

Community Growing in Cornwall

The impact and potential of local sustainable food growing in Cornwall



Produced by Sustainable Food Cornwall and the University of Exeter, supported by the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board's Community Growing Working Group

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Executive summary

Community growing is **sustainable food production that actively engages people within, and for the benefit of, the immediate community**. We define community growing schemes as community projects and initiatives that involve the growing of edible produce and its sale and/or distribution to members of the local community, providing direct links between food producers and consumers.

The Community Growing Working Group was asked to:

- Define community growing and understand its core characteristics
- Survey town and parish councils to assess the level of local council awareness and support of community growing
- Interview some of the most successful community growing schemes and develop case studies
- Document the multiple health, environmental and socio-economic benefits of community growing and threats to the continued success of community growing in Cornwall
- Review the evidence collected to produce findings and recommendations

In summary, community growing was found to be:

- Highly diverse, operating at a range of scales with a range of funding models, from fully grant-funded through fully self-financing to fully voluntary, always with the delivery of community benefit as its core purpose
- Widely distributed, delivering multiple social, educational, economic, environmental and resilience benefits to thousands of people across Cornwall
- Broadly supported by people in all walks of life with community growers experiencing high customer and member retention, and increasing demand for community grown food, and for participation in community growing
- Providing valuable formal and informal educational and training opportunities in a range of disciplines e.g. horticulture, retail and business operations. Education and training are integral distinctive features of many community growing projects
- Largely low-input, agroecological and regenerative, delivering a range of environmental, mental and physical, personal and community health and wellbeing outcomes that align with the Cornwall and Climate Emergency Development plans, and with Cornwall's Nature Recovery, Environmental Growth, Integrated Care and Health and Wellbeing strategies
- Enabling social innovation with the potential to support fundamental change
- Contributing to local food security directly (through food provision to people experiencing community food insecurity) and indirectly (through skills provision to enable people to grow their own food agroecologically)
- Succeeding against the odds, overcoming barriers including lack of funding, short-life tenure, lack of infrastructure and equipment

The key challenges for community growing in Cornwall are:

- There is not enough land available to satisfy existing demand for community growing spaces, and that demand is increasing
- Most community growing schemes would benefit from additional skills, funding, resources and support to flourish and deliver their full community value

**Key recommendations endorsed by Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board
2nd June 2023:**

1. Enable the benefits of community growing to be realised more widely through supportive policy interpretation and implementation, commissioning and operations
2. Champion and promote making appropriate sites available for community growing on public and private land holdings
3. Help support community growing projects and organisations with training, equipment, infrastructure, planning, finance, and effective community anchor organisations
4. Explore ways of strategically funding community growing, its support, infrastructure, expansion and resilience

Introduction

Community growing is **sustainable food production that actively engages people within, and for the benefit of, the immediate community**. We define community growing schemes as community projects and initiatives that involve the growing of edible produce and its sale and/or distribution to members of the local community, providing direct links between food producers and consumers.

Community growing schemes vary in scale, approach and purpose. Examples include community gardens and farms, allotment associations, community orchards and community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes. Community growing provides access to fresh and nutritious food, thereby improving local food security and public health. These schemes support local farmers and growers, foster community connections and wellbeing, reduce the negative environmental impacts of the food we eat, and help to create a sustainable and resilient food system. There are further social benefits as projects provide an opportunity for community building, skills training and career development.

This report has been produced by a team of people who wish to better understand the scale and impact of community growing schemes in Cornwall, with a shared ambition to identify how to support and expand their work. The impetus for the work came from an experimental event designed to engage civil and civic society organisations in a goal for action that could galvanise both the community and the statutory bodies represented on the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board, working together for a positive future. The Civic Lantern event was held in June 2022 and the top goal agreed was to: “Give land and support for every community to have a sustainable growing scheme.”ⁱ

To further this goal, a working group was established to gather new information about existing community growing activity and its impact in Cornwall. The group also produced a number of recommendations for the further development of community growing schemes and a short document went back to the Leadership Board for endorsement in June 2023. This report is intended to be used as a launchpad for further action to broaden and deepen action to support community growing across Cornwall.

Background

Cornwall’s food system is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with the majority turning over far less than £100k a year.ⁱⁱ Local farmers and related food suppliers and producers often secure poor margins on their products. Productivity in the food system is often low, and businesses can struggle to access local and regional markets. Furthermore, as a result of the current cost-of-living crisis and consequent rising levels of food insecurity in Cornwallⁱⁱⁱ the food system is vulnerable to environmental and economic shocks, including climate and ecological emergencies, volatile input and output prices, continued uncertainties about global commodity prices and supply chains, resulting in challenges for both the producers and consumers of food.

The UK Government has recognised many of these challenges. Henry Dimbleby’s National Food Strategy^{iv}, published in 2021, confirmed that fundamental changes are required in the UK food system to address multiple human, environmental and economic health challenges (see Appendix 1).

While many of the recommendations in the National Food Strategy^v have yet to be implemented, the Government’s net-zero 2050 climate change target^{vi}, the 25-year Environment Plan^{vii}, the new Agriculture Act^{viii}, as well as Public Health England’s ambitions to tackle obesity^{ix} and other diet-related health conditions, are all related policy agendas that are critically important to the wellbeing of future generations.

Cornwall already has a wealth of local food initiatives seeking to promote positive change in the food system. However, these initiatives are largely operating on their own, with little opportunity for coordination between them, or access to wider support. To reap the benefits of a more regionalised food system, a new level of ambition and coordination is required. There is a significant opportunity to do more to support existing activity and foster new projects in Cornwall. This would enable the shift towards a more sustainable, regional food system that is exemplary for other parts of the UK and beyond.

Existing community growing initiatives in Cornwall encompass a wide variety of social, operational and finance models with a diversity of land tenure arrangements. To a greater or lesser extent they can be characterised in relation to four important dimensions (see Figure 1). In this regard, **proximity** captures the extent to which projects are accessible and visible at the heart of the local community. **Resilience** refers to the ways in which the project is focused on social and ecological resilience to support the community and how it contributes to the sustainability of the local ecosystem as well as adaptation to climate change.

Participation reflects the scale of social engagement in the production and distribution of food. **Stewardship** concerns the extent to which the project nurtures the environment and community.

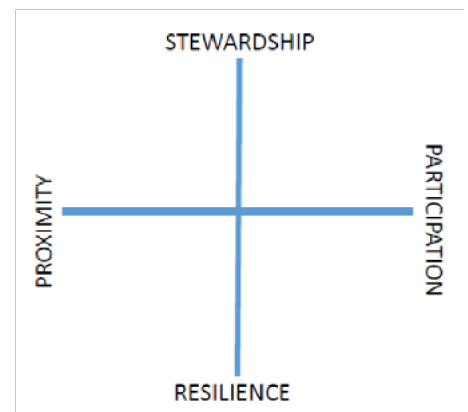


Figure 1: The four dimensions that characterise the diversity of community growing schemes

Our expectation is that expanding community growing schemes in Cornwall will generate important overlapping health, socio-economic and environmental benefits (see Figure 2).

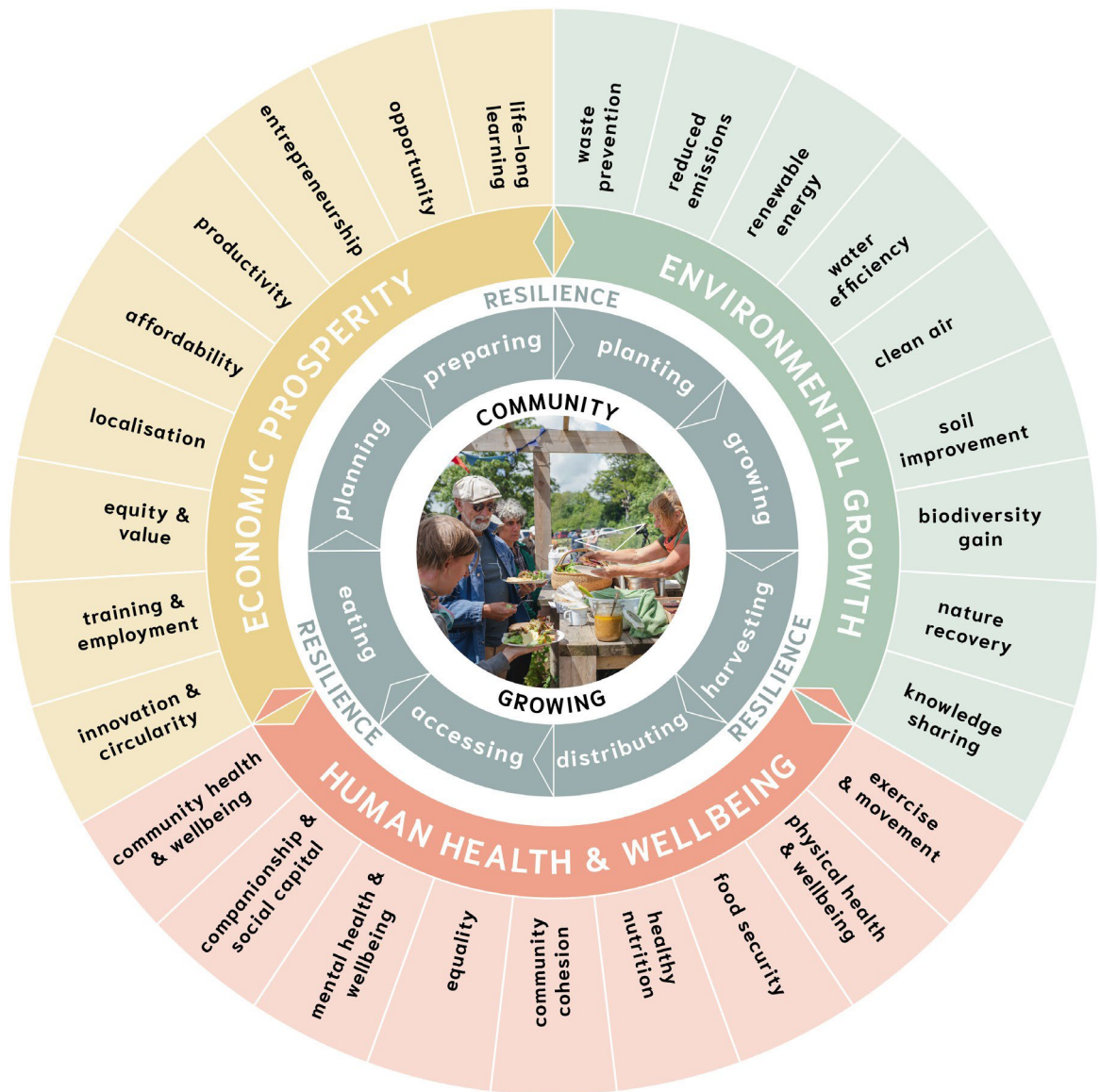


Figure 2: The overlapping benefits generated by community growing schemes

As indicated, benefits include improvements to human health such as enhanced mental and physical wellbeing through exposure to nature and physical activity, as well as the direct benefits that come from improved access to nutritious food. There are also important economic and social impacts that include access to training and skills development, employment, market access and development, food insecurity reduction, supporting local businesses and fostering community networks. In addition, the environmental gains include raising awareness and encouraging more sustainable behaviour amongst producers and consumers. This includes benefits to the ecosystem from agroecological production methods, alleviating levels of water, food and energy waste, and reducing carbon emissions via shorter supply and distribution chains.

Mapping community growing in Cornwall



Figure 3: Survey of community growing projects in Cornwall

Between November 2022 and June 2023, the newly-constituted Community Growing Working Group conducted research to map the scale and impact of community growing, and to develop practical recommendations to support existing and new projects in Cornwall. This involved:

- Defining “community growing” and understanding its core characteristics
- Developing and sharing a new interactive map that registers a range of food production activities
- Surveying local councils to assess existing activity as well as awareness and support for community growing
- Interviewing representatives from a number of successful community growing schemes
- Documenting the environmental, health and socio-economic benefits as well as identifying any threats to the continued success of community growing as well as barriers to setting up new schemes
- Reviewing the evidence collected to produce a set of recommendations for action

The ambition is to use this work as a launchpad for further activity to support and expand community growing schemes in Cornwall. Full information about the survey of local councils and case study interviews can be found in Appendices 3 and 4 at the end of this report and a summary of the key findings is included below.

Key findings from the research

As expected, we identified a diverse range of community growing projects, providing many social, economic and environmental benefits, reaching thousands of people in Cornwall. The map of these can be seen online at <https://sustainablefoodcornwall.org.uk/good-food-map/>

The list of Cornwall's community growing schemes can be found at Appendix 2.

Both are works in progress and may be updated by contacting Sustainable Food Cornwall.

The benefits of community growing are multiple and include the generation of significant levels of social capital and enhanced social connections^x; enhanced levels of both physical and mental wellbeing^{xi xii}; reduction in stress levels^{xiii xiv}. Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust reported reduced GP visits and psychiatric interventions, reduced hospital visits, reduced medication and need for support from community protection notices, and lower demand for crisis visits to counsellors in a cohort of service users who were referred to the mental health charity Mind.^{xv} Many community growing initiatives are engaged in fighting food insecurity by distributing quality food to those facing financial struggles exacerbated by rising costs of living^{xvi}. Community growing projects tend to have a positive impact on biodiversity and soil health, as well as reducing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in the supply chain. Growers have a destination for their entire crop, thus reducing food waste, and buyers are better able to exercise ethical and sustainable social and environmental responsibility through their buying habits.

The greatest challenge for community growing projects is access to suitable land and this is further exacerbated by insecure tenure. Most community growing initiatives need grant funding to cover initial start-up costs and subsequent capital investment. A significant number rely heavily on grant funding to pay for staff and other core activities. The funding landscape is complex and variable and not all community organisations have the skills or experience to access it equally. Staff who run growing schemes often work long hours on low wage levels without proper sick pay, adequate pensions or paid holidays. Community growing schemes are likely to be small-scale and their reliance on significant volunteer input could threaten viability. There is a need for training or support in multiple operational roles and responsibilities including agroecological and organic production, volunteer management, equality and diversity, marketing, finance and business planning as well as specialised technical assistance. Further detail on the benefits of, and the challenges faced by community growers can be found at Appendix 5.

The Cornwall Association of Local Councils survey exposed strong support for this activity from local councils and just over half of the 54 respondents reported that allotments were already provided in their community. The most common number of plots was 30-60 although some had considerably more, and Truro reported having up to 100 allotments in their jurisdiction. Where allotments were available, there were a wide variety of arrangements for running the schemes including the council itself, allotment associations, community groups and private landowners. Significantly, all of the 11 major towns responding had allotment provision: Hayle, Fowey, Camborne, Truro, Newquay, Padstow, Wadebridge, St Austell, Falmouth, Bude and Looe. Many had waiting lists and in some places, there were long waiting times for sites (the largest site in Camborne had a six-year wait). Very few councils reported that they were currently providing any shared or community growing spaces, but there was a lot of interest in doing so and many had already considered the idea. As examples, Hayle Town Council reported that they had an aspiration to set something up, St Dennis and St Erme councils were actively looking at the idea, and others would like to know more.

When asked about the barriers to doing more, the most common reply concerned access to suitable land. Some councils had their own land that could be considered but most would need help in approaching landowners and securing support. Other concerns included access to finance for purchasing land as well as costs for staff and resources such as fencing, gates and water supply. Other barriers with a single mention included: *Engaging community groups to take management of sites; Lack of involvement from the public; Funding for a project officer to coordinate projects.*

The community growing schemes study interviews further highlighted related points about access to land and finance to support local activity (see Appendix 3). While these projects are providing a wide range of benefits and engaging with people from all walks of life, there is a strong ambition for more to be done. Many respondents reported their frustration in spending a lot of their precious time applying for small amounts of funding at the expense of growing or helping communities. Others were struggling with lack of secure tenure to ensure access to the land, poor quality infrastructure and equipment, and the challenges of sustaining activity. Certainly there is insufficient land to satisfy existing demand for community growing spaces, and that demand is increasing.

Recommendations for the further development of community growing in Cornwall

Gathering and reviewing this evidence has led the working group team to recommend a step change in support for existing and new community growing schemes in Cornwall.

There is an urgent need to develop a mechanism to **identify appropriate sites for additional community growing activity**. Once identified, these sites need to be matched with local community organisations to explore the further development of existing or new growing schemes. It is particularly important for public sector organisations (such as the National Health Service, councils,

education providers and police) to lead by example, auditing their landholdings to see if there are opportunities to share any land. Sites that have been “orphaned” after Cornwall Council became a unitary authority, and those near highways, on council-owned farms, and in the grounds of schools and hospitals would be an obvious place to start. More could also be done to make full use of Cornwall Council’s Climate Emergency Development Plan Document (DPD) to encourage community growing more widely and particularly within new developments, through edible landscape design and enabling growers to live on their sites as appropriate.

There is an urgent need for **adequate and accessible funding** from the widest variety of sources. In this regard, there is scope to channel charitable and public sector finance to organisations that can use this resource to realise the important benefits for health, wellbeing and community. It would be possible to commission rigorous life-cycle assessments and evaluation studies to measure the diverse economic, social and environmental benefits provided by community growing projects. The new Community Area Partnerships in Cornwall could be encouraged to allocate funding to community growing and to provide ongoing support for community growing projects in their areas. Relatedly, they could help unlock access to Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) monies that could be spent on local projects.

In this regard, a targeted approach could **encourage and enable local councils to proactively support and increase community growing** in their areas. Town and parish councils have many of the essential skills and reputation for financial rigour that could be highly beneficial to local development. They can be twinned with community growing organisations to work together to secure land, raise finance and develop new projects.

Existing and new community growing projects and organisations require **additional and easily accessible support with legal matters, governance, planning, finance, communication and community development.**

There would be great benefit in **fostering synergies across the sector**, ensuring that new groups add to, rather than duplicate or conflict with, existing projects, aiming for at least one main project in a 15-mile radius. There is scope for site visits, peer-to-peer learning, placements and twinning projects to foster a culture of shared endeavour and learning. Collective purchasing (bulk buy) of community growing inputs would also help to keep costs down and share expertise. Cornwall could champion a permacultural approach to the growth of a coherent ecosystem of thriving community growing initiatives and anchor organisations that help each other flourish.

These broad recommendations can be realised through the fulfilment of specific actions that together will strengthen and expand community growing in Cornwall, and thereby improve access to food and community resilience for one and all.

The specific actions are grouped by recommendation below:

Realise the multiple benefits of community growing

- Advocate for community growing and support campaign activities to raise the profile of community growing and the value of its multiple benefits in Cornwall
- Recognise the role of community growing in creating health as well as treating sickness, and commission the health and wellbeing outcomes being delivered by community growing as an integral part of an integrated health and care system
- Commission rigorous lifecycle assessment and evaluation studies to validate and value the diverse economic, social and environmental benefits provided by community growing
- Explore opportunities for social innovation, embedding community growing approaches in new developments such as edible landscaping, residential gardening and supported self-management

Improve the availability of suitable sites for community growing

- Create a matchmaking service and brokerage linking existing and would-be community with potential sites
- Supporting landowners with this activity to provide all necessary services to engage and reassure them such as: legal advice, health and safety information, as well as the good governance and management of the land that is to be shared
- Maintain an information rich map of community growing initiatives so that new groups add to, rather than duplicate or conflict with existing projects, aiming for at least one main project in a 15 mile radius
- Identify potential community growing sites at multiple scales within the estates of Cornwall Council and the health and education systems, e.g. within “orphan” sites left stranded or uncertain after Cornwall Council became a unitary authority, near highways, on council farms, school and hospital grounds
- Make full use of Cornwall Council’s Climate Emergency Development Plan Document to encourage community growing more widely, particularly within new developments for example through edible landscape design and by enabling growers to live on their sites as appropriate

Nurture a resilient network of thriving community growing initiatives and anchor organisations that provide mutual support

- Encourage and enable parish, town and other local councils to proactively support and increase community growing in their areas
- Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and support among community growers through visits and placements to share techniques and best practice
- Provide targeted support and training to community growers, for example legal, technical, compliance

Develop funding mechanisms to enable and support community growing

- Help the new Community Area Partnerships allocate funding to community growing and to support the establishment of new projects in their locality

- Update Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) spending policies to fund community growing, its support and expansion
- Invest in strong place-based anchor organisations that can support smaller volunteer-led community growing initiatives to start and grow
- Support collective purchasing (bulk buy) of community growing inputs through finance and brokering

The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Leadership Board endorsed these recommendations and actions at their meeting on 2nd June 2023. The Community Growing Working Group will continue its work, advocating for and raising the profile of community growing to increase support for community growing activities in line with the recommendations and actions above so as to realise the step change needed.

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