

GROWING COMMUNITIES ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20



FOREWORD BY JULIE BROWN, DIRECTOR

“The pesky squirrels had a field day, frustratingly often taking just one bite from each fruit before moving on to the next.”



At the risk of stating the obvious: blimey, what a year it's been so far. 'Unprecedented' has been used... an unprecedented number of times.

But as we head anxiously towards winter, I'm going to set myself the challenge of not mentioning the 'c' word at all in this foreword (although there will be plenty to say about it in the body of this report). I thought it best to avoid drawing conclusions or making predictions and instead take a lesson from Bob Dylan:

Come writers and critics, who prophesise with your pen

And keep your eyes wide, the chance won't come again

And don't speak too soon, for the wheel's still in spin

And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'

For the loser now, will be later to win

For the times they are a-changin'

So, I'm writing this at the orchard in Kent where, alongside being the Director of GC, I am also partner in a fruit-growing business, selling mainly through the farmers' market and the veg scheme.

The last few weeks we've been busy harvesting, and the trees – now bare of fruit – are covered with a gorgeous display of orange and golden leaves.

Sadly, the pear harvest wasn't so great this year as the pesky squirrels had a field day, frustratingly often taking just one bite from each fruit before moving on to the next. They seemed less attracted to the apples that we planted in 2008 when we bought the land. This year the trees have finally borne fruit and we had an amazing harvest. And never in my life have I squeezed so many plums (learning much about the ripening and storage of stone fruit along the way)!

Earlier, I paid a visit to our 'Newbury ➡➡



Oak', an 8ft tree grown from an acorn gathered along the route of the Newbury bypass back in 1993, carried around in a pot since for many years and eventually planted back in the ground when we bought the orchard.

Last year it produced its first handful of acorns – one of which I was ludicrously pleased to grow on – although I'm trying not to invest too much symbolism in the solitary, vulnerable seedling sitting in the pot in front of me.

Today, I was able to gather 11 more acorns – the seedlings destined for a hedge planned as a windbreak for the apple orchard. It's going to take a good few years to compensate for the 10,000 trees so short-sightedly felled to make way for that new road, but a satisfying pursuit I think.


Hmm. Where am I heading here.... that things play out in the long term? That you reap what you sow? That the seeds we sow now can bring rewards in the future as well as making us happy in the here and now?

In terms of the here and now, I have

“I have never felt more convinced that Growing Communities – in its small way – is on the right track.”

found great comfort in Growing Communities over the last – often dark – months. It has felt like a grounded, safe, caring and essential place to be, not like something operating on the edges of society.

I've also realised this year that I have never felt more convinced that Growing Communities – in its small way – is on the right track. That we must, and will be, part of the future world we create as we tackle the climate and nature emergency.

I hope that Growing Communities can be a source of comfort and hope for you too. Thank you for being part of it. 



“Thank you for doing what you do! We absolutely love being part of the scheme - it gives us great food and feels like we are part of a radical political act at the same time.”

VEG SCHEME MEMBER

2020: A STORY OF RESILIENCE

This is the year we were put to the test. (No, not those swab tests, though many of you may have taken one of them at some point this year too.)

We’re talking about how the upheaval caused by the pandemic tested every individual and every system we know. Everyone’s physical and mental health. Businesses’ ability to adapt the way they work. The government’s ability to lead. Supermarkets’ ability to restock their shelves. Home bakers’ ability to craft

the perfect sourdough. Communities’ ability to support each other.

The biggest test for GC was whether our systems for feeding people – designed to withstand the challenge of climate change – could stand up to the phenomenal upheaval presented by Covid-19.

And the short answer is that we coped very well. OK, so in the early days there were sleepless nights and long hours ➡➡



of overtime. Some staff were shielding, sick or self-isolating. Some projects got shifted to the backburner (turns out a pandemic shines a piercing light on what really matters).

The core staff team worked incredibly hard to make the necessary changes to keep people safe. Julie, with senior managers Zosia and Katy, directed operations with insight and clarity.

KEEPING THE ENGINE GOING

The veg scheme team designed and delivered loads of changes – despite coordinator Jo, marketing manager Chen and finance officer Rachel swiftly pivoting to working from home. Ellie and Dom, with support from Nicole, kept everything running smoothly at GC HQ, even though it was Dom's first week in a new job and they had to find time and space to deal with a 20% rise in orders in the first weeks of lockdown.

Our system, for the most part, showed itself to be as resilient as we designed it to be. It's good to know that flexibility, responsiveness and trust prove to be excellent attributes in a crisis.

300%
increase in veg scheme members' donations to the Food Credit Scheme after lockdown hit

We have a close relationship with our farmers and suppliers. We've always paid them fairly and promptly. There is trust, understanding and, often, physical proximity. Most of our core farmers have invested in a largely local workforce who are employed all year round. They can still get to work.

BIG LOVE FOR THE MEMBERSHIP

Our brilliant veg scheme members are happy to eat the seasonal produce we provide, giving the ordering system the flexibility it needs. Your support and



patience when collection points closed or produce was less than perfect was amazing. Another bonus is the fact that most of you live locally and walk or cycle to your collection points. (Some 96% of you this year, up from 91%.)

And what a supportive and community-minded group of people you are. We launched our Whatsapp buddy groups in early April and it has been a joy to witness how enthusiastically you offer to help fellow members in need.

Market visitors, too, have been hugely



considerate of other customers and stallholders. Your continued patience has lifted our spirits and helped to make the market a safe and enjoyable place to buy food – when many other shops felt much the opposite. Despite lower visitor numbers, the market's income has remained steady this year – providing essential income to small farmers and producers.

Of course, we all miss the bustling days of lingering and chatting at the market – and we know many of you miss Kwame's excellent coffee. The chats ➡➡

“Farmers’ markets are crucial to us and our animals. By selling direct to customers who have a vested interest in the care of the animals that they eat, we are able to invest to improve the animals’ lives as well as our own.”

FABIENNE PECKHAM, LIVESTOCK FARMER

and lattes (and the sauerkraut) will return as soon as it’s safe.

Market manager Kerry worked hard to ensure the market never closed, redesigning the layout before lockdown even started. She then took a key role in making a compelling case to local and national government to keep markets open and advised other markets on how to use the distanced queuing systems and stall designs that worked for us.

We used our experience to advise other bodies about the benefits of our short supply chains for resilience too. We submitted written evidence on the impact of Covid-19 to the House of Commons Business Energy and Industrial Strategy committee. That report showed how selling direct through our market and to our veg scheme gave our farmers the security and continued viability they needed.

MONEY IN: MONEY OUT

For GC, revenue from veg scheme sales and the Better Food Shed increased, but that increase was wiped out by extra costs associated with the

pandemic – renting extra space for veg packing; allowing more time to deliver veg safely; needing more staff to work as market stewards. And we lost income from suspending our urban farm shops (bread, egg and produce sales at staffed collection points), closing our café at the market and losing some stallholders who needed to isolate.

We’re very grateful to Hackney Council, Esmée Fairbairn and the Farming the Future Fund, who stepped in with extra payments to help cover some of these costs.


REFRAMING THE BIG PICTURE

In other efforts to use our experience to influence the shape of the food system and the wider world, we also contributed to Hackney Parks’ strategy review – making the case for food growing for its many benefits for nutrition, education, biodiversity, and citizens’ mental and physical health.

We contributed to the Fruit and Veg Alliance Action Plan presented to farming minister Victoria Prentis at the Horticulture Roundtable; we will

be represented on most of the working groups arising from this. We gave evidence on short supply chains to the National Food Strategy enquiry and took part in webinars with the Landworkers’ Alliance (on Covid), Sustain (on markets) and Capital Growth (on growing in small spaces).

Alice at Dagenham Farm has been participating in Defra trials looking at new systems for awarding subsidies to farmers based on the public good they offer rather than the area of land farmed. We are hoping that the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs) will support sustainable farmers for the full range of environmental and social benefits that can be achieved alongside producing organic food.

None of this could have happened without your continued support. In the midst of the challenges thrown up by Covid-19, Brexit, the economic downturn and the nature emergency, we must build back better. With every veg bag you buy or pound you spend at the market, you are contributing to this critical work. 

“I have gained access to an invaluable network of growers and experienced people able to offer advice (crucially Sophie, who is amazing!) and armed with those connections the dream [of running a market garden] feels much more tangible and achievable.”

IONE, GROWING TRAINEE



DOWN ON THE FARMS

Our market gardens, usually buzzing with volunteers, have been rather quieter since March. The growers, Alice in Dagenham and Sophie in Hackney, agreed they couldn't support volunteers safely, so they mainly worked alone or with one other person.

Aside from the extra work, Sophie says “it was hard to be closed when people were so in need of time outdoors with purpose and community”. She's glad to have welcomed limited numbers of volunteers back in the past few weeks. She was also able to offer a short growing training to two people, Ione and Holly, and is grateful for all their hard work after their return in June.


Alice is about to reopen the farm to Barking & Dagenham College students, who regularly visited pre-pandemic. “It will be so wonderful to have their energy back at the farm,” she says.

In normal years, some Hackney produce is sold from the site in Clissold Park and

through the urban farm shop at the Old Fire Station. Meanwhile, restaurants buy substantial amounts of Dagenham's produce. Fortunately, the veg scheme model had the flexibility to take and distribute this extra produce.

POP-UP VEG SCHEME

Alice also started doing veg bags for the community where she lives in Newham. This helped spread the harvest over the week but needed more labour than sales to restaurants. Restaurants also pay more than veg scheme wholesale prices, so it takes more time to make equivalent income.

During lockdown Barking and Dagenham council bought produce from the farm – delivered via the Better Food Shed – for their food aid parcels. In Newham veg bag customers made donations to the farm to provide veg bags to vulnerable families. These were delivered through a local children's centre. 

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT THE SHED

The Better Food Shed is our wholesaler based in Barking, East London. It gives small veg schemes access to farmers and produce that would otherwise be out of reach. It gives farmers simpler orders and a single point to deliver to.

Having spent the year since it launched getting its operational systems running smoothly, the Shed was hit by a huge surge in orders when Covid-19 struck. Weekly sales increased by more than 40%. An added challenge was that this happened during the UK hungry gap – when the stored veg from the old season is running out and the new season's veg is yet to grow.

THE GOLDILOCKS FACTOR

The Shed coped incredibly well. It benefited from its ideal size: it is not so big that it needs to order giant amounts from small farmers (leaving them with no produce for their other outlets), but not too small, in that the size of the




orders are substantial enough to make deliveries viable for the farmers and wholesaler Langridge Organics. Its flexible buying policy – taking what seasonal produce the farmers actually have available rather than a set list of

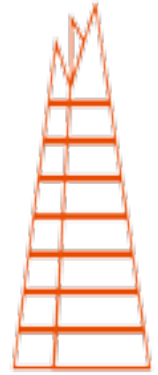
'perpetual summer' produce – adds to its resilience.

This year, as well as supplying eight original Better Food Traders (more on them later!), the Shed has started supplying a new shop and box scheme in Sydenham; the Fairshares food coop in Elephant & Castle; and the Granville Community Kitchen in Kilburn.

It also supplied produce to supplement the box schemes of some of our farmers, enabling Sarah Green and Ripple Farm to collect fruit and veg when they drop off their own harvest.

The Shed generates almost no food waste – as it orders exactly what's needed from the farmers each week. But on the rare times that there's a mistake with the order, Shed manager Danny has set up a partnership with the local food bank to donate surplus produce.

He's hoping to build regular donations into the Shed's business model in future, as well as exploring how to supply veg to less wealthy residents in Barking and Dagenham. 



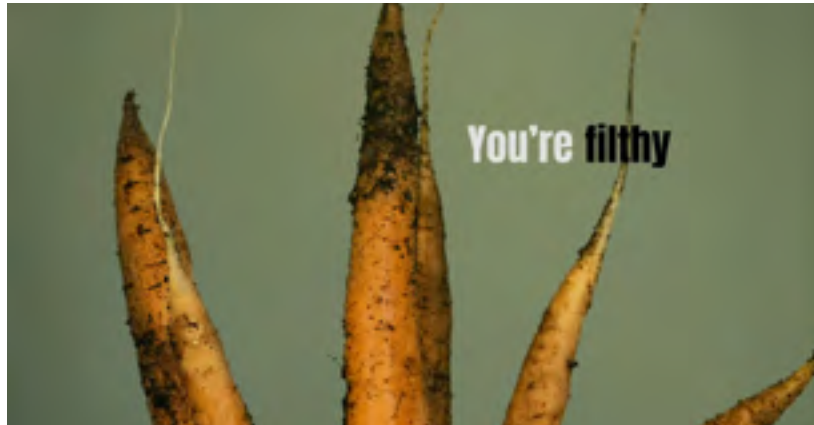
14 tonnes

of produce is traded through the Better Food Shed each week. If that was stacked up, the pile of veg crates would be as tall as the Shard*

(* Though of course we would never try that... far too dangerous.)

“Growing Communities clearly demonstrate all that is required to be a Better Food Trader, one of only two applicants who scored full marks in the subsidiary thresholds.”

**BETTER FOOD TRADERS
MEMBERSHIP PANEL**



NEWS FROM THE BETTER FOOD TRADERS

The Better Food Traders was officially launched as an accreditation body by GC director Julie and project leader Natasha at the Oxford Real Farming Conference in January – though the movement has been building since the first veg schemes joined GC’s Start-up Programme ten years ago.

The network now has eight accredited Better Food Traders (including GC) and ten aspiring members. It is also talking to three early start-ups and five other likely applicants.

“Our main aim for the year was to get ourselves known more widely,” says Natasha. The pandemic gave the network a shortcut to that by highlighting the resilience of – and necessity for – local food systems. Covid-19 created a bigger platform for those critical conversations to happen.

The team gave substantial evidence to the Food Foundation’s Covid-19 report

– which identified that box schemes increased their business by 111% in the six weeks between the end of February and mid-April. The report was used to lobby for Government grants to help upscale fruit and vegetable supply to meet increased demand.

Members spoke at the Northern Real Farming Conference and the Ethical Consumer conference as well as a Sustain webinar on local food resilience.

A cheeky film stressing the value of ethically traded food, made with agency Improper, was shared widely across the sustainable food network and beyond.

More recently, the Better Food Traders network has launched Know Better Food, a peer-to-peer learning programme. Some 16 participants from around the UK have trained as leaders and are recruiting new people to do the training and serve as ambassadors for ethically grown and traded food. 

GROWING COMMUNITIES ACCOUNTS 2020

INCOME STATEMENT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2020

| | 2020 (£) | 2019 (£) |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|
| TURNOVER | 1,559,803 | 966,048 |
| Cost of Sales | <u>1,447,640</u> | <u>887,266</u> |
| GROSS PROFIT | 112,163 | 78,782 |
| Administrative expenses | <u>101,112</u> | <u>76,286</u> |
| OPERATING PROFIT | 11,051 | 2,496 |
| Interest receivable | 1,021 | 886 |
| PROFIT ON ORDINARY ACTIVITIES BEFORE TAXATION | 12,072 | 3,382 |
| Tax on profit | - | - |
| RETAINED PROFIT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR | <u>12,072</u> | <u>3,382</u> |

BALANCE SHEET 31 MARCH 2020

| | 2020 (£) | 2019 (£) |
|---|------------------------|------------------|
| FIXED ASSETS | | |
| Tangible assets | 12,413 | 14,855 |
| CURRENT ASSETS | | |
| Debtors | 44,121 | 23,911 |
| Cash at bank and in hand | <u>268,144</u> | <u>363,893</u> |
| | 312,265 | 387,804 |
| CREDITORS: amounts falling due within one year | <u>(87,500)</u> | <u>(177,998)</u> |
| NET CURRENT ASSETS | <u>224,765</u> | <u>209,806</u> |
| TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES | <u>237,178</u> | <u>224,661</u> |
| CAPITAL AND RESERVES | | |
| Retained earnings | 191,179 | 179,107 |
| Other reserves | 45,999 | 45,554 |
| MEMBERS' FUNDS | <u>237,178</u> | <u>224,661</u> |

“Without making it sound like I have no life, your veg scheme is one of the best things in my life!”

VEG SCHEME MEMBER

“Your #foodzones model is a great inspiration and precisely the kind of thinking we need now!”

CAROLYN STEEL, SITOPIA AUTHOR, VIA TWITTER

TREASURER'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2020

It was another successful year financially for Growing Communities, with an overall 62% increase in revenue to £1.6m in 2020. The key driver for the growth was the launch of our wholesale cooperative, the Better Food Shed, which generated sales of £556k in total. We are pleased that the Better Food Shed has performed so well in its first full year of operation. The power of working together with other box schemes across London is not only creating greater choice and lower carbon impact, it is also making solid financial sense too.

The Growing Communities veg scheme grew by 11% in the year, which was in line with our expectations. We are also pleased that the farmers' market has continued to grow and prosper. Our growing operations – across both Dagenham and our network of Urban Market Gardens – showed a combined increase on the prior year, with a particularly strong output at Dagenham. We received £94k in grants during the year, primarily for the Better Food Traders and Dagenham Pavilion projects.

| | £ | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|----------------------|---|---------|------------------|
| Veg Scheme | | 704,565 | 782,814 |
| Farmers' Market | | 61,373 | 62,486 |
| Urban Market Gardens | | 9,615 | 7,884 |
| Café sales | | 10,992 | 11,296 |
| Dagenham Farm sales | | 34,310 | 41,671 |
| Grant income | | 93,672 | 94,171 |
| Better Food Shed | | 42,981 | 556,350 |
| Other | | 8,540 | 3,131 |
| Total | | 966,048 | 1,559,803 |

How likely is it that you would recommend the farmers' market to a friend or colleague?*



(* The Net Promoter Score is a national standard that measures customers' willingness to make a recommendation to their family, friends or colleagues. It can range from -100 to +100. The industry average for grocery is 24.)

WHAT'S NEXT?

“I’m very grateful for the unstinting effort put into running the market very well and cheerfully, especially through this pandemic. It’s a tonic every Saturday.”

FARMERS' MARKET CUSTOMER



Like many organisations this year, we have felt a bigger call to action about anti-racism. We recognise that we have work to do to create a workforce, board and membership that are more representative of where we live.

One of our first steps has been to create a placement as part of Feedback’s EcoTalent internship programme aimed at welcoming young people from under-represented backgrounds into environmental work. As this report goes to press, our Dagenham intern, Marlon, is starting his first week with us. In the year to come, we’ll be exploring more ways of giving young people a head start in this sector.

CASTING THE FOOD NET

Also in Dagenham, we are starting our Food Net programme, funded by the National Lottery’s Coronavirus Community Support Fund. This is a six-month project cooking and delivering

ready meals for low-income families and individuals in need in the area surrounding the farm.

Participants will receive a pack of healthy ready meals weekly, made from seasonal fresh produce from GC’s farmers and suppliers, plus a food pack of the ingredients to re-create the meal from scratch. They will also be encouraged to take part in weekly live-streamed Zoom cooking lessons with a GC trainer to prepare the meals virtually with the other participants.

LEAVING EU BEHIND

Of course, we’re making plans for life after Brexit too, though by buying mainly from local farms we should be insulated from disruption to imports.

Langridge, the organic wholesaler we use for European produce, is confident that there won’t be a huge upheaval. Our exit will coincide with the time of

year we start to rely more on imports of citrus fruit from Europe – but as Danny from the Shed points out, oranges can survive a few days’ longer in transit, unlike some more perishable produce that supermarkets routinely import.

ON YOUR BIKE

Our veg scheme is already very low carbon: we never air-freight produce; we never buy produce grown in heated greenhouses; we work with local farmers as much as we can. And we know that our collection-only system saves a lot of fuel (Riverford estimates that 26% of its total energy use comes from delivering veg boxes to people’s homes). But we also know we can always do better.

This summer we trialled using an electric bike from Zedify to deliver some of your bags to collection points. We’ve now decided to buy our own bike to extend these deliveries. 

THE LAST WORD

Our marketing assistant Rachel was recently interviewed by Cuemars, a homewares shop in Brick Lane. Read the full interview.

What would you say are the main issues in the food system?

In a very heavily crammed nutshell, it comes down to three key things, which create a kind of vicious circle: the industrialisation of farming and food production, which is pushing us towards an ecological and climate crisis; the global neoliberal economy, which drives unsustainable farming; and the loss of food culture and traditions.

The children's storybook idea of the farm with a mix of free-ranging animals and a patchwork of colourful fields, alive with birdsong, and a farmyard busy with people is very far cry from reality. Today you're more likely to find a lone farmer on a vast monocultural landscape, using huge machines to plough, sow, spray and harvest. Conspicuously missing are wild-flower meadows, hedgerows and

wetlands. Modern farming is destroying the natural systems that underpin our ability to produce food. And the people are missing too – chemicals and machines have replaced them.

Secondly, it's the economy and global market forces. Producers who are using sustainable practices struggle to survive. Because, for instance, managing weeds is a much easier, quicker job if you just spray it with a chemical rather than employ people to do it by hand or with basic machinery. And the prices farmers get for their produce has been going down steadily over the decades, as food corporations get bigger and more powerful. What's more, small-scale farms receive very little, if no, government subsidy. And they often pay additional organic certification fees for the privilege!

The last part of the puzzle is the loss of food cultures and traditions, which are developed over centuries as people learn how to feed themselves in

their particular landscape, within the limits of the land and climate they're living in. As farming becomes more industrialised, people are displaced from the land and grow up without a close connection to nature. And when communities no longer have influence over a food system, the corporations control how we eat.

How is the way consumers shop linked to the climate emergency that the planet is facing?

Buying from supermarkets is the biggest issue. They dominate 90% of the food market. While supermarkets have brought us cheap food and a seemingly limitless supply of it from all over the world, their aggressive trade practices have brought sustainable small-scale producers to their knees. Not to mention the amount of food waste that's inherent in this system. We're learning that cheap food comes at a great social and ecological cost. We need to learn to live within limits.

What can we, consumers, do to change this?


Firstly, start thinking about yourself as a food citizen rather than a consumer.

It's empowering, enjoyable and a damn sight more tasty! Learn to make food from scratch, grow salad on your windowsill, have a chat with a farmer, taste their delicious wares and learn about our incredible food history.

Support agroecological farmers – small to medium-scale organic farmers who are actively protecting wildlife, restoring soil fertility and protecting wild places. Buy as direct as possible and choose organic, local and seasonal. For coffee, tea and chocolate, look for small-batch, single-origin products.

Ask questions at shops and in restaurants about where the food has come from and how it's been produced.

Our Government doesn't do enough to support sustainable, healthy food. The upcoming trade deal with the US will make things worse. The Conservatives seem hell-bent on relaxing our food standards to open up these trade links.

So get political. Follow Sustain, the Landworkers' Alliance, Compassion in World Farming. Write to your MP, join the protests and sign those petitions! 

A BIG THANK YOU

We couldn't do what we do without the commitment of our staff, freelancers, patchwork growers, Board and volunteers. Our staff are Alex Tugume, Alice Holden, Ashlea Wane, Bren Bedson, Cath Goldstein, Dominic Stewart Barton, Ellie Virk, Georgina Sutton, Helen Bredin, Ian Atkins, Jack Harber, Jo Barber, Johanna Valeur, Julie Brown, Katy Barker, Kerry Rankine, Kwame Appau, Maya Hollis, Natasha Soares, Nicki East, Nicole David, Paul Harriss, Rachel Dring, Rachel Stevenson, Richenda Wilson, Shelagh Martin, Sophie Verhagen and Zosia Walczak.

Our patchworkers are Davina, Tom, Jack, Rachel, Shelagh, Tom, Ximena and Zosia. This year's trainees in Hackney were Holly and Ione (sadly, work commitments and Covid-19 meant Emma and Richelle had to drop out).

Thanks also to Danny Fisher, Deedee Aitken, Joel Lambregts, Paul Kirby and Rebecca Page at the Better Food Shed; Ambreen Raja, Antoinette Berte, Kate Ford, Michael Calwell and Rob Alderson for essential support; former staffers Ele Stewart, Farook Bhabha, Giles Narang, Kristen Park, Phil England and Ximena Ransom; extra support workers Alex Bloomer, Calum Handovsky-Boyd, Chloe Dunnett, Dave North, Denise McNeill, Elsa Froggatt-Brown, Hari Byles, Jonah Froggatt-Brown, Maria Lusitano, Paula Dangers, Shelby Pritchard and Sorcha nic Subhine.

Our volunteer Board members are: Sarah Havard (chair), Richard Dana (treasurer), Geraldine Gilbert, Kath Dalmeny and Natalie Silk.

Special thanks go to Caroline, Dewi, Ian, Imogen, Jo, Joanne, Michael, Sari, Shelby, Sorcha and Stephen for returning to volunteer at the market gardens in Hackney when it was safe to do so. At Dagenham, our longest participating volunteer, Dave Gore, volunteered all the way through the pandemic. We are very grateful to him for his constant support and kindness.



GROWING COMMUNITIES

Growing Communities is reshaping the food and farming systems that feed us so they work better for us, our community and our planet.


Our organic fruit and vegetable scheme and our farmers' market provide fairer, more secure markets for the farmers and producers who are the foundation of a sustainable agriculture system.

We produce fantastic local salad, fruit, herbs and veg – and new food growers – on our pioneering and award-winning urban farms in Hackney and Dagenham.


Our wholesale arm, the Better Food Shed, connects agroecological farms with local routes to market, while the Better Food Trader network supports those ethical retailers to change the food system together.

We also consider the bigger picture and work to create wider change: articulating our vision and advocating in support of our aims.

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