

BFT IMPACT REPORT

2023/24



Our Vision

Together, Better Food Traders (BFT), its members and its partners are working to address the social, economic and environmental damage created by the current food system. We want to create a visible, thriving food trading system that benefits local people, climate and nature, local economies and farming communities. We exist to support small and medium-sized enterprises who share that vision.

SUMMARY

This year we have seen considerable growth in our membership, with a number of larger organisations including shops, food markets and wholesalers joining. We have also had some bakeries and processors join, as we actively look to support more processors-who-retail. Our membership is now almost 170 traders across the UK (up from 100 last year) with 10 in Scotland, 14 in Wales and 3 in Northern Ireland.



We have recently become an independent organisation, spinning out from our mothership Growing Communities (GC) after 4 years of their brilliant incubation. BFT has matured and grown, and the time was right to become a non-for-profit Community Interest Company. Julie Brown from GC will remain involved as Strategic Advisor and we have put together an impressive board, consisting of BFT members and sector leaders.

We continue to receive positive feedback about how the work we do supports businesses to be more informed, skilled and resilient. Members also really appreciate having a community of fellow traders to draw on and speak to, as enterprises can often feel they are working alone.

Our overarching aim is to support the transition to agroecological farming in the UK, and address the social, economic and environmental damage created by the current food system. It is clear that independent food retail that is rooted in local economies, and alternative routes to market that can shorten supply chains are both needed to underpin that transition. It is exciting to be involved with multiple local authorities and Local Food Partnerships, helping build strong new supply chains and more regionalised food economies - which bring lower environmental impacts, greater food security, better pay for farmers, and better access to fresh, nutritious food for local people.

OUR COMBINED IMPACT



Better Food Traders sold over **£24,000,000** worth of fresh produce from UK agroecological farmers last year.

More than **350 climate and nature-friendly farms** in the UK are being supported by our members, and more in Europe.

170 Better Food Traders and their **55,300 weekly customers** are working together to change the food system.

“Three times more of your food pound goes to farmers with every purchase you make from your local Better Food Trader or not-for-profit food hub. Farmers make more money selling into this transparent, ecological supply chain to invest in their sustainable, organic businesses.”

Unpicking Food Prices Report, Sustain

EXTERNAL CONTEXT

The last year has continued to be challenging for sustainable food traders, due to higher in-costs, wage increases and lower customer spending. In most parts of the country, high streets are in decline and one in seven high-street premises is now vacant.

This makes the support of Better Food Traders more vital than ever, but also means that some traders don't succeed even with our help. HISBE supermarket in Brighton and the Locavore chain in Glasgow both had to make very difficult decisions and pause or cease trading at some of their shops - showing the fragility of the sustainable food sector.

But there are glimmers of hope. The Soil Association's Organic Market Report 2024 shows independents were the strongest growth area for organic food sales over the last year: supermarkets saw an increase of 2.7% year-on-year, while Independents saw a rise of 9.9%. It is clear that independent retail has potential to drive the transition to climate- and nature-friendly farming, and Better Food Traders play an important role.



WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

"The session was revelatory and so helpful... We are all pulled in so many directions and it can be tough to focus on gritty details like those we went into. It was really valuable and so glad to have that time and opportunity."

Feedback on the BFT Marketing Support Scheme

"Some of the best things I've learnt are via Better Food Traders."

Abbie Sellers, Plentiful Wholefoods

"The BFT team is doing some really great work - well done."

Organic North, organic wholesaler

Ripple Farm on trading with fellow BFT member, Growing Communities:

"Growing Communities are a big part of our business; we have been attending their weekly, all organic farmers market since it started in 2003, and we are one of their main box scheme suppliers. Added to that, they're all very nice people. They are such an important part of our supply chain."



BECOMING A CIC

Better Food Traders has spun out from our parent organisation, Growing Communities, and set up as a Community Interest Company. This structure will allow us to support a wide range of enterprises, whilst demonstrating our commitment to not-for-profit and mission-driven work.

Julia Kirby-Smith has become Executive Director and Nicki East is now Network Director. Julie Brown, Director of Growing Communities, remains involved as our Strategic Advisor, while our new board reflects the diversity and strengths of our membership:

Sarah Williams - Programmes Director, Sustain

Gareth Roberts - Director of Regather, Sheffield

Dawn Dublin - Director of Joyful Roots, Hastings

Bob Mehew - Director of Apricot Centre, Totnes

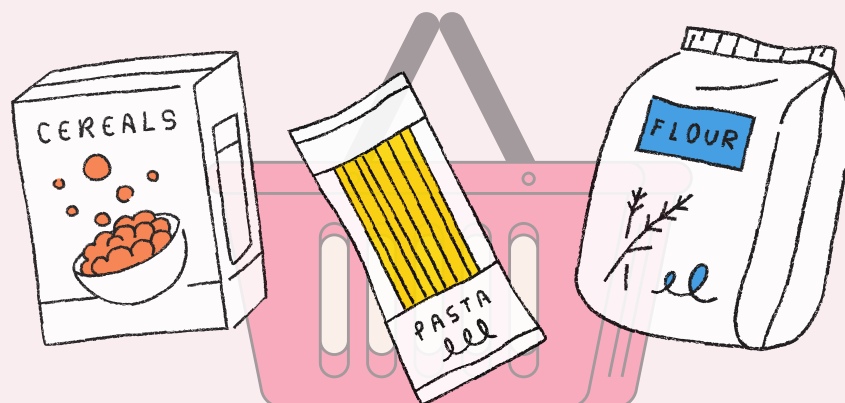
Tsouni Cooper - Coordinator at Flourish, Cambridgeshire

Zosia Walczak - Senior Manager at Growing Communities, London

Keval Shah - Accountant and Regenerative Agriculture researcher

Tom Richardson - Communications Manager, The Community Farm, Bristol

Natasha Soares - Director of Local Greens; owner of May Tree Orchard, Kent



SUPPORT FOR TRADERS

In the year 2023/24 we ran 32 hours of online training and advice sessions as part of our year-round member support. These were on a wide range of topics from Financial Management to Marketing Strategy, SEO to Instagram. Average attendance at each session was 15 organisations, similar to last year.

We also ran the Marketing Support Scheme, which supported a total of 18 organisations; and our Annual Gathering in Manchester, attended by 45 members.

We have expanded our peer-learning groups, with regular online Meet-Ups for Shopkeepers, Veg Scheme Managers and Marketing Leads, and we usually see 10-15 members at each one.

We have a strong newsletter readership: our average open rate is 60% (above the typical average readership for the NGO sector of 49%), and our peer-to-peer networking platform, Slack, is reasonably well used although we are considering moving to a different platform that is more popular.

BUSINESS SUPPORT WEEK

We kicked off 2024 with Business Support week in mid-January, delivering 60 hours of bespoke business advice sessions (20% more than last year) and seven different workshops on subjects ranging from Campaigning to Copywriting, Instagram Trends to Margins.

The full day of Finance webinars was well attended, with members praising the trainer for “responding to real-life examples, giving some great solutions and ideas”, while feedback on business advisors included: “He was SO motivating for me, a game changer as to how the year will go.” 90% of respondents said that their advice session was useful or very useful, and 100% said they would take part in BFT's Business Support Week again.

SUPPORT FOR TRADERS

MARKETING SUPPORT SCHEME

In March we launched our Marketing Support Scheme, awarding a total of just over £10,000 to eighteen of the BFTs who applied. We delivered 18 hours of mentoring and advice, and provided external training and support via Improper Agency and Blue Cactus Digital.

The resulting campaigns included leafleting, crowdfunding, Facebook ads, a rebrand, a website redesign, marketing events and a regional competition. Outcomes varied, and most organisations saw either increased sales or increased brand awareness. 94% of organisations who took part found the scheme 'useful' or 'very useful', and every organisation that took part said the scheme helped them try something new.

"I was really impressed with this support both financially and the mentoring... It was very helpful and also it's very encouraging that you are listening to our needs – very rare and very much appreciated."



ANNUAL GATHERING

A wonderful cross-section of members came together at the Kindling Trust's Mill in Manchester at the start of June for our Better Food Traders Annual Gathering. The day was a chance for our hard-working members to share knowledge and ideas with other people in the sector.

We ran a speed-dating session to tackle each other's burning business queries, and later we workshopped three questions: How should we grow, fund and provide support to the network? One attendee told us: "Everything I took part in today was great. The vibe seemed very good, constructive and engaged."

BEYOND OUR MEMBERS

Systems change is difficult and we realise that our work - focusing on traders and routes to market - cannot succeed without collaboration across the whole food chain. We partner on work that aligns with our strategy of creating a visible, thriving food trading system that benefits local people, climate and nature, local economies and farming communities:

Renewal of Bucks Food Partnership

Sheffield, Kent, Brighton & Hove, and Medway Food Partnerships

Lancaster Food Plan

Cornwall Food Hub Collaboration

Food Data Project Governance Panel

Organic Food Price Tracker - Organic Research Centre

Organic Consumer Survey - Organic Research Centre

NICRE Policy co-design workshop for Short Food Supply Chains

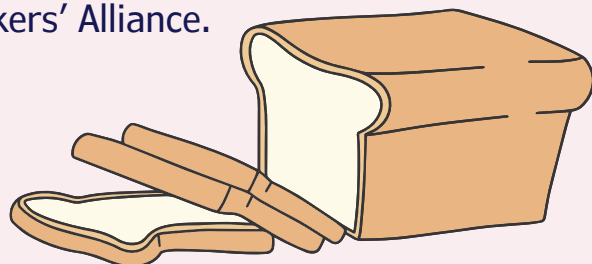
Forum for the Future: Growing Our Future UK workstream implementation partners

Local Food Working Party member, and hoping to set up a Comms and Marketing sub-committee

Food Hub Support Programme (in development) - a collaboration between Soil Association, Sustain and Growing Communities

Since becoming a CIC, we have joined Sustain (the Alliance for Food and Farming) and Eating Better, a coalition of organisations who support less and better meat, and a 50% reduction of meat and dairy by 2030 - our Executive Director is Chair of the board of Trustees.

We have also taken part in conferences run by Ethical Consumer, PFFA, Open Food Network and the Landworkers' Alliance.



POLICY & RESEARCH

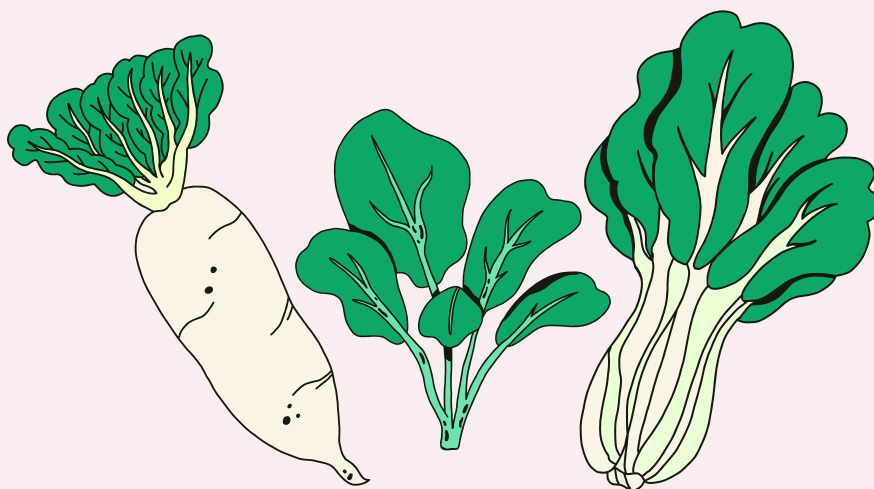
Better Food Traders helps to shape the policy landscape around food distribution and retail, through data-gathering, research and policy work.

We contributed to the Climate Change Committee's investigation of the English planning system and net zero, and submitted evidence to the Government's Inquiries into Fairness in the Food Supply Chain, and Fairness in Fresh Produce. We are urging Defra to earmark money for a Food Hub Fund, and we are backing the national campaign for Universal Basic Income for Farmers.

DATA & BENCHMARKING

We continue to gather data from new members, to build a better picture of the sustainable and ethical food retail sector. This data is available to members, researchers and academics.

We have also been developing our Data Project to create some benchmarking on how different types of BFTs operate. The results will be released in an insights report that should help BFTs see where they sit in the sector and improve certain aspects of their enterprises.

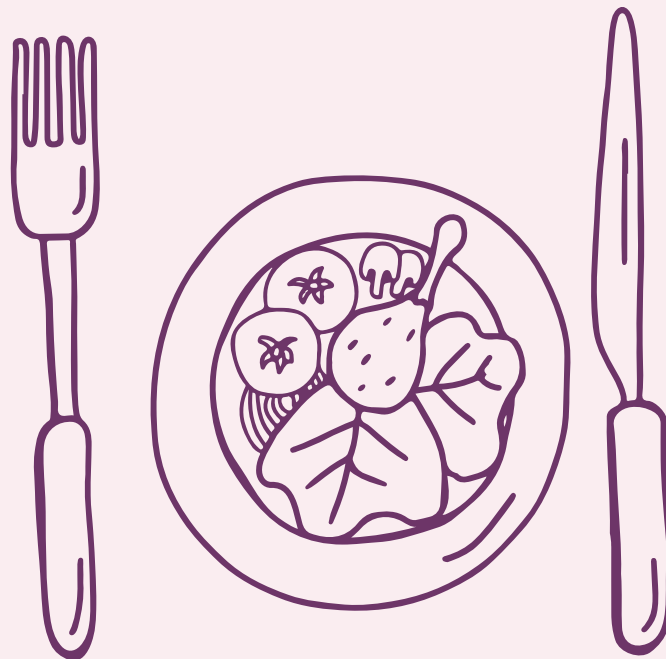


ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

We know that demand is key to growth of the sustainable food sector, and therefore achieving our intended impact. We act as the voice of Better Food Traders, increasing awareness of the reasons for seeking out better food, and raising the profile of our member organisations.

Our following on both social media and our newsletters have grown well this year, with more than 3,000 followers on Instagram and 750 on Facebook, and 500 people now subscribing to our external newsletter.

The Better Food Traders online map helps customers find their nearest BFT and purchase locally-grown, planet-friendly food. In September, we ran our Buy Better Food campaign using a combination of organic shares and paid ads to disseminate the content. The campaign generated almost 30,000 post engagements and 8,200 click-throughs to the map, as well as showcasing a number of our traders in reels, and creating useful content that all BFTs could use.



THANK YOU

We couldn't support so many brilliant enterprises (and in turn, routes to market for climate- and nature-friendly farmers) without funding from our members, supporters and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. We wouldn't function so smoothly without our Project Management Team and our new volunteer Board members. And we wouldn't be here without Growing Communities nurturing us for the last four years. Thanks to you all, especially our members who make this such a brilliant network.

BETTER FOOD TRADERS CIC

- ✦ Company number 15393366
- 📍 The Old Fire Station, 61 Leswin Rd, London N16 7NX
- ✉ hello@betterfoodtraders.org
- 🌐 www.betterfoodtraders.org