

Lessons From Lockdown



A collection of articles that explore how COVID-19 affected food, farming and wellness at individual and collective levels by mid-2020

Dear Reader:

This collection of articles serves as a curated record of how the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic immediately affected people involved with food, wildlife, local economies and social outreach in the Bristol and Bath area, ultimately with a view to explore what the outbreak exposed about our food system and the other systems it intersects.

We hope that readers find this collection useful in terms of learning how and why some groups fared better than others during this time. We also hope that any insights shared within will help us all better position ourselves in response to a potential second wave, and perhaps also influence ways of being in the world that could be generally beneficial, regardless.

Lastly, many thanks to our fantastic contributors who selflessly gave their time and shared their thoughts for the good of all. This collection was only made possible because of your generosity.

With love and in solidarity,

The Community Farm



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The impact of COVID-19 on our food supply chain

by Kim Brooks

Managing Director (incoming) at The Community Farm

In the UK, over 50%¹ of our food is imported compared to 28%² globally. The Big Four supermarkets hold 70% of the sales and there are just 11 Chief Executives deciding 97% of the food we eat³ (something for which they're paid handsomely⁴). We rely on a global supply chain that is characterised by convenience, just-in-time logistics and long supply chains. It is fuelled by marketing, is packaging heavy, and served with an abundance of misinformation and politics.

COVID-19 caused quite the stir in the UK's food supply.

First came "panic" buying which left our treasured supermarket shelves empty. Or did it? Truthfully, very little "panic" buying was to blame. Rather, small changes in our individual purchasing patterns were enough to deplete supplies⁵, highlighting the fragility of the just-in time supply chain.

Second came lockdown, during which all but essential eateries were closed and customer numbers were restricted in supermarkets. Resultant travel restrictions highlighted another weak link in our global food chain: our reliance on migrant farm labour. This issue became so dire that the Prince of Wales led a national recruitment campaign⁶ to ensure that the food in our UK fields wouldn't be left to rot. And, with usual connections to their food supply lost and a rise in unemployment, community projects such as Fareshare and National Food Service saw unprecedented demand, bringing issues of food insecurity and the inequity of our food system into the limelight again⁷.

Food-related businesses were forced to convert their models quickly to counter the above restrictions: farmers and small producers became home delivery specialists, shops began to sell goods out of their front doors or from convenient windows, and restaurants switched over to a 100% takeaway model.

On a local level, Bristol Food Union established itself to assist independent businesses in promoting these new business models. Their website provides an illustration of the entrepreneurial innovations being mimicked across the UK by small food businesses not just trying to survive the pandemic-driven changes evident in the supply chain, but also thriving in feeding their local communities.

Indeed, COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for some local food businesses. Veg box schemes, for example, enjoyed an average 111% increase in sales⁸ - but this surge in demand could not suddenly be met by using produce from their own fields. Luckily, many CSA veg box schemes combine their own produce with that from longer supply chains to meet customer demand (versus a producer led⁹ model in which a CSA only uses its own produce). At The Community Farm, we use produce from our fields first, then from a network of local farmers before looking further afield. At the start of COVID-19, we had to work quickly with our supply chain and networks to meet the new demand. Given that this new demand was in part driven by restaurants closing and more people cooking more meals at home than ever before, our sudden glut of unwanted wholesale produce was happily redirected into veg boxes for households. Other restaurant wholesalers - such as Strode Valley Organics, who normally supply to Bristol restaurants - were similarly happy for their produce to find a new home in our veg boxes. Relationships like these, found only within a local, flexible and resilient supply chain proved to be essential and mutually beneficial during this time.

Small, independent and local food businesses stepped up to the plate, too. Whilst there remain clear pinch-points (organic eggs and flour immediately come to mind), entrepreneurial food producers, processors and distributors were similarly ready to feed their local communities with food that has not travelled the world to get to them. And the benefits of sourcing produce from smaller, agroecological farms go beyond the reliability found in a local and short supply chain: environmental, social and health benefits are all positive side effects found in their locale¹⁰. As this pandemic has proven, such farms are ready to do more. But, to produce more, these smaller farm businesses need consistent and reliable demand to be able to plan appropriately.

Here we spy a possible silver lining to come out of this pandemic: can those customers who turned to their local food systems in times of crisis change their behaviours permanently? If consumers have the power to empty the shelves of the Big Four in a matter of days through tiny tweaks in their weekly shop, imagine what they could do if they supported their local supply chains.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket-global-and-uk-supply#origins-of-food-consumed-in-the-uk-2018>

² <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9509en/covid.pdf>

³ <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/grocery-market-share/great-britain/snapshot/14.06.20/23.02.20>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/13/tesco-chief-executive-handed-642m-pay-package-dave-lewis>

⁵ <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/global/News/Accidental-stockpilers-driving-shelf-shortages>

⁶ <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/global/News/Accidental-stockpilers-driving-shelf-shortages>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/may/21/brexit-coming-food-crisis-seasonal-migrant-labour-eu>

⁸ <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/2020/05/veg-box-sales-increase-by-111-in-six-weeks-as-a-result-of-covid-19-new-food-foundation-report-in-collaboration-with-csa-network/>

⁹ <https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/what-is-csa/types-of-csa/>

¹⁰ <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/whyweneedsmallfarms.pdf>

Independent Food Retail during COVID

by Danni Rochman

Community & Policy Officer at Better Food

As the rest of the world shut up shop, the onset of lockdown was a very different experience in food retail. Food and how to get hold of it was suddenly the focus of everyone's attention. Demand to access our stores and the products within rocketed. We - and many other small, independent food stores like us across Bristol - no longer seemed like 'nice little examples of how different food shopping could be', but a vital community asset of which there simply wasn't enough to go around.

Indie supply chains fared better than the supermarkets in those early days; the reasons are more complex than I would dare to explore here, and entrenched in the transformation of our food system witnessed since the latter part of the last century. Essentially, though, indie supply chains are overwhelmingly [short and local](#); our stock is less susceptible to disruption; the food we need to keep our stores open is right here on our doorstep already. That's not to say we didn't see our fair share of empty shelves: an increased need for food in the home, surges in popularity for baking, bulk cooking and growing, and changes to shopping patterns (no longer 'little and often' but 'lots and as infrequently as possible'), all took time to adjust to.

This new era of local shopping - if that's truly what it is - seems to have brought with it not only a new cohort of customers, but also greater loyalty from existing local shoppers. Local food shops offer something that sprawling supermarkets can't: immediate proximity, less daunting queues and crowds, staff that are recognisable and recognise you, and a reassuringly small but purposefully-chosen range. They feel safe. More than this though, lockdown has forced many of us to rethink our financial priorities. Uncertain income, a limiting of purchases only to that deemed essential, a greater emphasis on health, and increased awareness of the value of local supply - all of these have led people to place greater value on the food they buy. As more people choose to do the bulk of their food shopping in local indies, is this finally a recognition of 'the true cost of food' that is so often aspired to by industry insiders and sustainable food campaigners?

As the [high street reopens](#) and its bright lights begin to distract us from the wholesome life of lockdown, what can local, independent retail do to continue to remain a priority for the community? Cost is going to be a major factor and the toughest to mitigate. Indies can't fight big chains on a level playing field, nor compete to offer prices that fit consumer expectations of cheap food. But they can play to their strengths and focus efforts on a high-quality core range

that offers genuine value for money while also ensuring that their customers feel 'seen', both by offering a more attentive shopping experience, and by acknowledging the distinct needs of the community they serve. A better understanding of food - vague as it seems - is also vital; local food retailers tend to offer more unprocessed foods and more seasonal curiosities, so knowing how to use and make the most of these ingredients is the key to being able to afford good quality, local food. Retailers can work alongside city food campaigns to share this knowledge.

As reacting to crisis morphs to recovery, independent food retail will need space to thrive in as many domains as possible. My hope is that with careful attention given to the needs of their customers, old and new, indies can sustain and build on this resurgence of appreciation for local food; in turn, we'll see more food retail in communities, online, and at fresh food markets, ensuring greater access to good food than has been possible for many decades.

The impact of COVID-19 on the organic market

by Sophie Kirk

Business Development Manager at Soil Association Certification

COVID-19 has had a major impact on all food and drink markets: some positive effects with local supply chains and box schemes seeing increased demand, and some disruptive with the closure of food services resulting in a loss of markets for some producers. However, whether due to the current pandemic, or recent trends around sustainability and integrity, the organic market is performing well as shoppers look for clarity around availability, sustainability and traceability when shopping for food and drink.

The Soil Association's UK Organic Market Report, published in February, revealed the UK organic market to be worth £2.45 billion after growing 4.5% in 2019. After eight years of growth, organic sales have reached their highest ever value with gains seen across all channels including supermarkets, home delivery, box schemes and independent retail.

Data from Nielsen Scantrack shows that from January to the end of May 2020, encompassing the lockdown period, organic sales through supermarkets saw their **highest growth in three years**, increasing by 6.1% year on year. This is almost double the growth of non-organic food and drink products (3.1%). Organic products that have seen exceptional growth in this time period include beef, eggs, preserves and spreads and sparkling wine.

COVID-19 also recruited a huge new group of online shoppers with local and sustainable supply chains performing well. Box schemes and home delivery services have seen a surge in demand and many organic producers are selling direct to the public playing to their key strengths of promoting local-sourcing and sustainability, whilst reducing packaging use and food miles. Local shops have seen loyalty from their local customers again, and new "food sourcing" relationships have been set up through home delivery, and local click-and-collect systems.

This comes at a time when external events have fast-tracked already changing shopper behaviours towards the environment, personal health, transparency and integrity. [A YouGov survey commissioned by the Food Farming and Countryside Commission & The Food Foundation](#) revealed that 42% of people feel the crisis has made them value food more. A further 38% said that they are cooking more from scratch, and 17 million people are throwing away less food.

It appears that, despite the likelihood of tighter budgets, many shoppers are choosing quality, good taste and ethical options where possible. Sustainability and protecting the environment remains high on many people's wish lists and citizens seem to be making more planet centric choices. At a time when quality and safety are of importance for consumers, it appears that organic can "stand out" with its benefits of transparency and quality.

"As lockdown eases there are fears that future economic uncertainty may affect shopping behaviours. However, there are clear opportunities for organic businesses to keep some of the new customers they've reached during lockdown, some of whom may have tried organic products for the first time and realised that they taste great as well as doing good." Furthermore, organic products deliver many benefits shoppers may be looking for "post-COVID": natural, healthy and sustainable food and drink that's been sourced and farmed with care, with positive impacts for nature, climate and health.

Despite clear uncertain times, the UK organic market is expected to reach a value of £2.5 billion by close of 2020, seeing growth of more than 50% in the last decade.

Find out more about the benefits of organic - and where to find it - by visiting the Soil Association's [Organic Living Webpages](#).

Poco Tapas Bar: a restaurant in Bristol during COVID

by Jennifer Best

Director at Poco Tapas Bar pocotapasbar.com

Although the pandemic has brought huge challenges for our business, it has also been a unique opportunity to test our resilience, which so far has proven to be pretty damn strong. We've very much benefited from the flexibility of being a small business with a relatively small team, and were able to flip our offering and business structure in under 48 hours, launching a new menu website and going live on Deliveroo remarkably quickly. Within a week of the government's announcement, we'd transformed Poco from being a heaving tapas bar to a slammed takeaway burger joint! A real baptism by fire. Now we find ourselves officially permitted to reopen as a restaurant but, sadly, you won't see us sending tapas plates out of the kitchen for some time - our space is just too small to accommodate even a 1m social distancing rule.

We are now open as a cafe/deli during the day and, in the evening, are still serving our takeaway burgers alongside our classic Poco tapas dishes for delivery and collection. The next big challenge starts here as our overheads start to creep up and our revenue dips with the increase in other restaurant openings; meanwhile, we continue to consider the confusing prospect of how we might reopen our doors while there remains a risk of a second wave of the pandemic and the reintroduction of stricter social distancing regulations.

Our position currently is that we just can't risk it. As desperate as we are to open our doors for our beloved customers, and to feel the space filled with their energy, we'd rather do that when our staff can feel fully safe in doing their jobs and provide the warm service that we're known for without visors or masks to hide their genuinely gleeful faces.

Focus group: food buying habits during the pandemic

by Heloise Balme

Heloise is a Bristol-based sustainability specialist and lifelong foodie. Since writing her masters thesis on alternative food networks, she has had a particular interest in supporting sustainable food systems.

Almost everyone has experienced challenges sourcing food since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but how have these circumstances affected our food buying habits, both now and in the future? And has the pandemic materially changed our relationship with food or our beliefs about the food system? I recently ran some focus groups on behalf of the Bristol Food Network, talking to customers of The Community Farm to try and answer these questions.

Our research participants had used supermarkets to varying degrees pre-pandemic, but 90% had increased their use of local and independent food businesses since lockdown. The switch from supermarkets was partly borne out of necessity, due to a lack of available produce (particularly for those with specific needs such as allergies) and a lack of delivery slots (even for those in vulnerable categories). However, participants' increased custom with local, independent outlets was also driven by a recognition that these businesses needed support, now more than ever. And, as such businesses stepped up to fill the gaps left by major retailers for those seeking specialist products, deliveries and Click and Collect services, their ability to diversify and adapt quickly was hugely valued by customers.

Participants' experience with independents had largely been very positive, with them being impressed by the product range on offer and the ease of ordering. Although, with these local businesses struggling to keep up with new levels of demand, customers' experiences hadn't always been perfect (for example, ordered items being missed). Nevertheless, there was empathy for the challenges local retailers faced and, despite the hiccups, a resounding desire to keep "shopping local" post-lockdown, with around half of participants wanting to grow their support. People who were least engaged in local food pre-pandemic were most vocal about this.

The pandemic had compelled our research participants to take a more structured approach to food shopping and cooking; being more organised was seen as a positive with food now being valued more and wasted less. Some commented that the pandemic gave them the gift of time, finally allowing them to establish the shopping, cooking and eating habits that they really wanted. A focus on "proper meals" and trying out new ingredients seems to have motivated people to maintain their new habits post-pandemic.

For these customers of The Community Farm, personal food values have been galvanised by the lockdown experience with its change in pace of life and altered life perspectives. Additionally, the pandemic's impact on product availability and ease of food shopping may have adjusted their expectations of local, independent suppliers. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how sustained these lifestyle changes become as lockdown measures ease and time and convenience pressures return. This research is just one small piece of a huge puzzle, and there are undoubtedly huge differences in how food and food buying were experienced by others during the pandemic. However, I think it provides some hope that the pandemic may yet create a positive legacy for the local and independent food scene.

You can download a copy of the report here:

<https://www.thecommunityfarm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BFNxTCF-Covid19FocusGroup-June2020.pdf>

Feeding Bristol and Covid-19: 'feeding a city together'

by Maurice Di Rosso

Director of Feeding Bristol feedingbristol.org

What might come as a sombre surprise to some people of Bristol is also a harsh reality for a lot of our neighbours: the guarantee of at least one healthy and hearty meal per day is not something we all have the luxury of experiencing at the best of times. The 14-week lockdown only increased the enormous pressures that over 43,000¹ people regularly experience with regard to the above; not only were they trying to keep their families fed, but they were also trying to pay the growing bills caused by spending more time at home.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown, Bristol had 14,250 children (22.5%) eligible for Free School Meals. With economic decline and an increased number of people losing their jobs, the number of FSM registrations increased 250% during April and May 2020. These are staggering numbers. But what's important to remember is that this doesn't include all the people suffering from food insecurity. What these numbers don't tell you is that no child under the age of 5 is included, nor does it show the low eligibility requirements – lots of people miss out.

It would have been easy on March 23rd - the start of lockdown - to just give up. As a city, we have never had to deal with such an extraordinary situation; the task of making sure people didn't go hungry looked too hard. What happened in the days that followed, and continues at the point of writing this blog, showed tremendous solidarity across Bristol. Unfortunately while there were definitely people who went hungry during this time, the collaborative efforts of over 125 different organisations meant that many people were able to eat when circumstances meant they couldn't provide for themselves.

Feeding Bristol, a local charity focused on reducing food insecurity, led the strategic response of the city to increase the effectiveness of available resources in supporting those most in need in our community. Over 125 different community groups or organisations provided either meals or food parcels during the lockdown period. The reason this is so impressive is that many of these organisations had never dealt with food before! Those who had the skills were prepared to roll up their sleeves and help other groups with setting up food and COVID-safe practices.

Additionally, others including Feeding Bristol, Bristol City Council, FareShare South West, Bristol Food Network, and the foodbank network, worked together to provide the citywide oversight to help spread the amazing offers of support that came from local businesses (despite

potentially struggling themselves). We were inundated with offers of volunteer labour, food donations, warehouse space, use of commercial kitchens, and much more!

The cohesiveness between the private, public and third sectors in Bristol allowed us – together as one city – to help feed as many people as was possible during lockdown. Despite the catastrophic, long-term impact lockdown will have on our city, at least we know that we can work together. These partnerships and this way of working will continue as we move forward. Now back to the challenge of tackling the root causes so that, hopefully, more people can have that guarantee of feeding themselves a healthy and hearty meal.

¹ <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/32947/State+of+Bristol+-+Key+Facts+2018-19.PDF>

What should we spend on food?

by Ped Asgarian

Managing Director (outgoing) at The Community Farm

How much do you spend on food per week? Maybe, like me, you've taken the time to dissect what you spend your earnings on during lockdown.

With shops only just reopening, we've not been able to spend money like we used to and that certainly has presented the opportunity for many to reassess lifestyles and habits.

In this country we spend (on average) a meagre 8.9% of our disposable income on food. To put this in perspective, many of our European neighbours spend upwards of 11%, and if you go back to the 1950s we were spending over 30% on food.

	UK	UK (1950s)	France	Spain	Germany	Italy
Income*	£18,989	£18,989	£19,874	£13,222	£20,313	£15,064
Spend on Food						
% of income	8.9%	33%	13.4%	13.4%	11.4%	14.4%
per year (£)	£1,690	£6,266	£2,663	£1,772	£2,316	£2,169
per week (£)	£32.50	£120.51	£51.21	£34.07	£44.53	£41.72
per day (£)	£4.64	£17.22	£7.32	£4.87	£6.36	£5.96
Spend difference vs UK		271%	58%	5%	37%	28%
Cost of food vs UK			23%	3%	9%	20%
Cost of fruit and veg vs UK			36%	8%	15%	16%

* Income is calculated as median equivalized disposable income per inhabitant.
1950s income is standardized against current UK income to show percentage disparities in comparable figures.
Data in the table provided by [Eurostat](#) - statistics explained

Looking at this comparison immediately raises the question: why do we spend so little on food relative to the rest of Europe? This is amplified by differences in the cost of food, in particular, the cost of fruit and veg. The increased spend on food is not only restricted to countries where disposable income or food costs are higher: in Italy they earn 20% less than the UK but spend 28% more on food, even though the cost of food is 20% more!

The food system in the UK is becoming more akin to America, where they spend only 6% of disposable income on food! The recent RSA paper, *Our Future in the Land*, reported that the UK ranked as one of the worst for food poverty amongst the developed world, and this can be linked into our drive for cheaper food and an unwillingness to spend more.

Clearly, we do not have the same food culture we once did, and we have fallen behind our closest neighbours. Differences between the UK now and back in the 1950s is very stark when it comes to disposable income. We now spend far, far less on food (about a quarter of what we once spent) but more on travel, housing (driven by high rents and land prices - another topic for another day) and leisure and services. Significantly, that latter category has more than doubled as our lifestyles have changed. It is worth noting that this is a trend that not only occurs in the UK, but throughout the rest of Europe and the developed world.

Inflation of food prices has experienced very slow growth relative to both the cost of production and other commodities. So is this lower spend on food a reflection of food becoming cheaper (driven by supermarkets and intensified farming) or is food now cheaper because we are willing to spend less on food and more on other aspects of our lives? I expect there is an aspect of chicken and egg to this, but I think it is also a reflection of our changing food culture. Do we actually get bang for our buck when we spend more money on take-away food or ready meals versus buying and preparing raw ingredients? Are we really understanding the true cost of the food we buy?

Lockdown has forced many people to begin cooking three square meals a day. There are no more meal deals from the local shop when at work, or kebabs on the way home from the pub. In my household, we've worked out that spending approximately £70-£80 for two adults per week has allowed us to eat healthily, locally and sustainably. That's no more than £5.70 per person, per day, or £1.90 per meal. Much cheaper and healthier than fish and chips, pizza or an Indian take-away!

As consumers, investing money into our food and farming system can have dramatic impacts: socially, economically and environmentally. This is something we've explored at The Farm in other, earlier articles. I think we should all spend more time understanding what we pay and what we are willing to pay to eat properly. The COVID-19 pandemic, while taking so many things away from us, has given us the opportunity to reassess and improve much of what we do on a daily basis. We would be foolish to ignore it.

Five core principles on which to build food system resilience

by Joy Carey

Joy is strategic coordinator of Bristol's bid to be recognised as a 'gold standard' Sustainable Food City and an independent consultant in Sustainable Food Systems Planning

When I began my research into [Who Feeds Bristol? Towards a resilient food plan](#) ten years ago, I never imagined that within a decade the terms 'resilience' and 'vulnerability' would come to be used daily, nor that food providers would be identified as 'front line workers'.

Resilience is about having the capacity to deal with and recover from unexpected shocks, such as a pandemic.

Based on insights from the "Who Feeds Bristol?" study and similar work in other city regions elsewhere in the world, here are five helpful core principles on which we can start to build a better and more resilient food system.

- **Staple foods from the region** - increase regional-supply networks. Bristol and Bath can, and indeed must, buy more food, produced in a climate and nature friendly way, from nearby regions (West of England being a good start). This requires skilled food producers and land safeguarded for food production. By optimising regional supply - particularly of seasonal fruit and vegetables - we would be less vulnerable to import interruptions. The WoE and SW regions are rich food producing areas and the cities provide nearby markets.
- **Cook from scratch** - increase cooking skills. We all need to be capable of cooking a meal from scratch with simple, fresh, affordable ingredients. Having the confidence to do this is about personal self-reliance. It's much less stressful when we know how to adapt meals if there are shortages of certain ingredients. Less pre-prepared food means less wasted packaging and usually money saved, too.
- **Engaged citizens** - improve our collective food awareness. We must find ways to help everyone understand where their food comes from. Increasing understanding can shift attitudes and help create new good food habits. Then there is scope to address changes in the food system that would benefit everyone - to take positive action together in large numbers, resulting in much greater collective impacts.

- **Closed-loop or circular systems** - reduce, reuse recycle. Ultimately this is about conserving resources, and money - designing out unnecessary pollution and waste and treating anything that remains as a resource, not waste. The impacts of this are countless: more free water for our gardens from rainwater harvesting; provision of compost and fertilisers derived from food by-products to urban farmers that in turn encourages the city to collect green and food waste; healthier and more nutritious food produced in natural systems that regenerate the soil and wider environment; and local currencies like the Bristol Pound helping money to keep circulating in the local economy rather than be lost to external shareholders.
- **Safeguard food retail diversity.** As demonstrated at the start of the lockdown, there is an inherent risk in relying only on supermarkets. We need a wider range of options from where we can all buy nutritious food, including independent businesses, market traders, farm shops, and home deliveries direct from farmers. Numerous smaller scale food producers need alternatives to supermarkets in order to get their products to us and thrive as businesses. A diversity of outlets and routes to market bring mutual benefits.

The Community Farm's Field and Growing Operation during COVID

by John English

Head Grower at The Community Farm

My major reflection on the last few months is relief at how fortunate we have been at The Community Farm because COVID-19 has - so far - not had much of a negative impact on the field and growing side of our business.

We are lucky to have a business model that allows us to sell most of our produce direct to customers through our box scheme and we have been able to keep on with “business as usual” throughout the pandemic. I am well aware that the last few months have been a lot more stressful and difficult for some small organic growers who did not have a similar, reliable route to market. Many of them, particularly here in the South West, rely heavily on farmers’ market stalls and local hotels and restaurants for their sales. In April I was hearing of growers whose usual income had disappeared overnight and were frantically working out how to make a quick switch to selling and delivering directly to individual customers. This underlines how important small box schemes such as ours are in the local food network, and how communication and cooperation between small organic producers is not just important but vital in times of crisis.

It was fortunate in some ways that the peak of the pandemic hit us in the hungry gap when most producers were harvesting little from the fields and had already sold most of their overwinter stores from last season, so there was at least some breathing space for growers to find alternative customers for their new season crops if necessary.

Of course, the majority of field work is outdoors, either solo or with a few other people working nearby with plenty of open space to socially distance as needed. Therefore, the effect of the lockdown on the day-to-day operation of the field was very little; we had a full team at work at The Farm every day as usual. We have also been lucky that, since COVID-19 began, none of the field team has needed to self-isolate with symptoms, or to do office work from home for more than the occasional day. In some ways the lockdown actually helped our operation as it removed nearly all external distractions from minds and diaries and the working day. We found that we were getting more done, ahead of schedule (helped by the fact that the weather was nearly ideal throughout April and May). There was also a renewed sense of the importance of our work, that it was needed by the community, and so the best thing we could be doing was to get our heads down and crack on with all of the spring tasks on the to-do list.

The percentage of our veg boxes filled by produce from our own field - in terms of a full year of deliveries - is relatively small. This is partly a deliberate strategy and in part a consequence of how the continued growth of our box scheme has outpaced what we are able to produce ourselves, given the limited area of land and the machinery and infrastructure we have available to us. If the current boom in demand for veg boxes stays with us for the longer term, then the percentage of our field produce in the boxes becomes even smaller. This year we were already thinking about what our strategy should be for the next 5 years: what is the right scale for the field operation in the future? Should we be thinking about taking on more land so we can grow more produce? It is not something that we could manage without additional investment and careful planning, and there are both pros and cons to getting bigger, and to keeping to the small scale we have now. The last few months have brought the implications of these questions into even sharper focus. And, if in the future we need to rely even more on local growers to meet an increased demand for organic vegetables and fruit, is there capacity available in our local networks to meet it?

When the lockdown started, I began to worry about whether we would have the workers we needed to keep the field staffed and running. Our two seasonal field workers were due to start on 30th March: one of them declined the job offer because of the difficulty of relocating during the lockdown; the other was stranded in India and could not get back into the UK until the end of May. As it turned out, I need not have worried as finding enough labour during the lockdown did not prove to be a problem. One post was filled immediately from our reserve list of applicants and the other by short term cover from other farm staff, and then by a temporary worker whom we found through the local Bristol and Bath Organic Growers Group. Throughout April, in fact, I was directly contacted by, or was aware of, many more willing hands seeking work. This included experienced workers looking for paid employment, those who were inexperienced and suddenly unemployed, and also many others who just wanted to help out and offered to give their time for free, as volunteers.

Our normal volunteering programme was suspended until we were satisfied that we could manage groups of visitors safely. The regular weekday volunteering groups did not resume until early May. Fortunately, their absence coincided with a period during which we were less reliant on outside help, so our essential tasks were unaffected; the real need for volunteer support on The Farm starts in mid-May for planting, and then ramps up through the summer when we need extra help with picking, packing and weeding. The main concern was how we could continue to run our Community Farmer Days (CFDs) on Saturdays as our crop plan relies on these larger groups of volunteers to help with tasks such as the hand planting of tens of thousands of leeks and onions. In early April we ran a pop-up day with a work group of 12 people (a few of the staff plus specifically invited volunteers and household members) to set up our new no-dig, market garden area. It was the first test of whether a large group volunteer day could work with COVID-19 safety measures in place; everything from arrival and task briefing

to shared use of tools, job design, lunch and coffee breaks and use of toilets needed to be thought through from start to finish. Thankfully it was a great success. We resumed a reduced programme of CFDs in May and it was a huge relief when everything was planted on schedule.

We also had occasional help from a 'household bubble' of volunteers (the Warin household) for tractor planting and also for some of the market garden preparation work. This removed the immediate headache of how to run a tractor planter with a crew of three on the back who are all sitting less than 1m apart for more than 30 minutes at a time. After a risk assessment, some additional safety measures and the gradual loosening of the lockdown, the field staff crew have now resumed doing that work themselves.

One unanticipated impact during the early stages of the pandemic was the reduced availability of seeds. A spring lockdown resulted in a massive overnight surge in demand from home gardeners for vegetable, flower and grass seeds. Seeds became the toilet rolls of the horticultural retail sector. Within the first week, every seed supplier from the largest to the smallest in the UK was overwhelmed and had to close their websites to cope with the backlog of orders. I heard that some saw four or five times their usual amount of business throughout April (which is already the peak month) and would get a normal week's worth of orders within a few hours of reopening their websites. Now, in July, some are still restricting their opening hours because demand remains very high. All of the suppliers who sell bulk seed also operate a "small packets" retail business, so it had a knock-on effect on commercial growers who obviously depend on seed for their livelihood. Like most growers, I had already done some of my annual seed orders well ahead in January, but that was only the varieties I needed for our early sowings until the end of March. 70% of the seed I needed for the rest of the year was scheduled to be ordered in the first weeks of lockdown. In the end I managed to find all of the seeds I needed, but it added several days of extra work to ring additional suppliers, work around the closed websites and the long delivery delays and find alternatives to popular varieties that had sold out. Lesson learned: try to anticipate peak demand and buy seeds and other essential inputs a month or two further in advance than usual, whenever it's practical to do that.

Will COVID-19 bring a sustained boom in interest in growing your own at home, beyond this year? It can only be positive and welcome for our local food system and public health if it does. At the same time I hope that consumer behaviour will become more educated as a result of this experience. It was clear that many were needlessly overbuying a product with a limited shelf-life (seeds are not like loo rolls in that respect) and a perception of scarcity and panic buying quickly generates even more demand.

Volunteering at The Farm during COVID

by Ian Sumpter

Community Farmer at The Community Farm

What a strange time for us here at The Farm, having to close our doors temporarily to our wonderful team of volunteers.

Yet simultaneously nature is not waiting for anyone.

We had to dig deep as a team to fill the gap.

We hatched a plan with safe ways of working and found a way of inviting our volunteers back.

Those that felt safe enough were as happy to return as we were to see them. It felt like such a long time apart. Like long lost friends coming home after a trip away.

It was just in time as the season was beginning to ramp up: planting, polytunnel preparation, and of course, weeding all began to need doing in increasing amounts.

Being outside we feel safe, we can distance and know that what we are doing is important.

We are reminded of the value of companionship, of being part of a team traveling through the seasons together.

Collectively, we saw The Farm in a different light. The wonky produce we took home was turned into wonderful creations and recipes were shared.

We look forward to opening The Farm to potential visitors once again and looking back on this time as both difficult, enlightening and rewarding.

Looking after the little things: considering wildlife during COVID

by Sarah Pitt

Sarah has served on the Management Committee of the Community Farm and is founder of the Wildlife Group.

Lockdown has given us all a chance to reassess our lives and our relationship with nature. Many have found great comfort in hearing birds singing in city streets and, with less pollution in the air, being able to breathe easily and see clearly, far into the distance, perhaps for the first time.

At The Community Farm we're lucky to be able to connect to the natural world through our vegetable growing operation and management of the land and its wildlife. We've recently been taking a particular interest in bumblebees. These bees are the first to fly in spring, a time when the large queen bees search out nesting sites, often at the base of hedgerows.

Jane Mammot (an ecologist from the University of Bristol) has been studying the behaviour of bees and found that less fumes from cars on the road makes it easier for bees to forage because air pollution substantially reduces the strength and longevity of floral scents. Pollutants otherwise break down scent molecules emitted by plants, making it harder for bees to detect food. This means they often have to fly further to find food and bring it back to their nests. So, this year, bees are really benefiting from less lockdown traffic as they can now better sense the flowers they need, nearer to their nesting sites. It makes me jump for joy that we are giving bees and other insects a chance to display natural behaviour instead of endlessly having to adapt their lives around ours!

In many cases that adaptation is just not possible. One conservation charity, Buglife, believes we could lose 41% of the world's insect species in the coming decades. Others disagree, saying we need more long-term studies to monitor the complex picture of declines. Butterflies, moths, bees, wasps and dung beetles are amongst those most at risk, so, if you have been thinking of making lifestyle changes during lockdown, remember these little creatures as yet another inspiration.

Lockdown has given us a chance to study nature close to home, and has forced us to see clearly that human activity is the main cause of pollution on the planet. But as lockdown eases and the economy gears back up, how should we proceed?

Take small steps, is my view. We can't heal the planet immediately but if we care about the little, local things, then we can make changes that ripple out and create bigger ones.

For example, at The Community Farm our organic growing means we use no pesticides or artificial fertilizers so all wildlife can thrive: that includes the beetles, ants, spiders, worms and the hundreds of other soil based microorganisms on whom we depend to create healthy, well balanced soil for our crops. In addition, we purposefully manage our hedgerows and field margins so that animals can find fruits, flowers and seeds, shelter and nesting sites. We also have plans to plant more trees to help store carbon in the future, while at the same time provide homes for many insect species, bats and birds.

If you have a small garden, a terrace or even a balcony you can help wildlife by putting up nest boxes for birds and by planting flowers that attract bees between March and October (when they are raising the next generation). If you have room, consider planting shrubs and fruit trees that will provide habitat for birds and insects. You can also start composting kitchen vegetable waste and garden weeds; by returning them to the soil, you will help make your plot more resilient to climate change while boosting its fertility.

Most of all, look local for the long term. The Community Farm believes in sustainable production and that means growing food for our local community in a wildlife-friendly way, using fewer imported goods (and never using air freight), protecting the soil, cutting down on plastics and providing local employment.

Food production does not need to cost the earth. If we start to think local and focus our gaze on the wildlife that surrounds us, we can start to better understand that they have needs, just as we do. As we begin to find sustainable solutions to feeding our families, we can help wildlife by ensuring their offspring have a future full of plenty too. We can see clearly that we are part of nature, not separate from it, and post lockdown wildlife will need our help more than ever.

Emotional and Mental Challenges

by Emily Malik

EcoWild Community Interest Company ecowild.org.uk

In recent months, a new lease of life has been offered to our awareness and appreciation of the “nature” near our homes. Nearby nature. Even in the city, the microhabitats and gardens, trees and old walls teem with life, and, being forced to slow down, we noticed it, it noticed us, and hey presto, we’re in a relationship! Well, we’re always in relationship with the living world, but often obliviously. It’s the noticing of this relationship - sometimes called connection - that has been a gift in these months of lockdown, quarantine, furlough and shielding. The new headspace and abundance of time in which we can become consciously aware of this connection and how it fills us with delight is a perhaps unexpected blessing, especially when life has been weighing heavily on us.

So, a brand new relationship! Exciting. Even if it is with the “more-than-human” world and not with our attractive neighbour across the street. Exciting because the sensuous experience of fully-embodied nature connection is spine-tingling to say the least, and, once bitten, it is hard to resist that call of the wild, within and without. But, like all relationships, it can drift. What starts off as wonderful and vital becomes irrelevant and even invisible, sidelined by a daily life hurtling along with its usual insistence and unconcern for the gentle beauty of cosmic awe and wonder.

As the post-lockdown world picks up pace, will our nature connection inevitably fade like a summer holiday fling: all consuming in the moment and just a happy memory thereafter? The economic fallout is likely to batter the services provided by community and third sector organisations that address mental health problems and support wellbeing through nature connection. And yet it is so crucial that we keep this support there, both because the new awareness and appreciation that has been forged in these difficult times is a universal, natural high, and because these services feed into a much wider experience of ourselves as part of this greater living whole. If we can solve our own pains and challenges through this power nature has to transform our state of mind, we are much more likely to find our collective capacity to resolve the ecological crisis, too.

Family on The Farm

by Athlyn Cathcart-Keays

Volunteer

With lockdown in full swing in early April, I found myself seated alongside two other members of my household upon a moving tractor planter, carefully bedding plant starts into the soil while another family member sat upfront in the cockpit and one more trailed along behind us with a measuring tape and trowel in-hand to check our work.

Over the past three months, we've put chard, kale, salad, cabbage, kohlrabi, greens, onions, squash and more into the ground, and we're just beginning to see the fruits (or rather, the veg!) of our labour delivered weekly via the box of lush fresh produce that comes to our door.

A small food producer/CSA like The Community Farm is connected directly to customers, and the supply chain is short and simple. In comparison, during the pandemic, the 'just-in-time' supply chains of big supermarkets resulted in [milk being poured down](#) the drain and gluts of meat thrown away. Keep in mind that this happened in a country where an estimated [8.4 million \(10.1%\)](#) people are living in households where adults report food insecurity.

While supermarket aisles stood empty, The Community Farm's fields were well-stocked with budding organic vegetables, all caringly hand-planted by field workers and volunteers like my family. With business as usual upended during the pandemic, The Farm has shown just how resilient and secure a local food system can be during a time of crisis. Bare shelves don't mean there's not enough food to go around, but that it's just not being distributed properly.

Being part of this community – putting food into the soil and watching it grow – has made me feel rooted in place and reassuringly connected to the land and other field workers at a most uncertain time. Not only that, but doing such work in wind, rain or shine provided solace and purpose during lockdown, and, despite the weather, even felt like a holiday just an hour's cycle from home.

Healthy ways of coping

by Angela Raffle

Chair - The Community Farm

Our purpose at The Farm centres around health and wholeness, and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the importance of looking after our health in times of difficulty.

Friend of The Farm Dr. Phil Hammond (of BBC fame) has masses of experience helping people look after their health, especially when coping with adversity. He summarises the science into eight practices which he calls **CLANGERS**: Connect (with the world around you), Learn, be Active, Notice, Give back, Eat well, Relax, and Sleep. At The Farm, through our healthy veg boxes, and through opportunities for people to spend time on the land, we can help with all eight of the CLANGERS.

Dr. Phil advises us to plan - and fiercely protect - a routine that ensures we practice at least some of the CLANGERS every day. To satisfy relaxation, for example, we might spend fifteen minutes in the natural world focusing on noticing, stillness and breathing, especially lengthening our outbreath. For negative thoughts and anxieties, Dr. Phil advises us to have ready a list of ten things to do the moment those thoughts crop up. And he advises Five Portions of Fun per day, each portion different, serving size large or small.

The reason these practices are so powerful is because they counteract something called the Default Mode Network. This is what our brains shift into at times when we are not actually absorbed in anything particular. No doubt this is evolution's way of making use of spare time, by letting our brain trawl through the past and scan the future. But the result is random worrying thoughts like: "Oh I messed up there," or, "I'm not looking forward to that." So, by filling our days with mindful activity, learning new things, connecting, noticing, giving, practicing stillness, and by cooking and eating delicious healthy food, we can avoid the downward spiral of negative thoughts that can damage our energy and mood, and ultimately our physical health too.

Spending time at The Farm is also a great way of freeing ourselves from constant exposure to news, social media and screen time. This doesn't mean we ignore all of the troubles in the world - it just means we are more deliberate in how and when we choose to let news into our lives, and helps us to be mindful of the things we cannot influence and those that we can.

A Reflection: People, Place and Food

by Ian Weatherseed

Marketing Manager at The Community Farm

With the announcement of lockdown came the inevitability of disruption. Countless fearful questions soon followed: why the rush on toilet paper? Why was there still bread on supermarket shelves but no flour – let alone no yeast? Why the constant and tiring flip-flopping on advice and advisories? How long will we have to live like this?

Then came the institutional fallout: jobs lost and employees flung into furlough limbo; small businesses having to mutate or fold; entire industries plunged into interminable uncertainty.

And then, slowly, once the initial surreal strangeness had passed, along came the bemusement and anguish of the personal. For some, this appeared as a creeping, torturous isolation from loved ones, from everyday social contact, from touch and song and – as mask wearing increased – even from smiles. Digital solutions helped but were often experienced as shallow, glitching substitutes.

For others, the feverish opposite played out: they lived in the dread shadow of pressure-cooker living arrangements that lacked a release valve. Parents struggled to juggle work with family; children struggled to understand why they couldn't play with their friends. Relationships imploded or simmered with resentment.

Loss of all kinds was rife; some permanent, mortal.

The disruption also forced new perspectives and ways of relating. Suddenly, one's immediate locale became incredibly important. Think: neighbours, greenspaces, and local shops. Or rather: people, places, and food to eat – the very basics on which our society is built. These are and always have been the important things, crisis or not. But it is only when such taken-for-granted are disrupted that we become aware of them.

Given the unreliability of supermarket shelves and the closure of pubs, restaurants, places of worship and other traditional gathering places, The Farm quickly became a beacon for many during this difficult time; indie retailers enjoyed a similar luminosity. But should this be surprising? Just like how a kitchen is the heart of a house, The Community Farm is situated at the irresistible confluence of people, place and food.

Countless volunteers wanted to come out to The Farm from the beginning of lockdown; it was hard but necessary to say no until we had managed to put plans in place to protect our visitors and our staff. Similarly, we had to say no to many potential veg box customers at the start of lockdown; it took us time to scale up appropriately and to ensure that the quality of our offering would continue to meet our own high standards.

And yet the land, the soil, the hedgerows and their denizens remained the same: patiently waiting, growing, living. So, it is of little surprise that during this period of disruption in which our social and food-related lives were turned upside down, that people sought stability in that which has not changed: the land and its flora and fauna.

Indeed, the land is the foundation of everything that we do and everything we need. Without the land there is no food, and with no food to eat, there are no people. It is only when the land stops being able to provide for us and ours that we need to really start worrying. By being in relationship with the land, we care for it. And, just as we were raised by our parents, there comes a time when that relationship can invert and the cared for becomes the caretaker. This is an effortless decision to make when there is love, and there is much love for the land when we come to notice it, such as during this period.

When people talk about the upside of lockdown, it often comes back to nature relations and the wonder and love therein: being able to hear birdsong in the city, the sight of clearer skies free of air traffic, thrillingly close or rare wildlife interactions, and a greater general intimacy with the world at large and small scales. Shifts in routine and our sense of time changed the previously mundane into something revelatory and precious. Daily walks became lifelines, adventures, periods of recalibration during which we were taken back to the land, the most fundamental of fundamentals.

As lockdown continued and then lifted, this relation to place started to shift. No longer having to worry about food and people and blunted by repetition, our surroundings once again became mundane, for, as many of these articles have described, we humans are incredibly adaptable beings. When disruption strikes it serves to illuminate the previously unseen cracks in the systems, relations and ways of being that we take for granted. But the light dims quickly. And our eyes start to close.

But for us here at The Community Farm, our eyes have been forced open, ever wider than before. For now we truly understand just how important it is to support spaces such as ours, places where the fundamental union of food, people and nature exists regardless of other concerns. Yes, we deliver veg boxes and provide people with a place where they can get their hands in the soil, but, ultimately, beyond all this, we provide a foundational connection to what it means to be alive: in community with each other, with the land, and with its bounty. COVID has helped us to remember this; it is our duty to stay awake, and to persistently and kindly prod those who have already begun to nod off, pointing to the ties that irrevocably bind us to each other, to land, to food, and to life.