



IMPACT REPORT 2022/23



Better Food Traders is a UK-wide network that supports and promotes ethical retailers who sell locally grown, planet friendly food. Retailers are an important link between producers and customers - influencing food choices, telling the stories of where and how food is produced, choosing to pay farmers fairly or not - and Better Food Traders commit to ways of working that support planet-friendly farmers and benefit their local communities.

City Farm Shop, Bristol

IMPACT OF OUR MEMBERS 2022/23

“Love that we can turn to this network for advice and help.”

- Members' Survey

100 Better Food Traders
and their **41,988**
weekly customers
working together to
change the food system

Over **£14,463,917**
annual sales of fruit and veg from UK
agroecological and organic farmers

At least **295** UK
climate- and nature-
friendly farms supported,
and more in Europe

“We’ve really seen the value in BFT from a trading perspective (rather than a grower’s, which is covered by other networks). The marketing meetings where we gather to swap best practices are particularly useful.”

- Charlotte Barry, Camel CSA



Good Food, Catford, London

“Thank you for your support with this... We definitely seem to have steered through the other end of something very rocky. Undoubtedly we will be stronger and more resilient for it.”

- Moya from Barra Organics, Sheffield who attended BFT trainings on Crowdfunding and Securing Local Media Coverage, and subsequently ran a successful crowdfunder

Norwich
FarmShare

SUMMARY

It has been an exciting year at Better Food Traders, with our growing membership hitting the 100 mark, more training and events than ever before, a new Project Leader, a refreshed website, and lots of new strands of work. We currently have 100 members in total, with 88 in England, 7 in Scotland, 4 in Wales and 1 in Northern Ireland. 84% of our network is outside of London.

The level of active involvement from members has increased, with ever larger numbers attending our online training sessions and meet-ups, a strong turnout at our Annual Gathering in Bristol, and good engagement on our Slack channels where members ask for advice, help and general support. Even more heartening, we have seen a number of Better Food Traders mentoring and collaborating with each other, building strong ties and in some cases talking about working together locally. Ultimately, all of this provides stronger routes to market for nature-friendly farmers.

It has also been a very challenging 12 months in the sustainable food sector, and we have tailored our work accordingly. Global economic tides have brought crippling energy prices, worker shortages, and customers having to make tough decisions about purchases. Many of our members have described the work of Better Food Traders as more vital than ever.

Our members sold a total of **£14,463,917** of planet friendly fruit and veg. We also saw lots of new farmers listed as suppliers, with **295 organic and agroecological farmers** now trading through BFT members.

66 of our members run veg box schemes, of which 27 operate as Community Supported Agriculture. 30 of our members run market stalls, while 13 define themselves as a ‘food hub’, and the fast-growing group is shops, which now numbers 24. 43% of members were established in the last 5 years.

Each of these businesses has committed to selling no air-freighted produce, following a buying policy that prioritises small- and medium-scale organic and agroecological farms, and delivering on a social/ environmental mission by engaging with their local community.

EXTERNAL CONTEXT

The last 12 months have been challenging for almost all Better Food Traders. While the pandemic brought a surge in demand and heightened awareness of the fragility of the supermarket system, price rises are now impacting overheads and product margins, and the cost of living crisis is putting a squeeze on customer spending.

A survey of local food enterprises by Sustain in November 2022 found that more than half were **“operating but worried about the next few months”**, and 80% reported reduced sales/orders. One respondent said **“local support from (the) pandemic has dropped off drastically”**, while another noted **“no support from local council or government for small not for profit organisations”**.

The survey by Sustain identified a number of asks from food enterprises, and Better Food Traders is focusing on these four in particular:

- Identifying and sharing good practice on cost savings.
- Providing online advice.
- Signposting available grants and how to fundraise.
- Creating a Shop Local marketing campaign.

INTERNAL CHANGES

September saw Julia Kirby-Smith join the team as Project Leader, with a handover period from Natasha allowing for a very smooth transition. Julia brings experience of running a Better Food Trader business in North London, as well as a background in journalism and strategic communications. In her first months in post she has overseen a comms refresh across the website, social media channels and member communications, and put an emphasis on outreach and recruitment of new members.

We have just recruited a Network Administrator, Nicola Green, to support Network Manager, Nicki East, as our

membership grows. We are also looking at expanding our network of Regional Convenors who can run local events on an ad hoc basis (more on that below).



Better Food Traders
Annual Gathering

TRAINING AND BUSINESS SUPPORT

In the year 2022/23 we ran 30 hours of online training and advice sessions delivered on a wide range of topics from Crowdfunding, Securing Local Media Coverage and Search Engine Optimisation. Average attendance at each session was 15 organisations. We also ran an Advice Workshop at Oxford Real Farming Conference 2022 (attendance 25), the Annual Gathering in Bristol (attendance 40), two regional networking events (attendance 25 each) and Business Support Week - more details below.

We have a strong newsletter readership: our average open rate is 61% of the membership (above the typical average readership for the NGO sector of 49%), and our peer-to-peer networking platform, Slack, is well used. For example 35% of the membership accessed Slack in January, with 15% of members actively contributing to discussions. We have also refreshed our website, including a new dedicated Members' Area with an easy-to-navigate online library, and have had positive feedback such as: **“The welcome pack that we were able to download from the library and adapt for our own use was invaluable.” Martin, Middle World Farms.**

BUSINESS SUPPORT WEEK

On top of our regular monthly events, we ran an intensive Business Support Week in January organised in partnership with the Food Research Collaboration at City University. This event delivered 47 hours of confidential, tailored business advice to members. Participants said that sessions were **“very, very useful and have given us lots of ideas and direction”** and advisors were able to **“answer questions [they had] been wanting the answers to for 7 years”**. One of the advisors commented **“What a wonderful assortment of companies you have found - talking with everyone was amazing”**.

As part of Business Support Week we also ran a 1-day Marketing Design Workshop, attended by 15 members, and an open session on the Loans for Enlightened Agriculture Programme attended by 10 members. Participants said that the sessions were **“well structured”**, the discussions were **“easy to understand”** and that it was **“a good networking opportunity as well as a skills event”**.

REACTIVE EVENTS

As well as planned training, we delivered a series of reactive events in response to urgent needs of our members. We provided members with information, online sessions and advice around technical platforms, following the announcement by Boxmaster that the veg box software would be terminating in June 2023. We convened two emergency meetings to discuss options (attended by 21 businesses) and four further meetings with alternative software providers. We also negotiated special offers for our members from two of the most popular UK-based platforms.

In March we will run a Marketing Support Scheme, using some additional funding from Esmée Fairburn Foundation to provide combined cash and in-kind support to individual members who apply for the scheme. This is in response to a number of members seeing falling customer numbers and needing extra support to bolster sales.

ANNUAL GATHERING

Despite the challenging economic outlook, our members have faced this year's pressures with fortitude and determination - as seen at our Annual Gathering in September, which took place in Bristol. An inspiring day of networking, brainstorming and collaborating left attendees feeling renewed and hopeful. Members said: **“Thank you for arranging this gathering. The value of simply getting like-minded people together... this shouldn't be underestimated”** and **“Speaking to a selection of very knowledgeable people. Had some really great actionable advice. Inspiring!”**

MAP CAMPAIGN

The Better Food Traders Map is an interactive tool that helps customers find their nearest BFT and purchase locally-grown, planet-friendly food. We run a social media campaign to promote the map twice a year, which helps members to reach more customers as well as generating interest from non-member businesses who hear about the network. The map campaign in September 2022 resulted in more than 5,000 views of the map, a 12% increase in followers, and eight new members joining. In 2023, the map will form the basis of a targeted social media campaign called 'Adventures in Food' over the school summer holidays. We are hoping to create another campaign, our biggest yet, this coming September.



REGIONAL WORK

A pilot involving two member organisations acting as 'Regional Convenors' ran from April to December 2022. We are very grateful to Regather and Cambridge Organic Food Co for helping us explore how to organise our regional work in South Yorkshire and East Anglia respectively.

We tasked our Convenors with finding and signing up new members in their area, and developing a local network of enterprises through hosted events and other facilitation. After 8 months of piloting this approach, we concluded that outreach to new members was too time-consuming and difficult for Convenors alongside the demands of running their own businesses. However, our Convenors felt that hosting events was fulfilling, and our central team will continue to support them with this.

We will continue to look for regions where there is scope for smaller, localised networks and we're pleased to say that SW members held their first online meeting in February, with appetite for an in-person gathering later in the year. We will run further regional events in Yorkshire and East Anglia, and we are talking to members in Scotland about a regional gathering in Fife in the summer.

DO BETTER FOOD

In October we ran the second cohort of our Do Better Food training, a peer-to-peer learning model that provides people with all the tools to start conversations about making better food choices. In our previous cohort 50% of all participants went on to sign up to a veg box scheme.

We trained 10 hosts, over the course of two sessions, who are now going on to host conversations in their local communities about creating better food systems. So far more than 25 people have been involved in groups set up by our hosts, helping to create behaviour change that supports an organic, local, sustainable and equitable food system — fit foreveryone involved in the food supply chain.

MEMBERSHIP AND ACCREDITATION

In light of our growing membership and the considerable workload that our Accreditation Scheme was creating, we undertook a review of the scheme in September with help from our external Accreditation Panel: Clare Horrell (Real Farming Trust), James Woodward (Sustain), Geraldine Gilbert (Forum for the Future), Fiona Dowson (Sustainability Consultant) and Julie Brown (Growing Communities).

We decided to pause the accreditation scheme, with the panel noting that membership of Better Food Traders - based on meeting our standards on sourcing, sustainability and community - is an accreditation in itself. Instead of a further Accreditation Scheme, we want to develop two other strands of work that will be more inclusive of the whole membership, and will (we hope) have more impact for our members and our movement.

We are exploring a Business Improvement Programme that can benefit all of our members - we're currently looking at the resources and funding we'll need to set this up - and developing our Data Project to create useful benchmarking tools. The panel has agreed to stay involved and to become a Steering Group for Better Food Traders and these new strands of work.

DATA AND BENCHMARKING PROJECT

Better Food Traders gathers and analyses data from every new member using our automated sign-up form, and in doing so is building a better understanding of the sustainable and ethical food retail sector. In July we launched our shiny new Dashboard, which is a set of easy-to read data visualisations showing what we know about our members. The Dashboard provides different types of information, from 'sticky stats' (did you know 0% of Better Food Traders produce is air freighted, supporting 295 UK agroecological farms?) to detailed

comparisons of mark-ups, wages and volunteer hours.

We are planning to develop this further with data benchmarks that our members can use to assess their own organisation against the wider context, based on an annual survey of how members are operating (and for this year, how members are finding cost savings). Also regular reports that show the impact of the ethical food sector as a whole. We are always happy to provide BFT data for use in campaigns, research and other promotion of nature-friendly food and farming.

PARTNERSHIPS

Better Food Traders is excited to have worked with sector partners on a range of research projects throughout the year:

Food Research Collaboration - Report: Why Sustainable Food Hubs Network

Food Data Project - Governance Panel

Organic Research Centre - Marketing of Organic Food, and the Organic Food Price Tracker

Sustain/University of Portsmouth - Unpicking Food Prices: Where does your food pound go, and why do farmers get so little?

We have also shared our knowledge and insights at a number of external events, including the Oxford Real Farming Conference, the Welsh Real Food and Farming Conference, the Our Food 1200 project in Wales, the European FoodSHIFT 2030 Network, the Landworkers Alliance Better Food Systems Conference, and the Open Food Network.

PRESS AND MEDIA

We and our members have featured in a range of media throughout the year, including ITV News, The Telegraph, The Guardian, Ham & High, Bristol Post, Sheffield Star, Speciality Food Magazine, Vegan Food & Living and WickedLeeks.

We are currently exploring what it would take to put together a national marketing campaign for Local Food and/or Sustainable Food. Members are calling for a campaign that will help them compete with supermarkets and corporate advertising, and highlight the many benefits of the produce they sell, plus the importance of shopping locally. This would be a complex and ambitious task, but we are scoping what might be possible by bringing partners and funders together around this idea.



The Community Farm, Bristol

THANK YOU

Finally, a big thank you to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding the network, to Growing Communities for nurturing us and providing invaluable support, to Sarah Williams at Sustain and Julie Brown and Zosia Walczak at Growing Communities for being a great Project Management Team, and to all of our members for making the network what it is - a place of learning, sharing, generosity and solidarity.



MEMBERS L-R: GROWING COMMUNITIES (HACKNEY, LONDON), EAST NEUK MARKET GARDEN (BOWHOUSE, SCOTLAND)
UNICORN GROCERY (MANCHESTER) AND PEAR NECESSITIES (KENT ORCHARD)

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