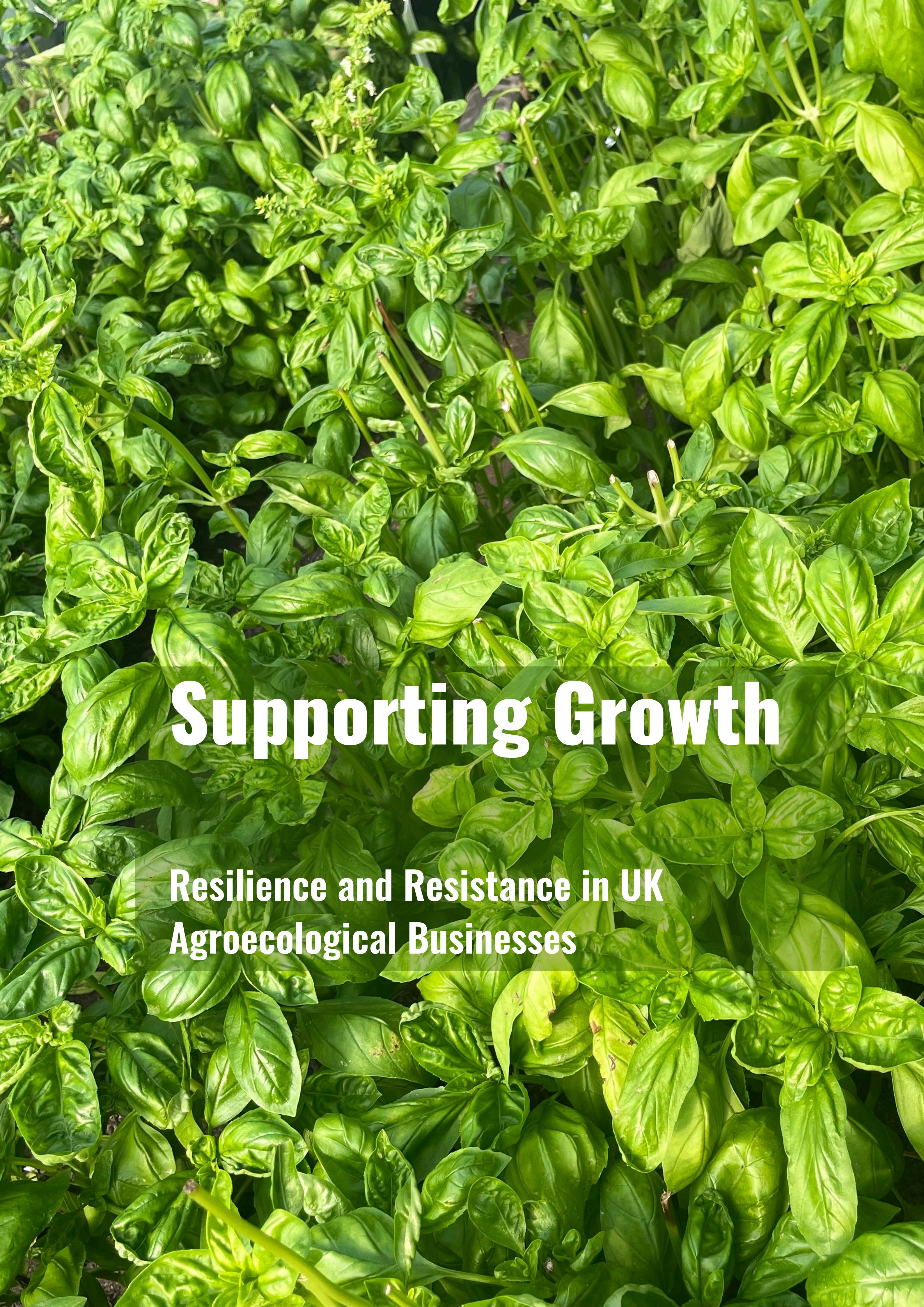

Supporting Growth

Resilience and Resistance in UK Agroecological Businesses

About LEAP

The Loans for Enlightened Agriculture Programme (LEAP) is a funding programme managed by the Real Farming Trust and supported by three social investors - Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action (CIVA) and The A Team Foundation. LEAP 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, businesses with LEAP funding are eligible for a small grant to be used to assess and develop their social impact, supported by the RFT and using the Social Impact Toolkit.

REAL FARMING TRUST

LEAP LOANS FOR ENLIGHTENED AGRICULTURE PROGRAMME

Introduction

In September 2022 we published "Food For Thought", a first pulling together of the learning from our Social Impact research with businesses who had received grants through the LEAP programme. In this wide ranging report, we reflected on what we had been told by customers, staff members, volunteers and supporters of Community Food Businesses about the connections to their lives, their reasons for being involved, and the difference it was making. During the process of bringing it all together, using the results of focus groups, interviews and surveys, it became clear that there were missing voices - those of the people who founded these businesses.

Although we had spent time discussing the practicalities of their involvement of LEAP, and through that had developed some level of understanding about them, we were often left interpreting and framing anecdotal information, side-bars of conversations from other settings. To rectify this, during the latter part of 2022 and into 2023, we recorded semi-structured interviews with some of these inspiring people, with the intention of capturing some of their ideas and experiences as they reflected on their journey with the business. By asking questions about what got them into their current situation, what they wanted to achieve, and what kept them going, we were also given insights into their personal motivations and the impacts of those journeys on their own lives. These conversations also provided an opportunity to think more widely about food systems, food culture, and the agroecology sector.

The demands of running a business have often made it difficult to find the time for these interviews to happen, and the project has been a slow burner. For now, this report is an update on the results of five interviews, linking them to other studies and reports to provide context and explanation, drawing on our existing learning from businesses, and posing the questions we are taking forward in the next stage of the Social Impact Programme.

As ever, our thanks are due to all our LEAP partners for helping us with this contribution to the understanding of our sector.

Backdrop

During much of 2022, alongside the preparation of “Food For Thought”, we started to sketch out a project looking at the social impact of Community Food Businesses (CFBs) through the lens of resilience - briefly, how the impact factors distinguishing CFBs from mainstream food businesses affect the resilience of the business, the individuals involved, and the wider community. Three years of work with our business partners in LEAP covered the immediate impact of Covid lockdowns, which in many cases provided a surge in sales and new customers, and the return to a normality which was increasingly unpredictable.

As the year progressed, questions about the connections between mission and business sustainability became more and more pertinent, with the impacts of the war in Ukraine, supply chain issues, Brexit, climate upheaval, and the surge in power prices hitting across the food system. By December 2022 the ONS was reporting half of all adults were buying less when food shopping, including 44% of respondents in the most affluent areas, compared to 61% of those in the most deprived areas. This insight from a founder demonstrates a level of resilience within the customer base, as well as his willingness to compete on price to attract and retain customers:

“My main concern is growing sales. We've just got to grow sales”

“One thing that has been encouraging, for example, is our market stall, where our sales have been growing, and our customer numbers have been growing. And that’s our best showcase, not just in the range of produce that we have available every week, it's the full range of what we offer, rather than prescriptive veg boxes... But also it is the cheapest place to get our produce, we have a lower markup, because it's kind of less work involved than weighing and packing and delivering veg-boxes. And that's been really encouraging, you know, against a backdrop where we actually assumed sales would be reducing, the last sort of three four months because of everything that's going on in the economy.”.

Away from the marketplace though, other businesses were facing steeper challenges, particularly those with shops, or dependent on refrigeration, both feeling the impact of the rise in energy costs. One founder described the economics of the model they were operating, and the various hits that had been taken since 2020, highlighting the fragility of a business that has been reliant on two primary routes to market:

"We don't need to be making more than 100,000 pounds profit in a year, that was just spot on perfect. So in the Covid year we made 110... that was just where we wanted to be, for me, that was just brilliant. I said to myself, and to my team, we can maybe grow sales by 5%. But we really don't need to grow by much more than that. We had two teams working lunches and evenings, we were maximising the capacity of the space. It just worked. And of course, then Covid stopped and Farm Drop went bust, and now sales are down 50%. So we're right back down to making a loss, struggling, all those things that for the first three years, three and a half, even four, were a real struggle, and they have reappeared. And of course, now you have different problems with our electricity bills just going through the roof... So yeah, my main concern is growing sales. We've just got to grow sales".

"We're having a tough time, we're having a really tough time... in terms of what gets me up it's trying to make sure it's still here in a year you know, that's kind of where I am just now"

As with many food businesses, the initial economic impacts of Covid were good. Lockdowns and nervousness about supermarkets drew many consumers to sign up for box schemes, shop with local businesses, and spending more time cooking and preparing meals at home. However, the surge in interest from new customers and the hoped for shift in people's consumption appears to have been short lived, increasing business vulnerability to other factors such as the surge in energy prices, and giving greater urgency to questions about the sustainability of the sector.

The Cost for Founders

The most immediate and direct impact of these vulnerabilities was on the people running the businesses. In Food For Thought, we looked at the impacts for people working for community food businesses under the themes of Good Jobs, Volunteers, and Diversity & Inclusivity. Reflecting on the experiences of trainees and employees in different businesses, we questioned the scope for any individual business to change the realities of food related jobs, particularly with limited resources available. We highlighted the combination of factors which limit the opportunities for new entrants without sufficient financial or cultural capital to join agroecological businesses, and the risk of this becoming part of a cycle reinforcing agroecology as niche.

Our discussions with the leaders of these businesses about the impacts on their own lives draw out similar pressures to many small business owners: ***"We make quite a lot of sacrifices to do what we do mainly in terms of pay and also hours and it's quite a significant effect on our lives to earn so little and to work so long".*** Perhaps darkening the mood of some of the discussions, interviews were being conducted at the end of the growing season, when people were at their lowest ebb, physically and mentally. *"In terms of motivations, you know, we're all struggling to stay in what we're doing, to be honest, I'm able to be a bit reflective because we're having lots of very reflective conversations around how we make what we currently do more sustainable personally. We're just run ragged really"*.

"It's quite a significant effect on our lives to earn so little and to work so long"

Besides the physical toll though, there was also a reflection on the economic impact which reflected previously expressed concerns about the pay and conditions for employees. *"I mean, we have made some money. But if I was actually getting paid an hourly rate for the work that I did, it doesn't really work. It's kind of what we've realised is that at this scale, which is very small, it's like a cottage businesses, a cottage industry really isn't it?*

So it's like, if it was just me, and I had low outgoings, and I wasn't trying to pay off a loan and ultimately run a business, it would work financially".

These stresses from the responsibilities of running a business are by no means unique. A 2021 survey for the charity Mental Health UK found four in five small business owners reporting poor mental health, including an inability to focus (66% of respondents), anxiety (64%) and disrupted sleep (63%).

Just as Food For Thought highlighted for employees, a number of interviewees told us that their connection to the mission of the business was the main driving force that kept them going, often using emotional language: ***"I think we're all very motivated here. Because we've got, you know, climate anxiety"***, and ***"I think we're still making progress… it can be incredibly frustrating, because any progress any of us can make is limited. And when you have such big goals, not just for [my business], but for that type of food movement. And then you see so many people working so hard on it, and the progress is, you know, encouraging but limited, it can be demotivating as well, so, you know, you don't always want to get out of bed in the morning".***

This responsibility for others was described by a founder two years into running their first business, describing the shift from being a volunteer to suddenly being in charge and responsible for the livelihoods of others: ***"It's just a different vibe, when you're the one that's driving it forward, whereas when you're a volunteer there is an absolution of responsibility, which is very calming and freeing, isn't it? Because you sort of get told what to do? And then do it and then you go home."***

In the August 2022 Land Workers Alliance Report The Attraction of Agroecology, participants described their work in agroecological farming as rewarding and fulfilling, and highlighted the specific appeal of working the land, with all participants expressing a desire to spend more time outside rather than behind a desk. Echoing this, one of our founders reflected that despite the challenges he had set out:

"The main motivation is undoubtedly, environmental and social, and trying to do the right thing. But the other motivation, certainly for me and I think I share it with my colleagues, the job itself is a really lovely job… It's really a lovely place to be outside, you know working you're actually seeing wildlife around you, watching stuff growing and then selling food, we're all very much into cooking. There's all these motivations around food and the outside and working with plants that I probably haven't mentioned, but that is a big motivation… it's just the stress of making it work

financially and trying to achieve these wider aims that we have, and it's just the general workload that's unbearable at the time".

Overall, our discussions with founders and their experiences of anxiety, pressure, low to no wages, and the general pressures of setting up an SME lead us to ask what more can or should be done to provide support to existing business founders as well as new entrants, if our overall aim is to help them and their businesses thrive? Can a business think of itself as sustainable if the impact for those running it is so negative? And if so, for how long?

Relationship to the Mainstream

"We now would see ourselves as part of an environmental movement, a social movement. But with perhaps more of a commercial understanding than some other community projects have"

Although the pressures being felt by the founders we spoke to might share many common aspects with any other business owner, our conversations also underlined a key difference, in the form of the mission. In Food For Thought we discussed the positioning of businesses which are often Community Interest Companies (CIC), a structure which places them somewhere between a charity and a straightforward business, and potentially missing available support as a result. Our conversations with founders provided an opportunity to further explore their relationship with, and attitude towards, the mainstream food system, and the different ways this influences their business model.

Reflecting the strength of language used in our discussions about personal motivation, a number of statements were made positioning businesses firmly in active opposition to the neo-liberal model: ***"I guess there's a big anti-big business strand in it for me as well… we need an alternative to the supermarkets and the big food and agricultural corporations that run our economy, because they run it for their own personal needs, their own profits, profit shareholders, and it's not about what's good for society. So I see that as a massive problem itself, it's not just the solutions but it's who's running the solutions and who profits from that".***

The challenge from supermarkets was ever present in many of our discussions, with one founder describing his ever present sense of the scale of challenge in facing up to them. ***"I have people say "Oh you guys are doing so great, you've got five shops now, and you've opened three in the last year", and it's like, well, yeah, but did you see Aldi wants to open 600 shops in the next two years?"*** (Aldi is planning to open the equivalent of one UK store a week over the next two years, adding 100 new stores to a current portfolio of 990). For his business model, this translated into a plan for rapid growth as the vital engine for change, to accelerate the development of a new system, although this expansion opened up new vulnerabilities for the business as they struggled to establish a presence and following in new markets.

"It's not just the solutions but it's who's running the solutions and who profits from that"

Whilst being actively opposed to and working against the mainstream food system, there is still evidence of the impact of the dominant culture in our discussions. The tension between commercial drive and mission values, and the need for pragmatic compromise, can be seen in this description of the decision making process for whether particular products can be sold by one business: ***"There's that thing where you either, you on principle say we're not selling this thing because it's not local, or it's not available organic, or, you have a kind of, "Well, this isn't perfect, but it's kind of better than what you can get down the road at Tesco's". And if you sell this for a while, and if we get a bit bigger, we'll be able to have that influence to improve this. So I think that's kind of more of the route we've gone for, you know."***

We also saw how competing for customers beyond loyal local activists and environmentalists, going beyond what one founder described as "super deep-green eco-warriors", can create the same pressures as any founder of an SME. One founder discussed the personal pressures of living on low or no salary, describing it as a fundamental part of the plan for market growth which involves competing for customers based on price and market positioning. ***"It's about playing the long game, whereby you enter the market and get yourself established in the marketplace by having very good sharp prices and we'll reap the benefit of that in the long term by picking up a significant customer base, rather than, which on my observation a lot of people do this, is price quite highly because they're trying to pay themselves a wage, understandably, but then struggle to get into mainstream shopping habits because they're just a bit too fancy".***

As well as tapping into discussions around the barriers and challenges to new entrants, this highlights that whereas a founder of a mainstream SME might strive to achieve growth for growth's sake, these founders have much wider goals relying on the financial success of their business: ***"I see it as a real journey as well, where you need to build your market so you can do stuff. So there's different stages in the organisation's development where we've reached a***

scale where we can do something new and improve the situation… quite early on, that was the opportunity to take on land and be a grower and grow some of the things that were missing. And later on with the veg box scheme, we reached a point where we had enough veg coming through that we could talk to farmers direct and get them to grow things for us and kind of fill those gaps in the local food economy."

What we see is a significant tension inherent to the model. On the one hand, founders feel intense pressure to deliver not just success for the business, but success in taking on and challenging the dominant system. Winning customers away from mainstream business involves playing within some of the rules, navigating brand identity and positioning, discussions about price points and target audiences, but often under the suspicious gaze of long standing supporters looking for signs of selling-out. ***"You see other places starting up and they have very fancy websites, fancy logos, branded boxes, very much style is a big part of what they do, I wouldn't say more than substance because it's just, we kind of prefer to just be really good at what we do and let people tell each other about it".*** Asked more about the reasons for this lack of marketing, he explained ***"I guess we don't help ourselves in the sense that we're not very good or we're not particularly good at marketing, we don't have those skills in the current team at the minute. But also, it's partly our own skills, it's also partly us being a little bit unsure or hesitant about going too heavily into marketing, and branding, all that pushy kind of stuff".***

"We don't help ourselves in the sense that we're not particularly good at marketing"

This hesitancy about being seen as just another business trying to sell something also underlines a further potential trap - with limited money available to employ people, some skill areas will be drawn from the luck of volunteers or trainees coming forward with the right experience or interest, whilst expenditure on staffing costs is focussed on hands-on production or delivery roles, with limited scope to bring in specific skill sets such as marketing or organisational management.

Alongside this, an internalised suspicion of practices linked to big business, and a worry about core-customer perceptions of anything which might identify them as inauthentic, selling out, or colluding with the mainstream system, risks undermining the commercial success which is central to achieving the mission. This relationship with the ever present eye of existing customers / supporters is also visible in the following sample of customer comments drawn from a social media post by one of our participating businesses when they launched a Crowdfunder to fund a recovery plan after taking a series of financial hits at a point of expansion.

The underlying attitudes towards food shown in this discussion underline the challenge faced by anyone seeking to change the food system, with mission driven businesses arguably held to much higher levels of accountability than those in the mainstream. Clearly, change is needed across all points of the system, not just with growers and producers but with consumers and the food cultures that form and shape our patterns of consumption.

"Most people in your neighbourhood literally can't afford to shop /eat at [business name]. Give to your food bank not private individuals. Bad look."

"I love [business name] but it doesn't sit right with me that a business is seeking donations"

"It's a social enterprise, so no-one is taking any profit. They offer a service and create jobs"

"No profit doesn't mean people aren't making money out of it"

"Social Enterprises are just businesses with fancy mission statements and access to grants"

"Sad to hear this, but [business name] doesn't help the vast majority of people who have to feed a family. Would much prefer Aldi… cheaper and more reliant products"

"The [business] is on my doorstep but I rarely use it due to the cost of the items. It's just not viable to feed a family from your stores unfortunately which is a real shame as I do buy organic in the supermarkets where possible"

"We're in the same position, had to make sad decisions around our consumption and revert back to less ecological and cheaper options"

"I do think we still manage to do our bit, but when you compare [business name]'s prices to Lidl for example, who also strive to use local suppliers, the difference in price can be quite significant. [Business name] feels more like an artisan supermarket rather than a sustainable one".

Customers and Food Cultures

In Food For Thought we used a theme of Foodies, Taste and Place to bring together discussions about the uneasy relationship that can exist between businesses and their customers. We explored the tensions that emerge as environmentally mission driven businesses establish themselves in a highly competitive market where customers make decisions influenced by a mix of accurate information, misinformation, and fragmented recollections, and the challenge that presents for growing, retaining and expanding a customer base.

The potential disconnect between producers and consumer was highlighted by a surprising result from a 2020 LEAP customer survey which found only 48% of respondents valued organic as a highly important factor in choosing the business, compared to over 80% for locality. This echoes the findings of a 2009 study of veg box subscribers in England and France, with English consumers rating low food miles and locality as their most important motivation. The frustrations about this were discussed by a leader from a different CSA, who explained in more depth why it was worrying:

"There's still a significant lack of awareness and motivation around fossil fuel use, synthetic fertiliser is still not understood enough. You know, there's a bit of understanding around pesticides, herbicides and so on, the effect on wildlife, but really it's still minor, I think people are generally attracted to our produce because of quality and taste and benefit to their own health, less packaging, and we're local, there's very, very strong support for Cornish produce. Which is tricky. You know, it's good in the sense that we're growing locally, but it's tricky in the sense that I suspect a lot of our customers find it easy to substitute our produce if they happen to be away or whatever, with produce bought from somewhere else that's local. And they might feel equally good about that, and think you know, it's alright, it's local. Whereas for us, that's deeply problematic, because of how most non-organic produce is grown and how much of a disaster that is for the environment. And actually, you're kind of bringing that disaster zone to your local area buying produce that's been grown with synthetic fertilizer…".

This 2020 overview of data on emissions across the global supply chain illustrates that transportation is generally among the lowest contributing factor for greenhouse gas emissions for most foods, and even this 2022 study which was reported in the Guardian under the headline "Climate impact of food miles three times greater than previously believed" highlights that although transporting fruit and veg more than doubles (overall) their production emissions, fruit and veg are still amongst the lowest contributors to emissions. However, projects such as the FoodMapp, a European research project producing "a map based platform that will enable consumers to reach and buy food products directly from food suppliers" continue to embed the message that local is the answer to sustainability.

"I suspect a lot of our customers find it easy to substitute our produce… with produce bought from somewhere else that's local… and think it's alright, it's local…

For us, that's deeply problematic, because of how most non-organic produce is grown and how much of a disaster that is for the environment.. and you're kind of bringing that disaster zone to your local area".

Nonetheless, the blurred messaging about locality continues to appear, an assumed good because of the virtuous links with local employment and allusions to wholesomeness; the organisers of British Food Fortnight, with 20.8k followers, put out this message: "*Why Buy British? Simple answer: Why wouldn't you?! Boosting local jobs and economies, whilst keeping food miles down therefore protecting the environment*".

Locality is also embedded in food culture through concepts of terroir and provenance, although in many cases based on shaky evidence. A 2022 study conducted on behalf of Science for Sustainable Agriculture surveyed self-identified "Foodies", primarily living in rural areas with high levels of food production, people who could reasonably be expected to feel well informed on issues such as provenance, and reports generally low levels of understanding about sustainable food production. Although over 80% of respondents felt high concern for the protection of natural habitats and protecting natural resources, awareness and understanding of specific terms relating to agriculture was low, with over two thirds of respondents never having heard of agroecology.

Moreover, respondents overall showed a generally loose understanding of the concept of 'natural' when relating to food production.

Reflecting on the significance of locality, one of our interviewees reflected on the need for pragmatism when the overall aim is to bring more customers into the business: ***"When I first started, it was very, very about local. And that meant, we didn't have very much on offer… when we first started, organic was a sort of "Nice to have" and now it's an essential. But the local thing has really loosened off, and it's come to the point where it's, we just need to have that offer that gets enough people in and be pragmatic and give people what they want, to an extent, so we can try and … guide a larger amount of people in the right direction, than allow a very small amount of people to do things, these sort of super deep green eco warriors, I suppose."***

Somewhat dishearteningly, but unsurprisingly, founders repeatedly described their frustrations at the ease with which supermarkets persuade customers that they are doing the right thing by choosing to shop with them. ***"What's going to happen is all the mainstream retailers are going to gradually, slowly, bit by bit, co-opt green issues and greenwash themselves so that the average consumer just doesn't change because "oh it's alright, my supermarket is cutting their plastic packaging by half a percent" and they'll get, you know, they'll get kind of led by these these catchy issues … packaging is important, but it's really minor compared to some of the other issues with food and farming".***

This fear is clearly justified - this March 2023 report from the Changing Markets Foundation found, amongst other things, that 42% of UK consumers were more likely to buy a product labelled as "carbon neutral", and 29% were willing to pay slightly or much more for them, alongside robust evidence of the hollowness of such claims and companies continued willingness to capitalise on them.

In 2021, LEAP conducted a field trip to the South West, including a visit to one of our partner business at Totnes market, where customers described supermarket organic food as "not properly organic", and biodynamically grown produce as like "Organic plus". But even in Totnes, an epicentre of the sustainable food movement, one founder despaired of the dominance of supermarkets. ***"I just don't get people… even in COVID they will be walking past local shops in Totnes because it's so well served with the local butchers and bakers and you know the whole works, and they're queuing for hours outside Morrison's only to get in and everything's gone. My local grocery never ran out of anything, not even toilet roll. What is it that stops people***

going there? I don't get it". Worse, few places are like Totnes, and challenging the dominance of supermarkets involves unravelling decades worth of accumulated shopping, cooking and eating habits, influenced by factors as disparate as where someone went to school, who they vote for, or who they cook for.

"Packaging is important, but it's really minor compared to some of the other issues with food and farming"

The frustration felt about the seemingly unbreakable relationship between customers and supermarkets runs through this description of a perceived undermining from within the movement: ***"George Monbiot… there he is, a green guru, and his analysis and description of soil is unbelievable. But his solution, what he's suggesting as a solution is so radical, it's even too radical for me, you know … what he's doing is bashing all of us lot, and I'm thinking well why it's hard enough as it is, what he needs to do is bash Morrison's, not us, and instead he's attacking all of us lot, and suggesting we all become vegan, perennial wheat growing, gloop eating, and I'm just thinking, what's that about?"***

Following the publication of his book Regenesis in November 2022 George Monbiot was giving interviews promoting fermented bacteria protein as a substitute for animal products, acknowledging that his own initial reaction had been a knee-jerk response as an environmentalist, but arguing that these novel products could provide a cheap alternative source of protein, with local production units providing employment opportunities within urban communities.

It should also be noted that in August 2022 Monbiot published a response to an open letter from Jyoti Ferandes of the LWA, denying he was hostile to agroecology or promoting cultured meat, instead arguing that he was challenging arguments that low yield forms of agroecology are an adequate solution to the challenges we face.

While people with influence within the movement are engaged in discussions about the future of food and how to solve the climate crisis, UK consumers continue to driven by price and habit. Although the rise of veganism and the rapidly expanding market over the past decade seemed to indicate a shift in these eating habits, research published by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board in February 2023 reported participation in Veganuary had dropped, with over 1 million fewer households participating than in 2023, against a backdrop of an overall drop in sales for meat free products through the previous year.

Regardless of the disputed reasons for the salad shortages earlier this year, and despite Thérèse Coffey's ill-advised promotion of turnips as a substitute, the coverage of the latest shock to the supply chain demonstrated little appetite for the reality of eating seasonally.

As with supply chain disruptions during the early stages of the pandemic, for the most part the focus for consumers appears to be continuity and familiarity, posing further questions for agroecological businesses looking to expand their markets, and for a movement seeking to challenge the dominance of supermarkets.

Routes to Market

Again and again, the role of supermarkets featured in our discussions, whether as foes to be taken on and challenged, or as a necessary evil that may need to be engaged with. For some within the movement, the call is for a CSA in every town, a goal described as scaling out and scaling deep, building a wide enough network to play an increasing role in feeding local communities.

For one founder, there is a risk of over production of sustainable produce, with insufficient routes to market. ***"There's more and more reason for [people to establish retail] in terms of potential customer base, good, viable models to copy and it's just not where the energy is going. It's not an exciting enough area... there's a lot of online content, YouTube, that's made small scale vegetable growing a pretty exciting place to be and that is great, but there needs to be something similar for retail. That is the biggest thing that's missing, I would say right now. You know, look at us we've just started a small scale growing project that has some retail but really if we wanted to, if we wanted to have a more significant impact on how everybody in a village of 7000 people, and how they shop, we would be looking to start a small shop, or a big shop, something that's on a main road, that is well thought through and really a very easy way for you to just ditch the supermarkets, the mainstream supermarkets".***

In another part of the country , one founder has a rapidly expanding business with multiple shops, as well as their own market garden - their aim is to expand market share and challenge supermarkets wherever possible, providing a route to market for new producers and growers. ***"If we can get more people to support us, that's more money to local producers, for foods that has lower environmental impact, greater local economic value, and it's better for society, makes space more interesting and a more diverse and interesting food culture... and trying to do that by using a different sort of business model, but to try and become as big a part of that food system as possible and use that market and use that power to change things for the better, and then have that platform to be able to draw attention to things that are problematic or to promote positive change in policy."*** However, the recent shift from a single shop to a chain of five required significant investment which was driven by grants and crowdfunding, and when demand wavered the business was left vulnerable, requiring new investment at short notice.

"Long term mainstream change is led by retail … the biggest need in this movement is more effective retail".

For another founder who has been reliant on selling direct to trade following the collapse of FarmDrop and a loss of a route direct to consumers, the connection between these two alternatives for the food system looked very different. *"Now I'm thinking that [we] have to go locally with existing supermarket outlets. And in some ways I think stuff it, they're the ones that have ruined the planet in terms of the chicken and the dairy and the dairy farmers not getting paid the price it costs to create the milk, why should they benefit from this wonderful local produce? But then the pragmatist in me just goes, well, if they don't, nothing will change".*

Clearly, there is no one single solution to this. Although for many in the movement supermarkets symbolise the many wrongs of neo-liberalism for some, the realities of operating within a dominant system may require some producers to build relationships with supermarkets if they are to create a route to consumers. As more people are drawn into production, decisions will need to be made about how they will define their relationship with other businesses, both within the movement and within the mainstream. Which leads to our final theme, around the guidance and support needed for new entrants, and how to steer activity towards identified gaps in the new system.

Supporting New Entrants

In the closing moments of her interview, the founder of one of our longest established business partners shared this advice for anyone considering starting an agroecological business, or making any change in their lives:

"Martin Wolfe always used to say to me, just plant the trees. So to phrase that in another way is Goethe's poem, Be Bold… it's a big step, starting out down this path. However, if you are bold, and plant the trees, then things that you don't realise will happen will happen in your favour and come towards you and support you… Boldness has genius, and magic in it. So what I would say is, make the transition, it's going to be good, it's going to work, you will be prosperous, and people will come to you."

To make this transition work, and for people to be able to plant the trees, it's clear that there are a number of practical barriers to be overcome. In Food For Thought we discussed some of these barriers, in particular factors such as economic and social capital and the risk of perpetuating cycles of exclusion. In a growing and informal sector, much relies on individual connections and networks from previous working lives, and relatively limited routes into the sector such as trainee programmes attract highly qualified applicants, able to shift commitments and location for the length of the programme.

One founder looked back on her route from working a teaching role in London to setting up a growing business in Somerset and, amongst other experiences, described the importance of a six month unpaid trainee grower role: ***"It was a very amazingly privileged position to be in, if we're going to use that word, because, you know, I spent six months living somewhere and not earning, and getting, you know, all the training on the job, but it was one of the best ways to learn how to grow".*** Privilege also runs through stories that involve access to finance, chance meetings with the right people, and having the capacity to navigate the processes necessary for setting up a business, though undoubtedly alongside stories of sacrifice and hardship. Many of the founders also reflected on the life stages where a switch in lifestyle is possible, either before having families or once children have left home:

"I was… in a good position because I don't have a mortgage, I don't have any children, I really didn't have any responsibility other than myself. And so I was in a position where I could take

risks. And I think other people are less able to take risks because of all the responsibility they have in their life. So, you know, I was in the sort of perfect place to be able to take that leap of faith, and just go for it".

""There's a lot of fear that comes up because we're conditioned to be afraid of scarcity and lack and failing, and so overriding that with, you know, blind faith is sort of what it was got me here".

For a number of the founders, youth wasn't merely a time of fewer responsibilities and greater capacity for change, it was also a time of not knowing the potential risks being taken. *"I think a really a big factor [in setting up the business] was the fact that I was quite young, I didn't really have anything to lose, I had nowhere to fall, and I didn't know enough to make me scared to do it."* Despite this, when asked what they would do differently, mentoring and support was mentioned a number of times. *"I regret that I didn't do what young entrepreneurs do now and get mentors, because a mentor would probably have sat down with you, with me and sort of talked me through that process"*.

Discussing the flow of new entrants into growing, this founder described the pattern he had witnessed in the South West, and his perceptions of the risk of failure for commercial ventures without a commercial drive: *"(The) last few years been quite a interesting time in small scale growing in particular, with lots of people starting new ventures, and certainly around here we see a lot which were probably started by people even even more influenced by environmental movement, people, you know, probably the common theme is they're all members of Extinction Rebellion, and they're very active in that kind of that world and they're starting projects, so they're growing and selling organic veg, but maybe have less of the commercial background or the understanding or motivation"*.

In particular, our interviews underline the role of keystone businesses and organisations in providing opportunities and support. *"When I found organisations like Slow Food, well, then I found my tribe, I found people I could connect with, I didn't feel like I was swimming around*

alone any longer". Others described the benefit of being in the right place at the right time: ***"We got to know each other in the Manchester scene.. We came with a certain amount of schooling and a way of seeing the world and growing and selling organic foods very much based on the Manchester scene, which is quite an important training ground for people".***

The LWA's The Attraction of Agroecology highlights a need for a level of coordination or networking between local businesses as a way of meeting demand for produce, a point echoed by one of our interviewees: ***"I worry there's going to be a high failure rate, partly because of lack of skills, but also partly because there's a bit of overlap in catchment areas, because when you're playing on the fringes, which is basically what we're doing, you know, you're a little bit more vulnerable to to those overlapping catchments"***. If there is to be a successful CSA in every town, this local networking provides opportunities to adapt

Clearly, organisations such as the LWA and RFT have an interest in supporting new entrants and helping them to thrive. Many of the recommendations in the LWA's 2022 report are outward facing, focusing on policy level interventions and integrating agroecology into mainstream agricultural programmes and business support activities. Our discussions with founders underline these recommendations, and also emphasise the need for a level of coordination within the movement.

To support this, we would suggest there is a need for market research to identify and understand consumer demand within regions; mapping activities to identify areas currently poorly served but able to sustain small scale businesses; and creating more opportunities for activities such as peer support, informal and formal networks, and peer mentoring both at local level and also across the UK.

Final Thoughts

As we confront another phase of the climate crisis and anticipate governmental and societal responses to it, we firmly believe that agroecological businesses will play an increasingly vital role in reshaping our food systems, addressing not just the ecological damage inherent to the current system, but also the social imbalances.

The businesses which form our movement, including community interest companies and co-operatives, growers and retailers, face numerous challenges as they work to achieve social goals, not least to the financial and mental wellbeing of the people running them.

Projects such as RFT's Ready Healthy Eat highlight the role community food businesses can play in addressing food poverty issues, and many of the businesses we work with have initiatives such as subsidised produce for people or communities in need as part of their social mission.

Increasingly though, our attention is drawn to the connections between social and economic sustainability. To effect change, community food businesses must reach potential customers with financial capacity who may be hesitant due to established habits, socio-economic factors, or cultural foodways. For many mainstream consumers, sustainable food businesses and the produce they provide is perceived as niche, awkward, or a luxury, maybe best saved for a weekend trip to a farmers market or local farm shop. How can these businesses challenge perceptions of sustainable food in an increasingly politicised cultural dialogue that has evolved from Cranks to Tofu Eating Wokerati, and win more customers from supermarkets?

Philosophically, businesses and the movement as a whole face questions about how far we are willing or able to go in adapting to the expectations of these potential customers without alienating existing customers? Is our aim to take over from mainstream businesses, or to set examples for them to adopt more sustainable practices? What are the red lines on how far we are willing to engage, and where are our areas of flexibility?

For everyone invested in the success of community food businesses, whether employees, customers, volunteers or funders, there is a need to navigate the balance between ethical purity and practicality, and to be realistic about the expectations we project onto them, as well as onto each other.

For organisations supporting the movement, how do we support these businesses and their leaders as they develop and sustain a business mindset, and how can we help them access the necessary skills when required?

Beyond practical business support such as coordinating and networking, is there more that can be done to promote other forms of support, particularly for the well-being of business founders, or to provide more targeted support for new entrants? How can we grow networks of businesses which enable founders to thrive, and to stay involved beyond a time when they are young, fit and free from other responsibilities? How do we support the mental and physical health and wellbeing of everyone working in the sector, and ensure these aren't sacrificed in the battle for economic viability? And, again, can a business truly be described as sustainable if it isn't physically and personally sustainable for those running it?