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GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES
WORKING ON FOOD, WELLBEING
AND SUSTAINABILITY



Good Practice Guide for Social Enterprises Working on Food, Wellbeing and Sustainability

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Acknowledgements

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Contact: Kim Graham, Shared Assets CIC: hello@sharedassets.org.uk.



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The mainstream food system is failing people and the planet in many ways, including a lack of affordability, the promotion of unhealthy food, chemical-intensive agricultural systems and exploitative working conditions for farmers and others in the wider food sector. Social enterprises in the UK are amongst the organisations experimenting with new ways of working around food, even if this sometimes isn't their core area of focus.

Social enterprises are a diverse group of organisations with a primary social or environmental purpose that combine the approaches of the public, private and civil society sectors. However, they often face a difficult and complex operating environment. Given their limited resources, this poses considerable challenges when trying to meet the needs of many different communities, pay their staff fairly, and produce healthy food in environmentally-friendly ways in a system dominated by the power of supermarkets, low prices for their produce, and a scarcity of suitable, long-term funding.

The 'Social Enterprise as a catalyst for sustainable and healthy local Food Systems' (SEFS) project, explored how social enterprises of all kinds can bring forward innovations in healthy and sustainable food. It directly involved six social enterprises working in areas from community transport to early years education, as well as holding workshops with many other social enterprises. The insights and good practice in this guide come from them, with some additions from the observations and experiences of Shared Assets and academic partners. Thank you to everyone who contributed their wisdom!

The guide is designed to be useful for other social enterprises considering how best to enhance and grow their activities and beneficial impacts. It

contains some questions to help you think through the tensions that can come as part of this work. It also has some ideas for ways to scale based on good practice that has emerged through the SEFS project, and signposts you to other sources of inspiration you might find helpful. We hope it will support the already sprouting shoots of a more equitable food system to expand and flourish.

Ways of growing

Not all social enterprises want to grow in the conventional business sense and there are many different ways of having a positive impact. Scaling is not necessarily just increasing the size of an organisation or its area of activities, it can also be about going deeper, replicating a model, working in partnership, creating new knowledge and sharing this widely, for example. There are different ways it can happen, each of which has its pros and cons, and there may be tensions in going for one approach more than another. Shared Assets previously produced a [series of thought guides, case studies, and a group decision-making toolkit](#) to help social enterprises (particularly those working on the land) think through the various aspects and strains which may be associated with scaling, which you may want to explore.

There is often a strong urge for social enterprises to scale their work or constantly 'innovate', whether in response to need in their communities, new funding opportunities or their own ambitions, but it is not essential to do. There is nothing wrong with doing one thing well, at a level that feels right for you. You don't need to grow your organisation to scale. Sharing ideas can be the fastest way to change society and transform the food system. Wherever you are in your journey of creating and running a social enterprise, the questions and tips in the sections below might be useful to reflect on.



Advice from social enterprises and topics to think through

The social enterprises we spoke to also had a wealth of useful advice to share from their experiences of scaling—good and bad! Below is a list of topics and questions to consider at each stage of trying to scale, in order to do it in a way that works for you and your business.

Starting out

- Keep things simple—have a clear purpose and aims
- Start small and do one thing well—then gradually build up whilst prioritising maintaining a connection to the community you initially set out to support—don't try and do too much at the same time
- Take the time to build up trust with people before setting up a project—if you don't have trust in each other as you scale, this is where things can go wrong
- Help people where they are at, for example in terms of food preferences, and build from there—making people feel welcome and comfortable is key

Setting up

- You may need to be prepared to work voluntarily to start (and fund yourself through another job)—few funders will fund you until you have a track record of what you can do
- For social enterprises there are some alternative sources of funding you may want to explore, such as social investment funds—this [map](#) and [site](#) might help
- Don't forget the amount of time the practical aspects of scaling can take, such as setting up a bank account—factor this into your plans
- Allocating time and money for ongoing monitoring and evaluation is important from the start, so you have the data to hand to review your progress
- Be realistic about managing the common pitfalls for new organisations, such as how to work on multiple projects well, not spread yourselves too thinly, and being able to draw activities together coherently
- Try to have a viable stream of income that allows you to make a surplus to create reserves for a rainy day—thinking like a business, which manages customer relationships, marketing, and supply chain opportunities well, may help with this
- Build on what the state is meant to be doing and do it better or fill gaps—e.g. community cafes, youth services—as a route to funding/profit generation

Building partnerships

- Research what's happening already locally to complement and not compete with others, and to expand your network—the social enterprise model is conducive to collaboration
- Join the dots—visit each other and make real connections
- Value the time it takes to build networks, for example through going to events, things can unfold from these connections that you can't imagine at the start
- Concentrate on building mutually beneficial partnerships—scaling knowledge as opposed to materials may not take up as much capacity
- Make it worth people coming to events by providing food and drink—and listen to everyone—the people cleaning and on reception, not just those in the 'main room'
- Think if you can partner with any health systems/providers to quickly reach new audiences
- Ideas belong to everybody and are already there in communities, they often just need to be channelled
- Sharing premises with a number of other organisations can be a useful way to nurture partnerships—for example, being based at a library or community garden where things are already going on can spark ideas for new ways of working together, and get more people engaged
- If you have your own premises—think about what space you can offer to fledgling social enterprises with similar aims to your own—this can be another way of scaling your work, by helping build an ecosystem

Scaling

- Who are you scaling for and how quickly are you planning to do this—is it in response to outside pressure (e.g. funding/media attention)?
- There is a risk of scaling too quickly and getting caught in a 'boom and bust' cycle which becomes overwhelming and doesn't fulfil the needs of the communities you are trying to support
- Think about how you can scale your social enterprise gradually so you can 'ride the wave' of additional funding, but still meet your original aims and current capacity levels
- Consider how you can share ideas with others to maximise your influence, but balance this with making sure you are still able to generate your own income
- Social objectives can sometimes be best met by giving away your ideas freely and using your

skills to move onto the next transformational innovation

- Focus on the journey, not just the destination, to bring everyone with you along the way
- Spend time getting everyone on the same page—staff and volunteers—before attempting to scale, and clearly communicate what you are doing throughout
- Seek out relationships with umbrella organisations that can support with essential but complex processes as you scale, such as around safeguarding, finances and accounting, monitoring and evaluation, HR, and admin
- Consider how to tap into the deeper shared values of your team and community, and how much to give people a say on these during your scaling journey
- Consider what sustainability or resilience means to you in a holistic sense, and how it can include people's existing knowledge as well as new activities

Caring for yourself and others

- Think about what upskilling and training your team might need to undertake scaling—e.g. on organisational or legal structures, or HR legislation
- Recognise your limits, know what you can't manage, and be ok with saying no to some things
- Consider if there is a role for 'nature'/non-human representation as a board member (as [Tree Sisters](#) and others have done) to have a more holistic perspective on resilience
- Give yourself time to breathe and reflect before powering ahead—social enterprises tend to move fast!
- Mentorship can be helpful, either through a formal scheme or an informal network of people you can draw on for their wisdom—the latter can be more sustainable in the long term. It can also be a mutually beneficial exchange to act as a mentor for someone else, and reflect on your own practice through this
- Support volunteers and maximise the non-financial benefits they can get from participating

Being the alternative—existing good practice

Social enterprises are already showing everyday how things can be done differently and better, within the food system and beyond. In this section, we highlight some of the good practice happening within social enterprises in various spheres in the bulletpoints, and share links to some organisations doing these things which you might be inspired by.

Improving health and wellbeing through transforming food systems

- Reducing social isolation and supporting mental wellbeing through undertaking land work, and having more interaction with food producers
- Providing information on the healthiness and sustainability of foods while running other social enterprise services, and running workshops/events—since social enterprises are not solely driven by profit, advice on healthy eating is often more trusted as communities know that the organisation cares about their wellbeing, and not just pushing a product to generate income for shareholders
- Making greater creative use of community engagement approaches, particularly less formal methods—e.g. Big Listen event, open door policy, newsletters
- Acting as ambassadors for behaviour change around food
- Linking up different aspects of healthcare, such as using herbs for healing, or offering [social prescribing](#) schemes and chances for nature connection
- Encouraging seasonal eating, and providing education on how to use 'unusual' food through recipes
- Increasing access to healthy and culturally appropriate food
- Creating 'sit spots' for people to rest and reflect
- Increasing availability of less processed, more nutrient dense food
- Providing wraparound services and introducing health/sustainability issues gradually in relation to other activities services related to sports and fitness

ORGANISATIONS TO CHECK OUT

Cae Tan Community Supported Agriculture [\[link\]](#) :: Selby Trust [\[link\]](#) :: Herbalists without Borders Bristol [\[link\]](#) :: Community Supported Agriculture Network [\[link\]](#) :: Cultivate [\[link\]](#) :: Social Farms & Gardens [\[link\]](#) :: Love Food [\[link\]](#) :: Incredible Edible [\[link\]](#) :: Windmill Hill City Farm [\[link\]](#) :: Lambhill Stables [\[link\]](#) :: Social Adventures [\[link\]](#)





Images: Kesteven Farm, Sheffield / Courtesy of Dora Damian

Increasing social justice through transforming food systems

- Upskilling others—educating others to do things themselves
- Building local (food) economies which support community resilience
- Creating ethical, fairly paid career choices for people
- Building awareness of locally freely available wild foods and the ethics of foraging
- Running workshops on food growing in small spaces to increase accessibility
- Campaigning for a fair living wage for growers, processors and retailers—mindset of allegiance with land based workers where our food comes from
- Ethos of being open to all—e.g. taking a multigenerational approach to engaging with the local community; ensuring not to exclude users from particular cultural/religious backgrounds
- Sometimes reaching out to particular target groups might involve organising special events to attract them
- Community-led/focused systems—not driven by profit
- Transforming food bank reliant communities—social outreach and meeting people where they are at
- Raising awareness of the injustices of the corporate-controlled food system and shifting mindsets around what a fairer food system might look like
- Supporting community access to/ownership of land and other resources—controlling technology and building own systems
- Tailoring activities to different abilities
- Making an effort to intentionally support a wide range of communities and therefore stocking a variety of food types—normal retailers are less willing to adapt for different demographics unless driven by profit
- Increasing aspirations of food culture—expect high quality, diversity and local
- Building connections between allies—growers, cooks, mass movements of consumers
- Using prices which fairly reflect costs to growers

ORGANISATIONS TO CHECK OUT

Granville Community Kitchen [🔗] :: London Early Years Foundation [🔗] :: Food Squad Sheffield [🔗] :: Landworkers' Alliance [🔗] :: Sustain [🔗] :: Grow Wilder [🔗] :: Cooperation Town [🔗] :: Land in our Names [🔗] :: Made in Hackney [🔗] :: Ecological Land Cooperative [🔗] :: Propagate [🔗] :: Nolly Cafe [🔗] :: Bentley Urban Farm [🔗] :: Lapwing Mill [🔗] :: Global Gardens [🔗] :: The Haven [🔗] :: FungALL [🔗] :: Glasgow Community Transport [🔗] :: The Bristol Rainforest [🔗] :: Eden Project Communities [🔗]



Helping the environment through transforming food systems

- Diversifying activities (e.g. creating a forest garden)
- Getting creative to transform gluts of produce
- Building awareness of how to cook seasonally, reduce food waste, and do energy saving cooking (e.g. with air fryers)
- Building environmental resilience beyond just measuring carbon capture, such as improving biodiversity
- Supporting land sharing and coexisting with nature
- Prioritising small scale, agroecological, regenerative, and/or organic agricultural practices, and producing food close to where it is eaten—even if this starts small with just a few herbs grown on a windowsill at your premises
- Participating in research that seeks to build an understanding of the impacts of agroecological practices (e.g. earthworm counts/humus content), and increase people's awareness and appreciation of biodiversity through citizen science
- Campaigning to protect green space and agricultural land
- Promoting and providing education about recycling and composting
- Creating opportunities for local landscape/nature connection and appreciation
- Sharing spaces, kits, equipment to reduce impact
- Bring transparency about where things come from
- Supporting circular models of food production and consumption

Using food system transformation to change other things

- Sharing ideas of social enterprise as a viable business model
- Policy work nationally and locally
- Building confidence and empowerment through education
- Partnership working—collaboration rather than competition
- Creating spaces for people to meet, exchange views, discuss problems and come up with their own solutions
- Not seeing food—or people—as disposable!

Further reading

Pathways to Good Work: Toolkit for Community Organisations [[🔗](#)]

The role of community businesses in providing health and wellbeing services [[🔗](#)]

Exploring your impact: telling the story of community food initiatives [[🔗](#)]

Beyond charitable food aid [[🔗](#)]

Food builds community [[🔗](#)]

Local Land Economies, guides for community food enterprise resilience [[🔗](#)]

Bring fresh and affordable food to your university [[🔗](#)]

Connecting community food enterprises [[🔗](#)]



ORGANISATIONS TO CHECK OUT

Organic Growers Alliance [[🔗](#)] :: New Dawn Traders [[🔗](#)] :: Biodynamic Association [[🔗](#)] :: Soil Association [[🔗](#)] :: BugLife [[🔗](#)] :: Wildlife Trust [[🔗](#)] :: Grain Lab [[🔗](#)] :: Permaculture Association [[🔗](#)] :: South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre [[🔗](#)] :: Imagine If [[🔗](#)] :: Compost Mentis [[🔗](#)] :: Keep Wales Tidy [[🔗](#)] :: Food Sense Wales [[🔗](#)] :: Sustainable Food Places [[🔗](#)]





As part of the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems programme, the SEFS project explores social enterprises that offer community growing spaces, distribution schemes, leisure and fitness centers, children's nurseries, and other community-based services. The project emphasizes their distinctive role in fostering food systems that are inclusive, sustainable, and healthy.

For more details, please visit www.cusp.ac.uk/SEFS.

