gentle. So nourishing to be outdoors with lovely company and getting stuck in to farm tasks.”

“Common Soil gave us the opportunity to let our kid out to connect to nature and understand where food comes from – thank you!”

- **Regular volunteer support**

Common Soil couldn't run without the contribution of its team of volunteers. This year we have had:

- 9 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
- Feel supported in tasks when they volunteer
- Feel part of a community doing purposeful work together
- As a result of volunteering they're doing more physical activity or are more connected to nature
- They've learnt something about food growing and/or the environment

When asked if volunteering had made a difference to them, people offered:

“For me the experience has been transformative in many ways: emotionally, mentally, socially and physically.”

“It's got me outside and learning, made me feel more connected to Stroud and the community here as I moved here this year, and made eating well easier.”

“Makes me feel part of something, purposeful and it's a positive use of my time.”

- **Uniting the two growing areas**

This year we have brought together the two growing areas at the site under one crop plan. This means more shared tasks (e.g. with growers covering therapeutic sessions) and feels more connected as a site and organisation.

Key challenges

- **Rain**

It was a very wet autumn and spring in 2023/24. As a consequence, we lost beds of seeds early on in the season and this translated to gaps in carrots and other roots and not as much squash as was hoped for in the harvest time.

- **Time spread thinly with new infrastructure developments**

The time of the growing team and admin support was spread very thinly managing infrastructure developments while also fulfilling all of the veg box responsibilities. This was a considerable stress on the team, who were quite exhausted by the end of the season. Next year, with less infrastructure needing to be built, this shouldn't be such a challenge.

- **Balancing finances**

Budgets are very tight and the operation of the farm relies on lots of volunteer time and support from grants. We have been unsuccessful with a few grant applications within this period that we were hopeful about. We had a lot of new members joining in June 2024, but some of these weren't familiar with the CSA model and the commitment to the full year and to come to the farm to collect that is required, so a few left after the summer. We also had a couple of people struggle in the cost-of-living crisis and have to stop their membership.

- **Ill health of 2 growing team members**

Two growing team members had unanticipated health issues or accidents that meant that they aren't able to work onsite for a significant period. We have covered the work through existing staff and additional volunteers, but they are missed, of course.

Learning for future

- When we asked our members what veg they'd like more of they said more cauliflower, broccoli, peppers, mushrooms, berries and sugar snap peas and less cabbage.
- When we asked members what we could improve three people said they need more lighting in the collection shed, a community composting area, to be able to buy herbal teas, a request for a different collection day and two requests to be notified a couple of days before about veg box contents for that week.
- We still need to get a succession plan in place to take pressure off existing growers so we are training people up for when growers change or can't work.
- We will make some changes to outdoor cookery workshops for young people in future – having more volunteer support and splitting age groups.

Plans for next year 2025/26

- **Increase to 70 veg members for regular veg boxes**

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

- **New fruit bush bank – if successful with Awards for All application**

We have applied for support to establish an open free community pick-your-own fruit bush bank. This will be a place where people can gather, share in the bounty of the season and children can learn about how fruit grows naturally.

- **Continuation of child and parent/carer group and Gannicox sessions**

We want to build on the momentum started last year with the child and parent/carer sessions and continue them from June to January, taking the children through the seasons and giving them ownership of some of their own plants/crops.

- **More outdoor cookery and bushcraft for young people**

We will seek grant funding to support more outdoor cookery for young people and continue to get them engaging with the farm. We hope to include natural craft, bushcraft, composting and fire building skills in these sessions as well.

- **Stabilise and support volunteers**

We wish to be able to support our volunteers more fully – looking at skills building and meeting individual needs, as well as group events and tasks. We would also like to reach out to engage new volunteers but need to adequately support induction. We have applied for funding to enable us to provide more support to volunteers or those seeking work experience.

We intend to work with Ruskin Mill to offer work experience placements to some of their students from September.

Here's to a fruitful, satisfying next year – filled with a sense of connection to each other and the land – for all involved with Common Soil.