

GROWING COMMUNITIES' ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12



The first crop of tomatoes from the Dagenham Starter Farm

Transforming food and farming through community-led trade



www.growingcommunities.org

Foreword by Julie Brown, Director, Growing Communities

Well, you wait 20 years for an award and then three come along at once!

First up: Hackney in Bloom Best Food Growing (professional) for our Urban Market Gardens. Next, we've just collected our *Observer Food Monthly* award for Best Independent Local Retailer and last month we had a visit from the judges of the BBC Food and Farming Awards – we're in the final three in their 'Big Food Idea' category.

All three awards feel significant in their different ways. It's wonderful that our market gardens have been acknowledged by Hackney Council. And we've won the OFM award because you, our members and market customers, voted for us. That makes us feel not only proud that you understand and appreciate what we do, but reassured that you'll stick with us on the bumpy road that lies ahead.

And it seems that the BBC judges recognise that the work we are doing to help other groups set up their own Growing Communities type enterprises is a 'big food idea' and has the potential to make a significant contribution to transforming food and farming.

Our Start-up Programme offers active support to groups setting up their own community-led box schemes using the financial tools, systems and thinking we've developed over the years. Our model is designed to be an economic seed that other groups can adapt to their own situations. Vegbox in Kentish Town and Local Greens in Herne Hill, for instance, are using it to create something similar – but also different.

And we want to help more communities – not just because it will enable them to create something



Penny and Tom from the latest Start-up box scheme, Vegbox in Kentish Town

as vibrant and as rich as we have here in Hackney but because the more groups there are pulling in the same direction, the more impact we can all have. So, the Start-up Programme is our contribution to creating wider change in the food and farming system, our contribution to tackling climate change and resource depletion, our contribution to dealing with the enormous environmental and economic challenges we face.

It is indeed a 'big food idea', which at times can feel overwhelming – the scale of the challenges we face, the contrast between our ambition and the daily reality of packing and selling vegetables week in week out, year in year out.

Which brings me back to our members and customers. You have stuck with us over those years and helped to create what's in the pages ahead. Just under half of members have been on the box scheme for four years or more. Last month we said goodbye to Gill, who had been with us for 16 years! And you have helped us to grow: 'word of mouth' consistently comes out as the top reason for joining the box scheme.

But did you know that the top reason people leave the box scheme is because they are moving or going travelling? So, if you have to leave us – now you can take the seed of Growing Communities with you and plant it in your new place. Find out if there's a scheme like ours and if not, why not think about starting one up? We'll be here to help you.

Julie Brown, November 2012

What you say about us

*“Just wanted to drop you a line to say how happy I am to be getting Growing Communities veg again, having been eating S*****'s Organic veg for two months while I was moving. It's so noticeable how much better quality and tasty GC veg is and to be supporting a local business is just a bonus. I've had loads of tasty meals and it's really convenient to get a week's veg at once.”*

Returning member, March 2012

“Thank you very much for the great chance I enjoyed of consuming such quality of organic vegetables. I would like to encourage you to carry on with your work. You are building a new world made for humans.”

Member leaving to live in Spain, summer 2012

“We had a problem with our bags on our first trial week and rang straight away. The next day you rang to apologise (again!) and met me very close to home with a huge bag of goodies. You've always been easy to contact and very helpful.”

Member, autumn 2012

“Yours were really great workshops getting our pupils to think about where their food actually comes from and why the choices they make are important!”

Anna Alikaj, secondary school teacher, spring 2012

What we've achieved in 2011/12

It's been an extraordinary year, with amazing highs and lows. We launched our Starter Farm in Dagenham, opened two new pick-ups, found new Patchwork sites, welcomed a new Start-Up box scheme into the fold, starred in some films about food, published our first comic book and, of course, won a string (well, nearly) of awards. But the year has also been dominated by poor weather that reduced the salad yields from our urban market gardens by 10%, devastated the vegetable and top fruit harvests of all the farmers and growers we work with and made the weekly task of filling the bags with seasonal, local produce particularly challenging.



Patchwork farmers Emma and Ximena and other friends set up Hackney Growers' Kitchen to sell cakes made with their own produce at the market

This year has also reminded us of how long it takes to really create change – and how getting more sustainably produced, local food onto our plates means a great deal of work that can be repetitive, laborious and not at all newsworthy! As well as the fun bits, making local food a reality also means packing crates of veg, picking slugs off salad leaves, suffering rainy days at the market and our farmers and growers working long hours in muddy fields.

So, it's great to see our alternatives featured not only in the national media, as Julie has explained, but also in a number of films, books and guides. Earlier this year, Ben Mann and Guiseppe Cioffo's film, *Best Before*, featured our box scheme (18 years old), our famers' market (nine and a half years old), our Food Zones (five years old) and our Patchwork Farm site at the Castle Climbing Centre (four years old) as cutting-edge examples of the 'London Food Revolution'.

This year saw our Starter Farm in Dagenham up and running. We've been developing our plans and searching for the right site and funding for a peri-urban organic farm since 2008 – we'd secured the site and Big Lottery funding by the end of 2011. In May 2012, we recruited our grower Alice Holden and the rest of the team: assistant grower Beth Stewart, volunteer coordinator Susanna Wallis and apprentices Shelagh Martin, Paul Harris and Leon Quinlan. In four months, the Starter Farm team and volunteers have transformed the ex-council nursery site: they've dug beds, shovelled truckloads of chicken manure



“The farmers' market is really good with lots of local produce. It's a blessing because organic used to be so expensive and it's very reasonable here and the range is increasing. It's very positive for the community.”

Market customer, autumn 2012

and compost, re-built polytunnels and glasshouses and produced delicious tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers, basil and beans that have been sold to restaurants and cafes in Dagenham and Hackney. From February 2013, the site will be in official Soil Association conversion and we'll be able to start selling the produce into the box scheme and at the market. The Starter Farm also hosts weekly visits from Eastbrook School and Barking College.

It has been really rewarding to put all the knowledge we've gained over the past 18 years into our Start-up Programme and watch other communities around the country build their own box schemes using our model of community-led trade.



Packing at the Old Fire Station

By the end of their first year of trading in the spring, the first five Start-ups were packing 305 bags of fruit and veg a week, had forged relationships with 13 sustainable suppliers and paid £30,000 directly to them. Overall, the new schemes have created six part-time jobs. The latest Start-up is Vegbox in Kentish Town, which launched in September and already has more than 40 members. We are looking for more communities who want to set up their own box schemes.

Closer to home, we took on another four urban growing apprentices this year,

James Cabbett, Hannah Mackie, Sean Gifford and Sarah Bentley, and will offer them Patchwork sites where they can grow salad leaves. Stephanie Irvine, the Patchwork Farm co-ordinator, is hoping to sign leases on three new sites in the next few weeks: St Matthew's in Upper Clapton, two private gardens on Clapton Square and another off Kynaston Avenue – and there is another new site at Stellman Close. Of last year's apprentices, both Shelagh and Julie have found paid work as growers in addition to working on Patchwork sites.

Despite awful weather, marauding squirrels and nasty attacks of lettuce root aphid on our urban market gardens this year, the growers still picked an impressive 800kg of salad, equivalent to 25.7 tonnes per hectare. The four Patchwork sites also did very well, producing 696kg of salad, including Ximena and Emma's mighty 404kg from the Hackney Tree Nursery plot!

Our Hackney growers are now selling salad to a wider range of outlets. Local shops such as Londis on Fountayne Road and Organic and Natural on Lower Clapton Road sell out every week, and a growing number of local restaurants are serving Growing Communities salad.

“We source as much English veg as possible and we like to support local growers. Some of this salad is grown at the church across the road, so it couldn't have a lower carbon footprint. It is really fresh and lasts a long time and the locals really enjoy that. We sell out every week.”

Mayank Patel, Londis Fountayne Rd



The Russet – one of our new pick-ups

Last month, the Hoxton Beach cafe at Clissold Leisure Centre tweeted: “Extra zinginess of our Stoke Newington-grown salads from @growcomm has been commented on.”

More than 170 schoolchildren visited our growing sites in 2011/12. Fiona McAllister, who designed the education programme, has now secured more funding from the Ernest Cook Trust, so we will be able to welcome more schools over the coming year.

The box scheme now supplies fruit and vegetables to about 770 households in Hackney. We pack about 1,140 bags each week – over 100 tonnes annually. Overall 86.5% of our veg came from the UK, up on last year. Over the past year, 61% of the veg and 32% of the fruit in our bags came directly from local farms – we are very proud of these figures bearing in mind this year's extreme weather and poor harvests.

We estimate that the box scheme and market combined provide sustainably produced food to well over 3,000 people

in our community every week. Some 31% of box scheme members consider themselves to be on a low income – an increase since last year.

We're very excited about our new pick-ups at the Russet on Amhurst Road, which has been buying our Hackney salad for some time, and at St Peter's Church in De Beauvoir, which will give even more Hackney residents a chance to join the box scheme.

This year we ran a series of successful Seasonal Taster events at different pick-ups to inspire box scheme members with new recipe ideas. We handed out recipe cards and samples of delicious low-cost meals cooked with ingredients from the veg bags – it also gave us a chance to meet members at unstaffed pick-ups such as the Castle and Chats Palace.

This hasn't been the easiest of years for the Stoke Newington Farmers' Market because of the cold, wet and windy weather, which cut down on passing trade – as well as reducing the

“Just picked up my veg bag and whoever was responsible for the contents this week has done an amazing job! It's bleak mid winter and yet I've got nine different veg and a variety of bright cheerful colours. I was going to leave it for the homeless shelter as I felt too cold to venture out. I told myself it would all be beige root veggies. I'm so glad I made the effort; you're awesome!”

Member, December 2011

amount of produce available. However, we are lucky in having some very loyal customers and some amazing producers! Overall the combined turnover for the producers at the market has gone up from £430,000 to £450,795.

We've tried new ways to explain why buying food direct from producers matters. This summer we commissioned a comic book from artist Mike Georgiou, *Super Stocks Bros – A Farmer's Life*, to show the hard work and ingenuity that farmers put into producing our food.



Chris and Iain Learmonth in Mike Georgiou's comic Super Stocks Bros