

GROWING COMMUNITIES



IMPACT REPORT 2022/23

WELCOME TO GC'S 2023 IMPACT REPORT



“We’ve made some small inroads recently – supplying two schools in Hackney and the HAF programme in Barking & Dagenham – and we feel up to the challenge.”

I’ve been looking into the origin of the phrase “build it and they will come”, in the hope of somehow weaving the story behind it into this foreword. A little disappointingly, it turned out to be a misquote from a cheesy 1989 film about baseball.

But the name of the film – what a gift! *Field of Dreams*. Such a perfect description of what we’ve created together over the past 25 years or so.

Just look at this report if you don’t believe me. The interconnected web of local people, farmers, businesses and projects reflected in these pages is a veritable feast of ideas brought to life.

And underpinning it all are literally fields of carrots, leeks, squash and spinach. An amazing farmer-focused supply chain that provides us with fresh, organic food that nourishes; food grown in ways that build carbon, protect soils and sustain nature;

and food traded in ways that build community and support meaningful livelihoods.

Together we have created something truly special and significant.

It’s taken many years to painstakingly build this supply chain: setting up our box scheme and farmers’ market; establishing our own growing sites and farm; then helping similar schemes to get up and running; and most recently launching the Better Food Shed – our wholesale distribution hub.

Your collective buying power and commitment have enabled us – albeit on a small scale – to transform food and farming through community-led trade, creating a new, ethically based supply chain that provides organic farmers with fair and sustainable routes to market, designs out waste and pollution, designs in environmental protection and community health, ➡➔

while supporting a plant-rich diet throughout.

But there is clearly more to do. And we're now operating at a scale to feel ready to take things to the next level by mobilising the potentially transformative power of public procurement.

By supplying schools, hospitals, care homes and catering, we can make our wonderful climate and nature friendly fruit and vegetables available to more and more people, providing sustainable and healthy food to some of our most vulnerable citizens. We've made some inroads recently – supplying two [**schools in Hackney and the Holiday Activities and Food programme**](#) in Barking & Dagenham – and we feel up to the challenge.

We know from experience that farmers can and will respond if the demand is there and they are paid fairly. This in turn would enable us to grow and strengthen our network of farms for the benefit of all: we're likely to rely more and more on supply chains like this as we move into a future where the

mainstream food system becomes ever less resilient and fit for the challenges of the climate and nature emergency.

So, we want local authorities in the communities we serve to see us as allies in achieving their goals and tackling the huge problems we all face. As a society we can no longer rely solely on individual consumers to do all the heavy lifting in the fight against climate change and the collapse of nature, and not all consumers have the buying power and choice.

We are ready to work with public sector buyers to reformulate menus, so that fresh, seasonal, plant-based, organic meals form the bulk of their catering offer, to focus on value and impact as well as price, to celebrate the produce and the farmers together, and to help challenge the image of organic food and make it the norm.

Alongside that, we can provide a way to meet many of their stated climate, nature and health commitments: reducing emissions throughout the supply chain, tackling waste from the farm level upwards, making healthy



food more widely available, and building community and local economy.

We know it won't be easy. Many have tried over the years – with some successes, but also with many disappointments and frustrations. So, we need you all to stick with us – continuing to sustain the very foundations of our exceptional supply chain as we inch forward.

So, Hackney, Haringey, Barking & Dagenham, Newham and Tower

“We can make our wonderful climate and nature friendly fruit and vegetables available to more and more people, providing sustainable and healthy food to some of our most vulnerable citizens.”

Hamlets, I say: “We've built it. Will you come?”

And to all our members, customers, staff, board and partners – I offer profound thanks for the part you've played in building this beautiful field of dreams from the ground up. We could not be contemplating this next step without you.

**Julie Brown, Director
November 2023**

By supporting Growing Communities, you are building and enabling a better food system, one that's better for you, your community and your planet. Read on to see what a powerful force for good you are.

FAIRER TRADING

Bridging the Gap

We're partnering Sustain and other groups in a [project to explore policies and financial interventions](#) that could both stimulate production of climate and nature friendly food and increase the capacity of those on lower incomes to afford it.

Key to this is finding ways to encourage councils, schools and hospitals to invest the public's money in food for public good, food that enhances health and protects the environment. Other [priority areas](#) are investing in ethical wholesale hubs such as GC's Better Food Shed, promoting local food, and fruit and veg on prescription, championing living wages and properly valuing horticulture.

Flourishing farmers

You tell us that paying farmers fairly is one of your key reasons for shopping with us, and it's the starting point for how we set our prices. We pay farmers what they need to produce food sustainably and pay their workers decently, then we add enough mark-up to cover our costs.

Living wages

All GC staff have been paid the Real London Living Wage since it was introduced in 2005. And we keep our pay differential low: no one at GC earns more than twice the Living Wage. Meanwhile, at Sainsbury's, [CEO Simon Roberts enjoyed a 30% pay rise last year](#), taking his annual pay to £4.95m.

Putting money in the right hands

It has been a challenging year for farmers, who have had to contend with extreme weather, [avian flu](#) and rising [fuel, staff and other costs](#).

When you shop at the farmers' market your money goes direct to the farmers and producers who grow and make your food. It's a lifeline for them.

Sales through the market were £883,871, up 17% on last year, partly thanks to the addition of [Soleshare](#), who sell sustainably caught fish, shellfish and smoked fish, as well as pâtés and fishcakes made from unsold fish, so nothing is ever wasted.

Making organic affordable

While organic food is necessarily more expensive to produce than conventional, it's untrue that it's only for the rich. Some 24% of market customers in our recent survey consider themselves to be on a low income but still choose to prioritise buying food this way.

Trading better

The [Better Food Traders](#), the network of ethical retailers we founded, welcomed its 150th member recently, more than doubling in size over the year. Veg schemes and shops from Inverness to Cornwall have bonded, shared advice and learned from each other to help us all to further our mission to keep our communities supplied with delicious, fairly traded, local food from climate and nature friendly farmers.



HEALTHIER PLANET

Throwing out packaging

GC delivers your fruit and veg loose, bunched or in paper whenever we can without compromising quality and freshness. This saved over 250,000 plastic bags, wraps, nets and punnets.

You returned well over 55,000 carrier bags for reuse, 15% more than last year, saving us buying new (recycled) bags.

At the market, Petersons Farm Organics went almost entirely plastic-free. Many other farmers and food producers offered refills. unpackaged and plastic-free foods such as bread, kombucha, cakes, milk and honey.

Supporting wildlife

While harvesting rocket at Ripple Farm recently, Martin's Merlin app recorded the song of more than **18 birds in less than 15 minutes**, including redwing, dunnock, goldfinch, skylark, siskin, treecreeper and linnet.

Clearing the air

Did you know that **25% of air pollution over London** comes from synthetic fertilisers and animal waste on farms surrounding the city?

By supporting organic and biodynamic farms that use natural fertilisers and by choosing to eat less meat and dairy, you cut the volume of these potentially harmful particulates in the air we all breathe.

Un-making waste

Up to **3 million tonnes of produce grown in the UK is wasted** before it leaves the farm gate, about 10% of all the food grown. By buying what seasonal varieties the farmers have available each week and accepting wonky, weird and wonderful fruit and veg, you're tackling waste before it happens.



“Changes are necessary if we're going to break away from the globalised food chains, so good at producing food that's cheap at the till but so costly in other ways.”

**SHEILA DILLON
THE FOOD PROGRAMME, BBC RADIO 4 (LINK)**

Lowering carbon emissions

On the farm: organic farmers use no chemical pesticides or fertilisers.

In the sky: you'll never find air-freighted produce in your veg bags.

On the road: 86% of the veg and 32% of the fruit in the bags this year was grown on UK farms, compared with just **55% of veg and 17% of the fruit** eaten across the UK as a whole.

Across London: Delivering to the Better Food Shed instead of all the veg schemes around London saved local farmers about 500 miles a week or 25,000 miles this year, the equivalent of driving round the world. Half the Shed's deliveries were by electric van.

On our streets: delivering to collection points rather than individual homes – with some deliveries by electric bike – saved many more miles. A massive 98% of veg scheme members walked, cycled or took the bus to collect your veg, covering over 70,000 miles a year. That's the same as going round the world nearly three times!

HEALTHIER PEOPLE

Transforming school meals

We were excited this year to start supplying fruit and vegetables to two Hackney schools, especially after seeing a study from Imperial College that found ultra-processed foods account for 82% of calories in schoolchildren's packed lunches and 64% in school meals.

Chef James Taylor said: "I've been working on transforming the school kitchens I oversee from serving mostly frozen ingredients, unhealthy menus and nutrient-poor food to fresh, healthy, diverse, tasty, colourful food made with great ingredients.

"I serve two vegetarian meals a week and I'm moving to more pulses and vegetables.

"It's been one of my dreams to be able to use affordable, locally farmed organic produce in my primary schools and it's finally happening."

Crushing your portion targets

85% of veg scheme members crunch through 5-10 portions of fruit and veg a day – pretty formidable given the *Peas Please* report in 2021 found just 33% of adults and 12% of children were getting their five-a-day. Nearly a third of veg scheme members and a quarter of market customers are vegetarian or vegan. A further quarter eat meat or fish less than once a week.

Inspiring the next generation

Both our farms have welcomed many groups of young people this year. After one local primary school visited Dagenham Farm, over half the children said they had discovered a new fruit or vegetable.

The farm ran a series of visits for SEND students from Barking & Dagenham College who immersed themselves in all aspects of growing and took veg back to use in their cookery lessons.

"This has been a fantastic opportunity for our students to get hands-on experience. You can see the students thriving by coming out of their normal college setting. Students are getting excited about planting things in their own gardens and it has given the push for some of our students to help out at home."

**CHRISTINA HEBRON,
BARKING & DAGENHAM COLLEGE**



BUILDING CONNECTION

How shopping at the market is good for your mental health

Did you know that [social interactions, including with people you don't know well, can make you feel happier and less stressed](#)? And that the more casual interactions you have in a day, the better you feel?

This is certainly true at the market. In research earlier this year, we found that three-quarters of market visitors felt happier after a morning chatting – or simply saying hello – to stallholders and other customers. Meanwhile just 5% of shoppers at a local supermarket felt better after shopping there and 33% actually felt worse.

At the market, 92% of people spoke to at least one person, and some chatted to more than 10. Whereas, four-fifths of supermarket visitors didn't say hello to a soul including shop staff.



Getting to know you

We've had a busy calendar of fun events this year and it has been great to see so many of you at them.

You celebrated the farmers' market's 20th anniversary by eating delicious cakes made by [Colga Parker](#) and [Syd Aston](#). You joined [Marina O'Connell](#) and [Vicki Hird](#)'s inspiring discussion about the crucial role of regenerative farming in the planet's future. And you came on our fun and fascinating day trip hosted by Martin at [Ripple Farm](#).

Those of you who braved the torrential rain told us you thoroughly enjoyed the activities and amazing spread of shared food at our first Harvest Feast.

You snapped up plants at our popular autumn plant sale as well as our spring sale at Springfield Park. And we've welcomed more groups to our growing sites in Hackney and Dagenham with revamped [team volunteering days](#) and [educational workshops](#), a fun day getting your hands dirty, your lungs clean and your spirits lifted.

Saving Hook & Son

When dairy farmer Steve Hook and his family were threatened with a proposed development that would build over 40 acres of their prime grazing land, [hundreds of you rallied](#) to object to the planning application.

Sharing the love

You generous veg scheme members donated almost £15k worth of bags of fruit and veg when you went on holiday. We used it to buy produce for food banks in [Bounds Green](#) and [Hoxton](#).

Redistributing uncollected veg bags and surplus produce from the veg pack and the [Better Food Shed](#) amounted to over £30k more.

Delphine Allard uses donated food to make three-course meals twice a week for guests of [NLAH](#), while Ketchurah Ravindren ([@ketchurahskitchen](#)) cooks up deliciously inventive meals for visiting groups from food left over at [Dalston Curve Garden](#).

GROWING COMMUNITIES ACCOUNTS 2023

INCOME STATEMENT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

	2023 (£)	2022 (£)
TURNOVER	2,060,464	2,159,462
Cost of Sales	1,941,879	2,078,929
GROSS PROFIT	118,585	80,533
Administrative expenses	115,714	106,633
	2,871	(26,100)
Other operating income	3,657	3,657
OPERATING PROFIT	6,528	(22,443)
Interest receivable	686	154
(LOSS)/PROFIT BEFORE TAXATION	7,214	(22,289)
Tax on (loss)/profit	-	-
(LOSS)/PROFIT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR	7,214	(22,289)

“I saw the impact that coming to the farm has on volunteers. I witnessed first hand the effects of simply having an outdoor space where there is work to do but importantly room to ‘not’ do.”

CAROLINE CHANDLER, HACKNEY GROWING TRAINEE, 2023

BALANCE SHEET 31 MARCH 2023

	2023 (£)	2022 (£)
FIXED ASSETS		
Tangible assets	82,780	73,782
CURRENT ASSETS		
Debtors	52,126	56,422
Cash at bank and in hand	281,095	290,977
	333,221	347,399
CREDITORS: amounts falling due within one year	(166,385)	(133,341)
NET CURRENT ASSETS	166,836	214,058
TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES	249,616	287,840
CAPITAL AND RESERVES		
Retained earnings	249,616	242,402
Other reserves	-	45,438
MEMBERS' FUNDS	249,616	287,840

“I love what GC stand for. I’m glad that I can support local farmers and more sustainable food practice. It’s exciting to find out what you might get in your veg box every week!”

HO SU YUEN. GOOGLE REVIEW, 2023

TREASURER'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

The year to March 2023 saw a small decline in revenues at Growing Communities. It was a year of two halves, with the first half seeing a continuation of the change in buying habits at the end of the pandemic. This typically resulted in a reduction in sales. The second half of the year we saw things pick up and that has certainly been the case in the current year. So the small reduction is not a cause for concern. We are seeing a similar pressure on sales across other member fruit and vegetable schemes across London, which has in turn impacted the Better Food Shed.

Notwithstanding this, GC's overall income was £2.1m, which is still 30% up on pre-pandemic levels. Given the competitive and economic landscape, this further demonstrates the continued financial sustainability of the organisation.

We continue to invest any surplus funds into projects that further the cause of Growing Communities. However, we want to do this in a way that continues to enable GC to operate in a financially sustainable way.

Overall, there was a £7k profit in the year. We remain in a robust financial position, with strong net reserves in line with our policy of retaining 3-6 months of operating costs.

	£	2021/22	2022/23
Veg scheme/Better Food Shed		1,935,840	1,802,144
Farmers' market		63,566	62,422
Urban market gardens		9,283	10,062
Dagenham Farm sales		38,609	33,252
Grant income and other		112,164	152,584
Total		<u>2,159,462</u>	<u>2,060,464</u>

INCREASE YOUR IMPACT

Keep shopping

By buying weekly fruit and veg bags and shopping at the farmers' market, you are supporting the type of local, regenerative farming we desperately need if we are to survive the challenges ahead. So keep buying and eating the good stuff and embracing what each season has to offer.

Lobby your school

Are you a parent, teacher, chef or governor? Talk to us about providing healthy, unprocessed, pesticide-free fruit and veg for your school kitchen. We have leaflets you can give to staff or do [pass us their contact details](#).

Tell a friend

Talk to your friends and family about the food choices you make and why they matter. Pass on a flyer. Invite them to discover if there's a [Better Food Trader](#) near where they live.

Volunteer

Come and get your hands dirty in our [Hackney market gardens](#). Enjoy physical activity, good company and the chance to slow down and feast your senses.

Book a corporate or school visit

Bring your team for a fun day out at our [Dagenham Farm](#) or [Hackney market gardens](#). Grow food, bond and leave with a glowing sense of achievement. All our [team days](#) were given a 10/10 rating this year. We welcome [school trips](#) to see food growing in action too.

Share on social media

Join the conversation with GC on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), X (Twitter) or [LinkedIn](#). Show us what you've made with the food you've bought. Tag us if there's an event, article, action, campaign or group of inspiring changemakers doing things you think we and the world should know about.

THANK YOU FROM ALL OF US

None of the projects and progress in this report could happen without the commitment and hard work of GC staff, Board members, freelancers, growers and volunteers. Our staff and freelancers over the year were Abi Foreshew, Ailbhe Murphy, Alice Holden, Amina Usmani, Ashlea Wane, Beth Cullen, Bren Bedson, Carla Goodman, Cath Goldstein, Catriona Glover, Chris Murphy, Danny Fisher, David King, Dee Pascal, DeeDee Aitken, Denise McNeill, Deva Thackray, Dominic Stewart-Barton, Ellie Virk, Emily Vanns, Ged Boden, Georgina Sutton, Hannah Green, Hattie Hammans, Helen Bredin, Helen Freudenberg, Helena Buckley, Ian Atkins, Jo Barber, Johanna Valeur, Julia Kirby-Smith, Julie Brown, Katy Barker, Kerry Rankine, Kwame Appau, Kyra Hanson, Lois Gallimore, Maddy Hartley-Salim, Mark Courtney, Mathew Day, Michael Nutley, Millie Sandy, Nicki East, Nicola Green, Nicole David, Noah Birksted-Breen, Paul Harriss, Paul Kirby, Rachel Giambrone, Rachel Stevenson, Richenda Wilson, Sadegh Aleahmad, Sam Crofts, Shaun Tuck, Shelagh Martin, Simone Bellini, Sophie Verhagen, Val Gwyther and Zosia Walczak.

Our volunteer Board members are: Sarah Havard (chair), Richard Dana (treasurer), Amanda McDonnell, Anna Khalfaoui, Clare Hitchcock, Geraldine Gilbert, Kath Dalmeny and Natalie Silk.

The patchwork farmers are Dee, Jack and Susy. This year's trainees in Hackney were Amy Murtagh, Caroline Chandler and Thom Hood. Thanks also to Teddy Mills and all the other [Zedify](#) bike riders who have helped deliver your bags this year, Nick Putz from van deliveries, Matt Moore at [Improper Agency](#) and Michael Calwell at Boxmaster. Huge gratitude to the 30 shops, community centres, churches, pubs and other businesses that host our veg scheme collection points.

Special thanks to Dewi, Imogen, Petra, Chas, Lucy, Olivia, Joanne, Julie, Mat, Nicky, Anne, Beth, Christina, Cicely, Jazz, Caroline and Will for regular volunteering in Hackney and to Damon for repairs. At Dagenham, we're grateful to Dave and Cal for all their help. Between you, you clocked up 2,700 volunteer hours!

For links, sources and references used in this report, see the online version on the GC website.






To our dedicated members and customers, you're vital to our work and we can't thank you enough. When you source your fruit and veg from Growing Communities, you're not just getting quality produce – you're ensuring climate-friendly farmers receive a fair deal. These champions of regenerative farming are nurturing the very soil future generations will depend on.

But your support goes further than this. Our wholesale arm, the **Better Food Shed**, enables box schemes, schools, councils and shops to source the best fresh organic food from local farms, and the **Better Food Trader** network supports ethical retailers across the UK. Take a stroll through our urban farms in Hackney and Dagenham: they're not just growing amazing produce but also cultivating the next generation of food growers and changemakers.

Beyond the veggies, GC is advocating for a fairer food system giving communities improved access to healthy food and ensuring better pay and conditions for those who grow it.

This report is a tribute to the strength of this community.

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