Food for Thought

Exploring the Social Impact of Community Food Businesses

September 2022

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful for the time, energy and input that all the businesses have dedicated to this programme. We would like to extend our appreciation and thanks to all participants, such as customers, staff, volunteers, trainees and supporters, who have given their valuable time to engage with us and our research. We would also like to thank the grant funder and social investors of the Loans for Enlightened Agriculture programme (LEAP) who have made this work possible. We look forward to continuing our impact journey together.

Citation

To cite this report, please use the following format:

Wannerton, R., Owen, L. and Horrell, C. (2022) "Food for Thought: Exploring the Social Impact of Community Food Businesses."

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The Loans for Enlightened Agriculture Programme (LEAP) is a £1 million funding programme supported by three social investors - Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action (CIVA) and The A Team Foundation. The programme is managed by the Real Farming Trust (RFT), and seeks to support early stage Community Food Businesses (CFBs) who grow, sell or process agroecologically grown food by providing loan financing and mentoring support to help them move to the next stage in their development.

Alongside this loan funding, every business supported by LEAP receives a small grant to be used to assess and develop their social impact. Coventry University Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) provides research capacity and impact expertise to work with RFT and the LEAP businesses to help them assess and develop their impact.

This report summarises the work undertaken to assess and analyse the social impact of eight Community Food Businesses that have been beneficiaries of the LEAP funding programme since 2020.

Our work with these different stakeholders has underlined several emerging themes which we argue merit further investigation:

- **The tensions** that exist between CFBs' aims of **providing 'good jobs'** in food production, and the realities of doing so with limited resources within a dominant food system focussed on providing cheap food.

- An increasing **re-framing of volunteering as an engagement tool**, rather than a supply of willing free labour. CFBs need assistance to support and develop volunteering.

- The **positioning of CFBs within a food culture which helps to perpetuate and embed positions of privilege and exclusivity**, and the impact of these barriers and perceptions on CFBs' ability to break out of their existing customer bases and create wider change in the food system.

- The **impact of CFBs on the places and communities they are based in and the "community" that they engage with**, including their role as community connector, and economic stimulus. There are also some less welcome perceptions, such as being a symbol of gentrification or change within areas and engaging with a specific community of interest rather than the community "on the doorstep".

- Beyond physical barriers such as price and accessibility**, what other barriers discourage people from supporting CFBs?**

- Whether the **mission of the CFBs** is formed by the expectations of those running the CFB, or those supporting it, and how that relationship to mission affects what CFBs can do.

Although CFBs are mission driven, they are also working towards financial viability, operating in a highly competitive and politicised food system. We have observed some of the tensions between a drive to grow a business and increase market share, whilst maintaining the integrity of vision often expected by longstanding customers and staff.

Individually, many people running CFBs have a strong interest in delivering social impact, not least to help them market what they do, but the limited resources available and the focus needed to keep businesses afloat often restrict their ability to do so.

More work is needed to explore the impact that CFBs are and are not having, and why. Open discussions about this will help individual businesses understand the connection to their communities, and should feed into wider conversations across the sector about the expectations placed on CFBs to deliver this social impact, and who should or could pay for the cost of delivery.

Further research in this area would also help organisations working in the policy and funding fields to advocate better for the structural changes, support and resources that are needed for CFBs to deliver this work.

Introduction

This report summarises the findings and learnings from work done with eight businesses that were beneficiaries of the LEAP funding programme during 2021. Using tools in the [Social Impact Toolkit]() and working in partnership with Coventry University's Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR), we looked to identify and analyse the social impact that the LEAP businesses were having using different quantitative and qualitative tools. These activities gave an insight into what's happening within a fascinating, vibrant and impactful sector of the food system, a movement formed by people seeking to change the dominant model, however expressed.

In this report we use the term Community Food Business (CFB) to describe businesses which incorporate the principles and practices of agroecology and food sovereignty in the scale of their operations, type of governance structure, their fundamental mission and the nature of the food and farming systems they seek to deliver and/or change. CFBs operate at the local, community scale which in general means shorter food supply chains with less complex arrangements and fewer intermediaries than more conventional food systems. The majority of the CFBs we work with are Community Interest Companies, a structure which lies between charity and business, allowing for the generation of profits in order to support a community benefit, rather than for shareholders. Whatever their structure, the CFBs exist to support a mission that goes beyond producing and selling food.

Over the course of 2021 we worked with a diverse range of CFBs in rural and urban settings across the UK, including market gardeners, fishers, veg box-schemes and shopkeepers. We facilitated **7** engagement events with these businesses, interviewed **51** people including staff, volunteers and customers.

We supported the development and helped analyse the results of surveys, with **600**[1] responses detailing people's experiences of engaging with these businesses.

Fig.1: CFB Market Stall, Devon

In addition to their core food business, mostly based on environmentally focussed missions and methods, many of the businesses deliver activities which are specifically focussed on making an

[1] this includes 300 responses from surveys carried out in 2020

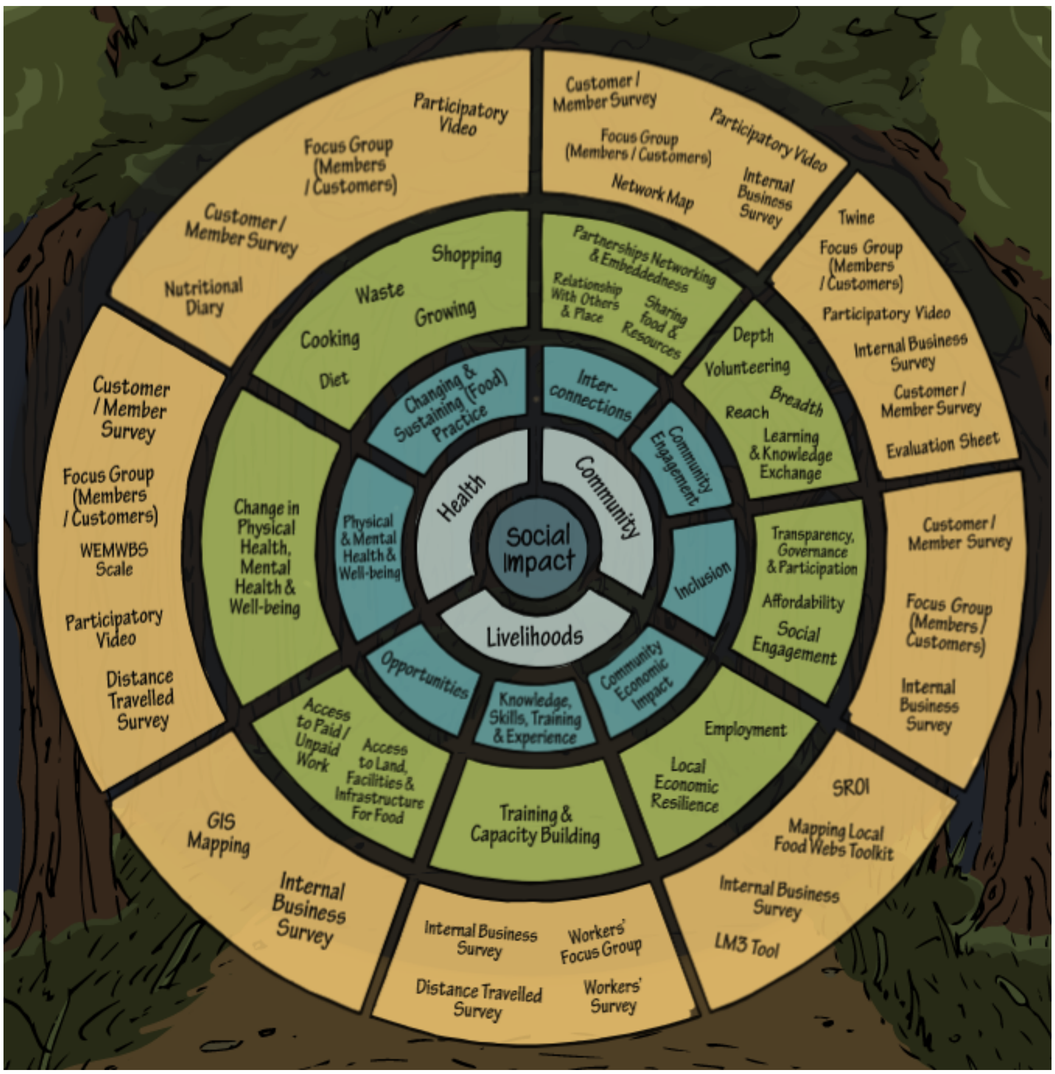
impact on people's lives, including therapies, social prescribing, and trainee schemes. Paid staff and volunteers are driven by their individual desires for change in the food system. LEAP has enabled us to access the stories and experiences of people working in these businesses, as well as those supporting them as customers, during a period of lockdowns and massive changes in the food system driven by Brexit and Covid.

The gradual easing of lockdowns during 2021 gave us opportunities to meet in person with some of the businesses for the first time. An autumn field trip to the South West took in five different organisations and we talked to volunteers, customers, staff and directors to find out more about why they got involved, the change they want to make in the world, and how they think it's going.

This report provides more detail about the activities we've been involved in, some of the emerging themes and questions raised, before setting out ideas on the future direction of this work.

The Social Impact Toolkit

The Social Impact Toolkit has been our principal tool for assessing the impact of LEAP businesses. The toolkit has been co-designed with a number of CFBs over the last six years. This is however the first year it has been tested significantly in the field. Our work in the field during 2021 has highlighted the need for the toolkit to have ongoing development, consultation and application.



In particular, the following have become important areas where the toolkit requires further development:

Race

The toolkit is colour blind and does not directly or clearly provide space for users and educators to properly explore issues of race within the food system.

Diversity and Inclusion

The outcome areas and indicators around diversity and inclusion require further critical input and development to ensure they enable users to engage with current debates around the importance of decolonisation within agri-food systems, and how this intersects with environmental justice, social justice and race.

Toolkit MOT

The toolkit requires an ongoing annual developmental “MOT” to ensure that materials are up to date, the tone and guidance is accurate, and that it remains fit for purpose. Ideally this will involve harvesting the critical input from LEAP collaborators and related projects.

Funding

The grant offered to support the social impact work of LEAP businesses is set at 18% of the loan amount. In most cases social impact plans have been costed and scheduled to run over 12 months, compared to a five year repayment of the loan.

In the majority of cases, LEAP grants were used to fund a combination of costs attached to the social impact activities, from the production of resources to the building or refurbishment of spaces which will be used for events or for community members to use. In most businesses, a small amount of grant was also apportioned to cover time for team members to be involved in social impact assessments.

In 2021 it has become apparent that even amongst businesses that are not start-ups, a focus on business development means that social impact plans often cannot be implemented until Year 2 of the loan. Flexibility is therefore needed in deciding when and how much of the grant to drawdown, to help businesses ring-fence it for social impact work irrespective of when that work happens.

In some cases a portion of the grant is being used to fund infrastructure which will be used to support social impact activities some time in the future, so the funding of capital and revenue costs can be separated by significant periods of time. As a result, assessment activities such as focus groups with trainees would benefit from running over a much longer period to more accurately capture impact.

Unsurprisingly, the ongoing pandemic and the impact of lockdown and social distancing measures have placed limits on LEAP fieldwork opportunities. The majority of focus groups and interventions have been hosted online this year - although fruitful, this has been challenging for building rapport and a deeper understanding of the work happening 'on the ground'.

Moreover, contact between LEAP and CFBs has been sporadic rather than structured, because LEAP businesses have been at the forefront of responding to the impacts of the pandemic. This means they have had considerably less time to engage in social impact delivery, monitoring and engagement with us.

Emerging Themes

Theme 1: "Good Jobs"

"My goal is to eventually get out of this type of low skilled, low waged work"

Staff Survey Respondent

Alongside their environmental credentials and production methods, many businesses we work with use the jobs they offer to differentiate their operations from mainstream food businesses such as supermarket chains. Some are structured as workers' cooperatives, but the majority use a combination of paid staff, trainees and in some cases, volunteers. The mission often draws interest from a wide range of people who support the values of the business. In this respect, the Community Food Businesses engaged in LEAP are operating and engaging in 'Values-Based Supply Chains'.

However, the practical, routine and often physically tiring tasks that make up much of the food system provide limited opportunities to differentiate between similar roles in mainstream shops, farms or processing sites with very different values. With limited resources available to provide opportunities for staff to progress or develop, the financial strength of bigger employers plus a more competitive employment market after Covid and Brexit means that some LEAP businesses are under pressure to find staff with the right skills.

What are Values-Based Supply Chains (VBSC)?

Key benefits of VBSCs for participating farmers include:
(1) they are more transparent than conventional supply chains; values are communicated throughout the chain, providing buyers and consumers with information they need to pay more for these foods;
(2) they provide higher prices to participating farmers due to the chain's strategic partnerships and the fact that buyers are willing to compensate farmers for particular values; and
(3) buyers in these supply chains are more willing to negotiate with farmers and often absorb some of the transaction costs and work with farmers or ranchers to source products on an on-going basis.

Overall, the goals of VBSCs are to:
(1) provide greater economic stability for producers and others along the supply chain; and
(2) provide high quality, regional food to consumers.
(Source: Feenstra and Hardesty 2016)

Box 1: Values-Based Supply Chains

One CFB founder expressed frustration that although much of the mission of the business was focussed on providing good jobs as a social good, they were finding it difficult to recruit. They described the challenge of "*finding a suitably qualified candidate who's willing to work for us for the low pay and poor conditions that we can afford to offer".* Indications from a survey with paid staff in one CFB suggest that the sector is significantly behind other industries in terms of personal development opportunity, with little resource available to support staff training and development. Indeed, when staff reflected on working in roles that support a mission or set of values they believe in, but for poorer pay and benefits than they might have experienced elsewhere, it was clear there was pressure on the CFB to find other ways of keeping staff engaged and connected to the mission, to make up for sacrifices that they might be making.

This commitment to supporting the overarching goals and mission of CFBs also shows strongly in our data on the trainees. In contrast to paid staff, trainees arrive at CFBs with an explicit aim of building their knowledge and experience in the sector, making the likelihood of a positive experience much stronger. As one respondent commented:

" I've been trying to think of what one thing I've learned, I think it's the value of food, and what that actually means... you have to constantly be adapting and changing. And it's really hard to grow food and supply a community with local, organic, high quality produce"

Trainee Focus Group Participant

A number of the trainees we spoke to had left relatively well-paid professional careers in order to become 'live-in' or site-based trainees. They compared the frustrating or damaging and often highly stressful work environments that they had previously worked in with physically demanding yet deeply rewarding roles in food production, and the benefits to their general health and wellbeing.

> ***"The problems of the world can be very overwhelming, and as an individual it's hard to really tackle them in what can feel like an important or significant way. But working in a place like this it's possible to distil the problems into more manageable tasks. When you work in a team, it can feel like you're kind of doing some good. I think that's a massive boost to my mental health"***

Trainee Focus Group Participant

Whilst a number of trainees commented on the mental health and wellbeing benefits of the work and training at CFBs, they acknowledged that life on a farm, often in poor living conditions like temporary accommodation (e.g. a caravan), required strong commitment and a level of physical hardship. This was counter-balanced with the rewards that came from doing something that reflected their personal values and the emotional support they received from other trainees and the staff:

> ***"I found the winter really hard. I live in the caravan on site by myself, which is a very different experience to when I was living with housemates before... but I feel like any time that I have reached out or been reached out to by other people to ask, you know, how am I doing? I feel like there's really this space and opportunity to say, like, "Actually not that great" You know, and that is really well supported. And you are helped with that which is really actually a really valuable working environment to be in."***
>
> **Trainee Focus Group Participant**

Many of the trainees we spoke to characterised themselves as having an existing interest in food politics, agroecology and food production. Against this trend, one CFB used the government backed Kickstart trainee scheme (which supports young people aged 16-24 at risk of long term unemployment) to bring a new employee into an administrative role. This placement has been described by both employer and trainee as a great success, with the trainee not just taking on a wide range of office tasks to support the business, but also reporting a significant improvement in their knowledge about issues in food production and the food system. Moreover, the trainee described a personal journey of experiencing different foods, and a change in what they look for and are aware of when choosing what food to buy.

Many CFBs have limited financial resources to support their aims of providing 'good jobs'. This is countered by drawing on a pool of potential employees who have a deep commitment and connection to the mission, but this may be of limited help when trying to recruit people with specialist skills, and runs a wider risk of embedding a cycle of privilege. To keep people on board who are aware of their earning potential elsewhere, it is critical to demonstrate impact and keep the connection to mission active in employee's minds.

Overall, our work with LEAP businesses looking at the challenges of being the employer they aspire to be raises the following questions:

- **How do we define and assess what constitutes a good job within the community food sector?**
- **What does, or should, that job provide?**
- **How is the concept of a good job used within the sector to promote the values of the business to customers?**
- **Are the values of the business reflected in the jobs that it provides?**
- **How do we best support people wanting to join and stay within the sector?**
- **How do we model inclusivity and avoid elitism?**
- **What do the jobs that the sector currently provides say about the value society places on food production jobs, and what does it mean for agroecological transitions?**

Theme 2: Volunteers

"It's been clear to me for some time, that we are not going to be able to generate a surplus from growing and selling veg that will allow us to put on other social goods, we cannot run them off the back of it... we've never made a profit. In fact in 11 years we've managed by the unpaid input of workers"

Staff Focus Group Participant

Many LEAP businesses have some level of engagement with volunteers, mostly in hands-on, often sporadic or unpredictable production roles. During 2021 we spoke to a number of CFBs who have realised that this use of volunteers for core business activities is not sustainable or particularly viable. It lacks the reliability and clarity of scheduling and responsibilities that would come through paid roles. They struggle to provide the support for the volunteer experience that they want to be able to provide, leaving them feeling they are getting neither what they or their volunteers require. At the same time, they often rely on volunteer labour and are therefore in a difficult position in terms of managing and delegating, while at the same time ensuring volunteers do not feel overburdened and potentially disengaged.

Conversations with volunteers about these experiences of ad-hoc supervision have highlighted that many became involved by word of mouth or requests for help on social media, and largely the roles offered are fairly informal. As a result of the history of volunteer involvement, CFBs seem to be less likely to access guidance on how to recruit and support volunteers. Many appear to have done no training on how to manage volunteers and provide a good volunteering experience. It has been notable that none of the organisations we have spoken to within LEAP are connected to any volunteer support bodies such as Councils for Voluntary Service, usually recruiting through word of mouth and 'as and when', but therefore missing out on the support and training that may be available.

Overall, our experience with CFBs indicates a direction of travel where some are recognising that the benefits of volunteering may be greater if viewed as a community engagement activity, for instance through a volunteering day. This structure enables staff to spend time and concentrate on supporting volunteers, using activities as a tool for bringing people together. The alternative is to provide a more structured volunteering role with specific goals and appropriate levels of support, which requires resources outside of the business, and more active management.

The therapeutic impacts of horticulture that CFBs offer often attract volunteers who themselves have significant social and emotional support needs. Some CFBs expressed concern about their lack of experience and training to support these volunteers. Notably, none have been connected to services supporting volunteer involving organisations in their areas, for example Councils for Voluntary Service.

Future questions relating to volunteer involvement raised by our work so far include:

- **Is volunteering part of the business plan, or the social impact plan, or both, and what are the differences?**
- **Is volunteer involvement one of the key elements of “community” in a CFB and how do the volunteers reflect what that “community” is?**
- **What makes for a great volunteer experience for all parties?**
- **How do CFBs manage, supervise and support volunteers over a medium-long period of time?**

Theme 3: Diversity & Inclusivity

"I'd say that (proudly) coming from a working class background, there is sometimes gaps in my knowledge when it comes to certain unusual foods and products, which some other colleagues don't seem to have. Given the working class population which surrounds the areas where our shops are, I think it's important to have colleagues like myself, as customers who come in just for a look could feel that the shop is an environment which 'isn't for them'"

Staff Survey Respondent

Consistent with wider debates across the sector, more CFBs are considering what opportunities they can or do provide that directly address social inequality, injustice and asymmetric power relations. We have started conversations with a number of LEAP businesses on diversity and inclusion topics, exploring not just race and ethnicity, but also issues of social mobility, class and privilege.

In many cases, those people involved in the work of CFBs (as volunteers, for example) have relatively high levels of social capital, either through formal education, connectedness and/or professional background. CFBs have often been fortunate to attract people wanting and able to work in poorly paid or voluntary roles because of the deep commitment and reciprocation of values that are broadly about climate crisis mitigation, sustainability and supporting local businesses. This also works well for the business, bringing in people who have experience, transferable skills and shared values that help in meeting the needs of driving a fledgling business forward.

"Becoming part of this world, in itself is a privilege, we're not being paid. Or well, we are, we have a small salary to be here. But that's like, definitely not accessible to a lot of people who might have a family or might need to pay rent, or might just need to survive and get to the end of the week. And, you know, as a group of people, as a trainee group, we're not very diverse. And that's also something that could be improved, to make sure that it is inclusive and accessible to, you know, more people from different backgrounds to come here and feel comfortable and feel seen as well by other people. Because otherwise, we'll continue to perpetuate that culture that kind of stays the same"

Trainee Focus Group Participant

Looked at through a lens of social impact, this ability to tap into a pool of well-resourced individuals becomes problematic, raising concerns around perpetuating and further embedding privilege. This is something some CFBs address by providing food through various forms of 'solidarity schemes', cross-subsidy projects, or social food provisioning. For example, one CFB provides produce to local charities using funds donated by box scheme members; another offers a sliding scale box scheme where customers choose how much to pay based on a self-declaration of their household income.

These initiatives can have significant impact, both in the volume of practical support being offered, and for beneficiaries. One worker at a CFB, who is responsible for connecting with recipients of subsidised vegetable boxes, said the refugee community who received the food saw it as a sign of 'feeling welcomed'. In an era where division and fracture has arguably been a prominent feature of UK society (as witnessed with Brexit and the ensuing withdrawal from the EU), such acts need to be understood as vital spaces for (re)building disconnected communities.

However, these types of cross-subsidised schemes are still relatively nascent and rare within the CFB sector, which in turn raises the question: to what extent should CFBs be reaching out to everyone in their community or area? Whilst all support is vital, is there a limit to how many social and environmental issues can be addressed by a single business? This raises questions about the mandate and purpose of CFBs and also about who pays the cost of meeting this social impact. Differences in their Theory of Change will affect the extent to which they see social impact as a key part of their mission.

As always, discussion around privilege in this context intertwines with critiques of organic food, illustrated well by this respondent to a customer survey:

"(I would shop more with X if...) ***not everything was organic. I understand there is a lot of demand for this, but it is not better for health and if every farm in the world went organic, we wouldn't be able to grow enough food for everyone. Offering a mix of organic and conventional produce (still seasonal and local etc.) would let people choose and potentially open you up to lower income families who can't afford to shop organic. I love your ethos in the main, but I have a bit of a "thing" about the better-than-thou attitude that is associated with the organic industry and I actually shop with you in spite of your goods being organic, rather than because of it (all your other good work around living wage and local growers is more important to me than being petty about organic)"***

Customer Survey Summer 2021

As discussed later, if there is an assumed or stated goal to change the UK food system as a whole, this perception of organic produce as an embodiment of privilege is part of a range of barriers to be overcome to enable a breakthrough to wider markets, and every CFB will have a role to play in this through their messaging and actions.

Looking specifically at race and ethnicity, our work with CFBs underlines the disproportionately white profile of the sector, both those working within the businesses and those supporting them. Although in some cases this can be seen as a reflection of location, this disparity is something CFBs are aware of. We have observed activities including looking at reviewing the products available, introducing anonymised monitoring as part of the recruitment process, and obtaining funding to offer an apprenticeship which will only be open to candidates with a non-white ethnicity.

Some of questions we are keen to explore further are:

- **Which communities are being served and supported by CFBs, and does it matter?**
- **What is the role of CFBs in addressing social inequalities?**
- **How will the answer to the preceding question about the role of CFBs impact on wider perceptions of small scale food production?**

Theme 4: Foodies, Taste and Place

Our direct contact with customers of CFBs through surveys, focus groups and individual interviews has started to catalyse more thoughts around where these businesses fit into the wider debates on food culture, and how this intersects with delivering sustainable food systems.

"It's going back to the ancestors when I used to go shopping with my grandmother. The trolley like that, no packaging, straight in as I'm gonna do a whole day shopping, enjoying, you know, everything and the vibe, not like a supermarket. And then you go home and we'd unpack it all, so there's no packaging, no plastic, so I wanted to do that, I wanted it to be like that, because I remember it before we had plastic"

Market Customer Interview

This evocative and nostalgic description of how shopping at the market supports the wellbeing of the customer raises questions about how this fits into the lives of those who are not able to spend a day at the market shopping for their food, and instead have to access food in the most convenient, affordable spaces (often supermarkets).

In the rest of our conversation, this customer also drew on a recurrent theme of taste and place, where local becomes not just a (possibly misguided) environmental choice but also one of inherent food values. The challenges to the assumption that local automatically equates to sustainable or environmentally friendly are now well established, but the linking of locality to taste and quality adds a less tangible, more subjective layer similar to the French concept of terroir, appealing to some consumers whilst alienating others.

Amidst discussion about the benefits of eating food produced locally, one focus group participant who was a longstanding customer and supporter of the CFB expanded on this perceived difference:

"I've just come across the peppers.. really intense like a fruit. It's like a sweetest fruit and compared to a pepper from Morrisons it's "Wow, that's, that's remarkable. It's the same vegetable. How is that possible? What's going on?"

The same group included a customer who had signed up during lockdowns, describing herself as having toyed with signing up for some time, but only fully committing when it was difficult to get deliveries from mainstream supermarkets. Although expressing many positive feelings about the produce and the people involved in the business, this new customer expressed a greater degree of scepticism about whether local and organic food is of a higher quality:

"I mean, it'd be interesting to have a blind tasting, because how much of that is in your mind? And how much of it is actually real? I tend to get eggs from here, there and everywhere, really, I mean, I get some eggs, free range eggs from Tescos. And occasionally I'll pick them up when I'm out and about walking when people are selling them outside. And if I'm being brutally honest, I'm not convinced that I would know the difference. If I did a blind tasting, I'd like to think I would, but would I? I don't know whether I would".

Customer Focus Group Participant

This scepticism taps into cultural critiques which link CFBs to the dominant food system in a way they may not expect, whereby food and 'foodies', people self-identifying as having a strong interest in food, are part of a process of commodity fetishisation, ascribing value to intangible qualities such as taste, and equally murky concepts such as locality. Willingly or not, CFBs are a part of this system, and whilst some actively work against it, others are happy to acknowledge it as a necessary part of building a market.

Clearly, customer surveys can give a biased view of the community that a CFB is reaching. Data that we collected from CFBs in 2020 indicated that most of those responding to customer surveys *already* had strong, pre-existing ethical values and generally ate healthily, so the CFBs were supporting rather than changing behaviour. Data from 2021 has further reinforced that the "community" of customers is a community of interest rather than necessarily the community 'on the doorstep' of the project. How the CFB relates to the immediate place and people that it is situated in, how it came to be there, whether the founders of the CFB are local or "incomers" are all questions that need further work and examination.

Our questions arising from this echo those raised earlier relating to diversity and inclusivity (p.18), and link to points raised under the employment discussion (p.10):

- **What is the impact of CFBs on gentrification / the embedding of incoming communities?**
- **How do CFBs relate to the place and people in which they are directly situated?**
- **What is the "community" that CFBs engage with, and what impact does this have?**
- **Is the local / organic message a barrier to engagement as well as a draw?**

Theme 5: Breaking Out

Fig. 2: Newly installed storage at LEAP-funded CFB

If wholesale change and transformation of the food system is to be achieved, one key driver for CFBs should be to encourage a shift of consumption habits on a large scale, moving more of their spending from supermarkets and creating an economic impetus for more producers to change tack in their practices.

A recurring finding from our customer survey work with CFBs is that they are broadly supporting people to make changes they were already considering, or underpinning existing world views and values. Although this reflects the methodology of customers self-selecting to complete surveys, these results underline the challenge for mission-driven businesses of how to bring on board and retain customers who aren't naturally pre-disposed towards sustainability issues as a driver in their consumption patterns.

Some CFBs, particularly veg-box schemes, describe seeing initial surges of customers during Covid drop back through 2021, with some indicators suggesting demand during Covid was driven more by availability and accessibility than by connection to mission, and although it may have driven some customers who had previously considered subscribing to a veg box, this didn't translate to long term commitment. Exploring this with newer customers highlights their own perceptions of now common themes - price, accessibility, and the challenges of eating seasonally:

"If I'm going to be honest here, I think, eating seasonally after being spoiled by a supermarket, which doesn't operate seasonally, you have to be realistic and sort of understand that if you're going to go back to a seasonal approach, which is the sensible approach, you are going to get bored out of your brain. I mean, at the moment, if I'm being honest, I'm sick to death of carrots in my veg box".

Customer Focus Group Participant

Despite the challenges of engaging with non- or ex-customers, our questions arising from these observations would benefit from the input of these groups. In particular, the following questions need asking with reference to non- or ex-customers:

- **What measures are and can be taken by CFBs to keep new customers engaged and connected, as well as to capture their experiences?**
- **Where monitored, what are the reasons given by regular customers who leave subscription services?**
- **Beyond physical barriers such as price and accessibility, what are the perceptual barriers which discourage people from supporting CFBs?**

Theme 6: Impact of Mission

In 2020 one of our CFBs conducted a large customer survey (n=212). The CFB has a strong environmental mission which is focussed on producing and selling organic food. However, their customer data found organic to be one of the lowest scoring preferences for customers, with only 48% of respondents placing organic as highly important in choosing the business, scoring it significantly lower than values, locality, and traceability of food, which all scored over 80%. Elements of this finding have run through the work with different CFBs in 2021:

Fig. 3: Packed veg boxes ready for distribution, South West England.

"I like the environment and stuff, and I think that's important. But what I really like is interesting varieties locally grown, and you know where it's come from, and I can say, oh, what kind of apple is that? I haven't seen that before and they know the name of it"

Market Customer

In further surveys with staff and customers, it became apparent that many people carried their own personalised version of the mission with them, projecting their own priorities or values onto the existing mission. Although this is, to a certain extent, due to brand development and good for driving the economics of the business, it can also create tensions between different stakeholders, particularly where the values of market-driven capitalism clash against those of founders whose aim is to question and dismantle those values. As the following quote highlights, CFBs are often acutely aware of the conundrum they can find themselves in, running and developing a viable business while embodying 'alternative' politics and values that are not always easily aligned with prevailing neoliberal markets:

"You've got this conflict all the time between trying to attract customers who are going to give up their hard earned cash, in order to do this work, that is really not cash driven. It's more ethos driven....what we've been discussing for a long time is trying to attract people because of the ethos of the organisation because they want to be part of something. And I think what's been happening is we've been attracting people because they want nice veggies and treat us like a shop"

CFB Founder, Staff Focus Group

To further highlight that customers may be somewhat vague about what they were supporting, one of our partners running a market garden which uses agroecological techniques but is not certified organic, discussed the dialogue they were having with someone from a local certified organic CFB who was urging them to certify as organic. After discussing the economics and making a passing observation that his own enterprise's mission was social justice rather than organic, he commented that he thought many of his market customers would assume his produce meets organic certification standards anyway.

This sense that stakeholders each carry their own interpretation and understanding of a CFB's mission raises further areas to explore:

- **The role of mission, and a sense of progress towards it, is important for staff and volunteers to feel their energies are being well directed and keep them engaged.**
- **The scope CFBs have to quantify and measure achievable targets within a wider mission to develop that sense of progress.**
- **Whether mission is formed by the expectations of those running the CFB, or those supporting it (customers).**

Theme 7: Reciprocal Values Between Producers And Consumers

One of the main drivers for consumer engagement with the LEAP businesses is broadly environmental concern and wanting to adopt more sustainable practices in terms of food consumption. When asked 'what are the main reasons why you decided to get involved with [the LEAP business] 84% of respondents to a spring 2020 CFB consumer survey (n=212) said 'to use less packaging' and "to reduce my carbon footprint'. These two reasons for engagement were also prominent in other surveys carried out with other CFBs in 2021.

There was also evidence that a shared sense of 'progressive' values and supporting local enterprises with a particular set of social-ecological principles was a key driving factor for engagement amongst consumers. In response to the same question about why they got involved with the LEAP businesses, over 80% of respondents from all of the customer surveys said they wanted to support the ethics and values that the businesses represented. A desire to support local businesses also came out strongly, with this reason being cited consistently by over 70% of customers as a reason for their support.

Such findings resonate with current debates about the role that 'alternative' agri-food supply chains can have in achieving wider sustainability goals. Indeed, the need to transition to greater social-ecological resilience has been firmly brought into public discourse in recent years through acclaimed documentaries such as the BBC's 'Blue Planet', events such as COP26, and ongoing civil disobedience actions by groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. Short Food Supply Chains and 'Values Based Supply Chains' (see Box 1 p.10), which are arguably the cornerstone of LEAP businesses' commercial relationships with distributors, retailers and consumers, are of increasing interest in food policy circles, academic research activity and public procurement initiatives.

The social impact work within LEAP is contributing to these contemporary debates by generating data and evidence. The types of supply chains and food that LEAP businesses provide is satisfying demand from consumers who are increasingly aware of and concerned about where their food comes from, and at what social and ecological cost. We advocate for further critical exploration of these issues, and more work at the interface between research and policy in order to amplify the key points and recommendations emerging from this work.

Food for Thought - Where Next?

Our work with LEAP businesses has brought to light a number of questions which are likely to apply to many other Community Food Businesses. In addition to the specific questions and areas of interest at the end of each thematic section, the following are observations on what should come next for LEAP or others seeking to investigate social impact within this still-emerging sector.

While social impact was a key selection criteria for LEAP businesses, our research has indicated that the businesses are often driven more by an environmental mission (i.e. factors such as climate change and carbon footprint). Social impact is going to be the area businesses will have less capacity/drive to prioritise or address. In light of this, a triple baseline approach to impact measurement including environmental, economic as well as social impacts might provide a more valuable and useful assessment of business impact.

The financial pressure of running a CFB means that the extent of social impact that is embedded in the business model is often limited to stakeholders with specific characteristics, often coming from a place of privilege. How and to what extent CFBs can or should move from this to a more inclusive model of engagement with more diverse stakeholders is a question that warrants further thought and investigation, and is critical to understanding how the social mission of the sector can be delivered.

As social enterprises, CFBs are largely positioned at the intersection of two distinct sectors, but may not take full advantage of the assistance available through sectoral agencies. This becomes particularly clear in the realm of volunteering, where advice on recruiting and supporting volunteers can be provided by local Councils for Voluntary Service or other local organisations, as well as access to training and development for staff who supervise volunteers.

Our work with LEAP businesses has highlighted five fundamental questions that warrant further exploration and research:

1. **What constitutes a "good" job** within a CFB?
2. **What is the role of volunteering** and how can it be best managed and supported for the benefit of both the business and the volunteers?
3. **What is the community that CFBs** do or should **engage with** and what impact does this have in terms of equity and inclusion?
4. **What are the barriers** beyond price and accessibility **that exclude or prevent people from engaging with CFBs?**
5. To what extent **is the mission of a CFB driven by those who run it** (staff and volunteers) **or those who buy from it?** Does this matter?
6. What are the expectations placed on CFBs to deliver social impact, and **who pays, or should pay, the cost of its delivery**?

We intend to explore these questions further both with LEAP businesses and across the sector more broadly, and encourage others to join with us in further debate, discussion and research in this area.

A better and deeper understanding of these issues will enable organisations working in the policy and funding fields to advocate better for the structural and funding changes that need to happen, to support CFBs to deliver greater social impact. It will also enable the sector to determine the role that CFBs can or should play in delivering social impact. For the CFBs themselves, further work in this area will enable them to understand and be transparent about what impact they do or want to have, and help them to achieve it.

Appendix: Research Activities

Qualitative Research	Participants
Staff Focus Group	5
Trainee Group	4
Trainee Focus Group	6
Customer Focus Group	6
Producer & Staff Interviews	9
Customer Focus Group	5
Market Customer Interviews	17
Total:	**51**

Table 1: Overview of research activities and number of people engaged

Quantitative Research	Responses	Response Rate
Customer Survey	212	*Good - primarily recruited online due to Covid*
Customer Survey	88	*Good - felt to be representative*
Staff Survey (Limited access)	58	*Good - majority of staff across all teams*
Customer Survey (Non-standardised)	147	*Good*
Customer Survey	9	*Low, but some conclusions can be drawn*
Customer Survey	5	*Low response rate*
Volunteer Survey	3	*Good. Covers the regular volunteers only*
Staff Survey	6	*Good. Small business, covers all core staff*
Customer Survey	32	*Large sample of their customers covered*
Open Day Survey	6	*110 attended (5% response rate), low to draw firm conclusions*
Community Meetup Survey	3	*18 attended (17% response rate), low to draw firm conclusions*
Customer Survey	31	*Large sample of their customers covered*
Total:	**600**	

Table 2: Overview of survey data, responses and response rate