



Community Farming in Northern Ireland:
A Catalyst for Change

IMPACT REPORT

2022 – 2024

CO-OPERATIVE
alternatives



Foundation

Table of Contents

Foreword

Introduction and Context for the CCF Initiative

1

Methodology

7

Strategic Context

10

Impact Report & Discussion

18

Calculating the Social Return on Investment (SROI)

48

Outcome Based Definition of Community Farming

51

Conclusions and Recommendations

54

Case Studies

59

List of Tables & Figures

Item

Figure 1. The three components of community farming

Figure 2. CCF project locations

Table 1. Eight principles of SROI

Table 2. 4-step approach to monetisation

Table 3. Strategic alignment

Table 4. Key characteristics and baseline data

Table 5. Model Theory of Change

Table 6. The CCF Initiative Theory of Change

Table 7. The focus of each CCF project

Table 8. Top 3 reasons for CCF project engagement

Table 9. Project achievements

Table 10. Progress Made

Table 11. Changes in Approach following Advice / Support

Table 12. Difference to 'land', 'communities', 'local economy'

Table 13. Co-Designing new spaces

Table 14. Main engagement groups

Table 15. Improvements to overall health and wellbeing

Table 16. Regenerative Practices

Abbreviations

Abbreviations

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute	AFBI
Community Benefit Society	CBS
Community Interest Company	CIC
Community Supported Agriculture	CSA
Co-operative Alternatives	CA
CiCo Consulting	CiCo
Cultivating Community Farming	CCF
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	DAERA
Department of Health	DoH
Department for Communities	DfC
Department for the Economy	DfE
Jubilee Community Benefit Society	JCBS
Northern Ireland	NI
Social Return on Investment	SROI
Theory of Change	ToC

FOREWORD

Dear Colleagues, Partners & CCF Pioneers,

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this comprehensive impact report on the Cultivating Community Farming (CCF) project.

The project was funded by the Co-op Foundation and managed by Co-operative Alternatives in partnership with Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS). The CCF project's overall goal was to accelerate the capacity and growth of community farming projects across the region.

This project aligned with the aims of the two organisations involved, JCBS and Co-operative Alternatives respectively, who have worked to increase a variety of community-led initiatives with food and nature and address the broader systemic issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, and food security.

The report collated data and valuable information from the 10 participating groups over the course of two years, from 2022 to 2024. The diligent efforts of the CiCo team have culminated in an SROI report that encapsulates rigorous research, thoughtful perspectives, and data-driven conclusions.

From an in-depth description of the participating groups to the final recommendations, each section has been written to provide clarity on the progress made by each group as well as impacts on communities, the environment, and the local economy. Our aim is not only to inform but also to inspire further exploration and dialogue.



FOREWORD CONTINUED

I extend my gratitude to all those who contributed to this project with their skills and competencies — first of all, our partner, Jubilee Farm with their accessible team, Tim Davies and Portia Woods, our in-house consultant, Jonny Hanson from Jonny Hanson Consulting and Communications and founder member of Jubilee Farm, our SROI expert, Ciaran Collins and the CiCo team who worked tirelessly to bring this report to fruition. Not least, our funders, Co-op Foundation, for allowing the space and time to frame a first reflection on what the potential benefits and challenges of community farming are in Northern Ireland.

A final thank you, to the participating groups, the CCF Pioneers, for their dedication and honesty, for sharing their development journey and actively participating in a 'community of practice' supporting each other's efforts. This document suggests that community farming is a 'practical concept' as valid as others to increase community wealth and value for both communities and farmers.

Let this report serve as a catalyst for meaningful discussions, informed decision-making and contribute to the advancement of knowledge of community farming in this region.

Tiziana O'Hara
Project Manager
Co-op Alternatives



1. Introduction and Context for the CCF Initiative

1.1 Introduction

This report explores the impacts and Social Return on Investment (SROI) of the Cultivating Community Farming (CCF) Project delivered in partnership between Co-operative Alternatives (CA) and Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS) for the period February 2022 – March 2024.

Dr Jonny Hanson, consultant to the project, noted that Community farming is part of a broader pattern of ‘civic agriculture’, whereby more localised food production and consumption are linked to a broader, and sometimes global, set of economic, social and environmental factors (Kaika & Racelis 2021). However, as with sustainability in general, community farming suffers from numerous, and often overlapping, definitions. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) remains the most practised, studied, and defined form of community farming. The CSA Network UK defines CSA as a partnership between farmers and consumers in which the responsibilities, risks, and rewards of farming are shared[1].

Community farming in Northern Ireland exhibits many of these same trends but is not as well developed or studied as other parts of the UK, Ireland, or Europe. For instance, the CSA Network UK map shows four CSA members in NI, compared with over 150 members across the UK[2]. Prior to the commencement of the CCF initiative, Jubilee Community Benefit Society, was the only known example of a community-owned farm in NI.

Community farming in NI, as elsewhere, can be understood as a diverse spectrum or continuum of approaches that connect communities with farming, and vice versa. However, while social farming in NI has had clear buy-in and funding from both the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Department of Health (DoH), community farming, including CSA, has had little to no official support to date from relevant departments.

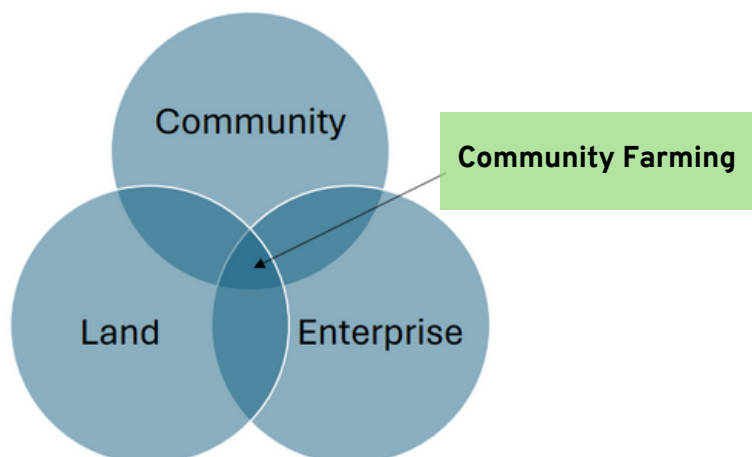


Figure 1. The three components of community farming

[1] About CSA UK (www.communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk)

[2] Find a CSA - CSA UK (<https://www.communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/find-a-csa>)

1.2 Background

In February 2022, the Cultivating Community Farming (CCF) Initiative was launched. Funded by the Co-op Foundation and delivered in partnership between Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society, 10 community farming projects in Northern Ireland were selected to participate in the programme over a two-year period.

The initial objectives of the project were to:

- Enhance understanding of community farming by exploring diverse business models and successful management, empowering and sustaining community-driven agriculture.
- Define and develop project identity, assisting in developing customised action plans tailored to project needs, and shaping the success of outputs relating to land, community and enterprise.
- Build capacity and share knowledge on growing, farming, and caring for animals, through continuous learning and skill development, utilising workshops, skill-sharing sessions, and site visits.
- Foster connections and collaboration, creating a network of like-minded groups that transcend organisational structures and contexts.
- Measure and communicate the impact of social, economic, and environmental impacts generated by participating projects, providing feedback for refinement but also measuring the value of each project.
- Facilitate access to seed funding for each participating project, over two years, empowering projects to take initial steps, overcome start-up challenges, and realise potential.

1.3 Aim Objectives and Scope of the Study

The primary aim of this report is to evaluate the CCF initiative to understand its effectiveness in promoting and supporting community farming across NI. By measuring impact, this report seeks to ascertain the project's achievements, challenges, and contributions to the sustainable development of community farming in NI.

The objectives of the study are to:

- Measure the impacts of the participating groups involved in the Cultivating Community Farming two-year project through engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries and extrapolate the overall project's learning.
- Answer fundamental questions such as 'What difference have the participating groups made to the 'land', 'communities' and 'local economy', and 'What are the key learnings of 'community farming'?
- Articulate the outcomes achieved, based on the three main output areas: 1) the 'community', 2) the 'land', and 3) the 'enterprising activities' for each participating group.
- Measure cooperation and collaborations, type of ownership models, awareness of farming, growing and business models and engagement with communities.
- Capture an outcome-based definition of 'community farming' based on engagement with each participating group.
- Quantify the overall benefits of the CCF initiative as a Community Farming intervention in Northern Ireland, through measuring the social, economic, environmental (and other) benefits of the programme.

- Evaluate the extent to which the CCF initiative has met an objective need, maximising impact, delivering the best value for money (encompassing all costs and benefits) and affordability.
- Inform future strategic intervention for Community Farming in Northern Ireland.

The scope of this report determines the activities and duration to be included in measuring impact. The scope is reflective of available data and information collated through stakeholder engagement, including site visits and survey responses undertaken and gathered by CiCo Consulting.

This report is an evaluation, not a forecast. The scope for measuring the impact of the CCF initiative was agreed with Co-operative Alternatives and covers the period February 2022 – March 2024. The scope includes the initial 10 participating CCF projects and the communities they serve.

The study assesses the social, economic, and environmental impacts generated by the CCF initiative. This includes evaluating its influence on participating CCF projects, surrounding communities, stakeholders, and the broader national and regional context.

Within the report, a transparent exploration of the research methodology employed to gather and analyse data will be presented, ensuring the reliability of the study's findings.

The report includes an examination of the alignment of the overall CCF initiative with national, regional, local, and notable policies, which provides insights into its strategic significance.

The study will calculate the SROI to quantify the project's social value and assess the effectiveness of the resources invested.

A number of the participating projects will offer a first-person insight via case studies, into their experiences within the CCF initiative over 2 years.

The study will conclude with a set of recommendations aimed at informing future project development, policy decisions, and community farming practices in Northern Ireland.

1.4 Report Structure

This report structure is set out as follows:

- Section 1: Introduction and Context for the CCF Initiative
- Section 2: Methodology
- Section 3: Strategic Context & Alignment
- Section 4: Impact Report and Discussion
- Section 5: Calculating the Social Return on Investment (SROI)
- Section 6: Outcome-Based Definition of 'Community Farming'
- Section 7: Conclusions and Recommendations
- Section 8: Case Studies

The report is supplemented by appendices made available to Co-operative Alternatives & JCBS, and summarised and illustrated throughout the report. All appendices are available on request.

1.5 About Co-operative Alternatives

Co-operative Alternatives (CA) is a co-operative development body specialising in setting up and growing a variety of co-operative enterprises with positive environmental & social impacts across Northern Ireland. CA provides business support at all stages of development, including legal structures, community ownership models, community shares & loan stock offers.

1.6 About Jubilee Community Benefit Society

Founded in 2017, Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS) practices & promotes care farming, community-supported agriculture, and conservation education & engagement. JCBS owns and operates Jubilee Farm, the first community-owned farm in Northern Ireland. CA and JCBS have previously collaborated to develop and launch Jubilee Community Benefit Society's community share offer in 2018/19, and 'An Introduction to Community Farming' course in 2021, both supported by the Co-op Foundation.

1.7 Profile of Participating Groups

9 of the 10 originally selected groups are introduced below. One group initially selected to partake withdrew from the CCF project early in year 1.

Azora Community Farm: Located in Hillsborough, Azora is a community benefit society prioritising community engagement, with plans to expand into commercial farming. The project has seen growing volunteer participation, forming partnerships with local volunteers, including church groups and a close relationship with a Zero Waste Refill Shop in Lisburn. While it currently provides volunteering opportunities, governance challenges have been addressed with support from the CCF initiative. Azora Community Farm is active in environmental initiatives, with future goals of specialising in herbs, edible roots, and unique produce, while also offering workshops, community gatherings, and training opportunities.

Glenside Farm: Located in Comber, it is home to award-winning Glen Cowie pedigree Aberdeen Angus and Blue Texel sheep grazing over a split site of 43 acres. Offering access to an authentic working farm, Glenside is providing meaningful opportunities to engage with farming and nature. Their core focus within the CCF initiative was crafting a clear action plan and enhancing their 2.5-acres of accessible land, which presents opportunities for conservation and community project enhancements. Community engagement is paramount, benefiting refugees, persons with mental health issues, persons with disabilities, and all ages. They have tailored projects for wider community benefit through the CCF initiative and have strengthened collaborations.

Gortin Wellbeing Collective CIC: Located in Gortin County Tyrone. Beneficiaries include both children and adults. Their focus is on fostering connections with local groups, schools and statutory agencies. Their community forest spans 0.9 acres and aims to inspire environmental responsibility and wellness within the rural community of Gortin. The space serves as an environmental education project, emphasising skill transfer, seed propagation, soil regeneration, and dietary diversity. It focuses on regenerative farming and soil growth. Key collaborations include with Queen's University and involves research projects related to soil and wildlife. Their educational efforts include interactive workshops with local schools, a holistic fair, foraging events, and after-schools forest school garden workshops.

Harmony Community Trust Glebe House: A registered charity, Harmony Community Trust also known as Glebe House, is located near Strangford Village County Down. In June 2021, they initiated a Seedbed project, aiming to create a social and growing space in line with their community-focused mission. They used initial CCF funding to improve land access and set up a polytunnel. Community engagement is a top priority for the Charity, offering wide ranging activities, in particular for older individuals and young people in rural areas, fostering cross-community connections, and partnering with local schools for youth engagement. Their involvement in the CCF initiative has accelerated land access improvements, initiated a growing project on their land, indirectly helped secure some additional funding, and enabled them to host seminars and community events.

L'Arche: Located in south Belfast, they create communities where people with and without learning disabilities live and work alongside each other. Within the CCF initiative, the aim has been to expand community farms across the city, focusing on organic gardening skills, workshops, and regenerative principles. Their CCF initiative explores organic principles, water management, traditional apple orchards, native rootstocks, wildflower meadows, no-dig market gardens, and bat and bird boxes. L'Arche prioritises sustainability with peat-free gardening, organic practices, composting, recycling, and fair share food practices. Current programmes revolve around regenerative gardening and arts and crafts such as woodcraft and pottery on a developed farm site close and accessible to urban areas. Often services and activities are designed and managed by beneficiaries. Key beneficiaries include persons with disabilities including their families & friends, refugees, elderly volunteers, the LGBT community, church groups as well as children within the justice system and their families.

Laurelbank Farm: Is a 7-acre organic farm and supper club located near Saintfield County Down. As well as supper clubs and the Farm & Feast CSA scheme, they run cooking, brewing and growing workshops. The Farm & Feast CSA scheme was the main focus of their CCF involvement. It is a community-supported agriculture scheme in which members work together to grow and harvest produce. The methods used help the land to regenerate and respond to the local ecosystem. CCF funding enabled them to set up a polytunnel for growing various crops such as aubergines, tomatoes, and chillies, to include in veg boxes.

Tenth Glen Heritage Farms: Is located in the Antrim hills, in the area of Glenravel. Their overarching aims include the preservation of local farming heritage and traditional skills, crafts, and ways; promoting community supported and environmentally sustainable agriculture and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the rural communities that surround them. Their priority within the CCF initiative was focused on restoring derelict local rural buildings for the purposes of local heritage restoration, develop their enterprise model and expanding their community engagement. Some examples of their activities have included the delivery of volunteer days, workshops, heritage farm experiences, and planting willow trees for future basket weaving workshops.

The Turnaround Project: Is a registered charity based in Belfast, born out of the need for continued support for individuals leaving the justice system. Their goal is to provide second chances, prevent reoffending, and change community attitudes toward supporting individuals. Their CCF initiative allowed them to connect with experts, form a valuable steering group, and gain technical support in terms of commissioning a business plan for expansion into a potential enterprise for growing Irish native trees, access peer support, and expert advice. It has also allowed them to enhance community engagement, which focuses on offering volunteering opportunities to both individuals leaving the justice system and the wider community.

Wee Farmer: Is located near Moneymore, close to the shores of Lough Neagh. Drawing on 20 years of gardening experience, the project focused on having a positive impact on both physical and mental well-being through community farming, with a strong focus on promoting mental health recovery through gardening and community involvement. They have incorporated features like hedgerows and paths to make their land accessible to the community. The project's plans include obtaining licenses for medicinal products, like nettle shampoo, and expanding their product offerings such as a living salad bowl and living herb pot, as well as oils and soaps.



2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In January 2023, CiCo Consulting was commissioned by Co-operative Alternatives to undertake an impact measurement report of the Cultivating Community Farming (CCF) Project. This section sets out the methodology adopted to deliver the terms of reference for the report and is informed by the following activity, carried out between February 2023 and February 2024. Appendix 1 provides further detail on the Social Return on Investment stages, metrics overview, monetisation process and valuation methodology.

CiCo Consulting use the National Social Value Standard (SVS[3]), which is a measurement framework for the appraisal of social value – at the forecasting, monitoring, and evaluation stages. Developed by social value economists via the Loop software system[4], using the latest government and academic best practice, such as the HM Treasury Green Book. Appendix 2 provides further detail on the National Social Value Standard.

2.2 Methods of Data Collection

A mixed-method approach was used for data collection, capturing both quantitative and qualitative data. This included:

- 10 semi-structured interviews with each of the participating CCF projects between April and August 2023. These were in person and formed part of site visits to each of the participating groups' farm / site.
- 1 in person and 3 Zoom workshops with Co-operative Alternatives from January 2023.
- 1 in person site visit and 2 Zoom workshop sessions with Jubilee Community Benefit Society.
- A detailed web-based survey capturing responses from each of the participating CCF groups (100% response rate from each of the participating groups).
- 2 in-person workshop focus group sessions with representatives from each of the participating CCF groups, as well as Co-operative Alternatives, and Jubilee Community Benefit Society (September 2023 & February 2024). These half day sessions focused on key themes such as refining the Theory of Change (ToC) & outcomes framework, the social, ecological/environmental and economic outcomes of the CCF interventions reported by each participating group, changes that have occurred and capturing an “outcome-based definition” of community farming. These sessions were facilitated by CiCo Consulting & JCBS and delivered in person. See a full copy of the Outcomes Framework later in this report.

[3] www.nationalsvs.co.uk

[4] loop.org.uk

After data collection, measuring the tangible costs and outputs of a service or activity is relatively straightforward, however quantifying the wider social, economic, and environmental outcomes that a service or activity is delivering is more challenging. Considering this, SROI is an approach to understanding and managing the value of these social, economic, and environmental outcomes. SROI is based on a set of principles that are applied within a framework. SROI is similar to cost-benefit analysis, in that it assigns a monetary value to outcomes, both positive and negative, thus enabling different activities to be compared in monetary terms. It is based around eight principles as set out below.

01.

Involve Stakeholders. These can be volunteers, employees, service users or the wider community. It is important to involve everybody affected by a decision to understand what they value. This enables us to measure impact.

02.

Understand What Changes: Articulate how change is created and evaluate this through evidence gathered, recognising positive and negative changes as well as those that are intended and unintended.

03.

Value The Things That Matter: Making decisions about allocating resources between different options needs to recognise the values of stakeholders. Value refers to the relative importance of different outcomes. It is informed by stakeholders' preferences.

04.

Only Include What Is Material: Establish the boundaries of what information and evidence must be included in an account of value to give a true and fair picture, and one that is based on the evidence from stakeholders, so decisions taken focus on the changes that matter.

05.

Do Not Over Claim: Only claim the value that activities are responsible for creating.

06.

Be Transparent: Demonstrate the basis on which the analysis may be considered accurate and honest and show that it will be reported to and discussed with stakeholders.

07.

Verify The Result: Ensure appropriate verification of results in line with the decisions being supported. In cases where results are being reported to external audiences or are supporting significant decisions, independent assurance may be required.

08.

Be Responsive: Pursue optimum Social Value based on decision making that is timely and supported by appropriate accounting and reporting

Table 1. Eight principles of SROI

To ensure as robust a process as possible, CiCo Consulting has adopted a 4-step approach to monetisation in relation to the CCF initiative, as follows:

01.

Identifying Outcomes: We conducted research to identify the social, environmental, and/or economic outcomes of the CCF intervention and changes. Most metrics within the Loop system have multiple outcomes grouped together and each of their individual valuations aggregated. For example, the wellbeing impact on an individual moving from living isolated to volunteering on a CCF community farm, and then the changes to their wellbeing etc.

02.

Assessing Methodologies: We assessed the most robust valuation methodology for each outcome. For example, site visits were carried out and speaking with participants re: wellbeing impacts. We also developed a survey to determine quantifiable data for the overall impacts of the project

03.

Finding the Data: We collated the best quality data to support each valuation approach. For example, the Loop system builds in academic studies for WELLBY life satisfaction data, ONS data for income levels, and the GMCA Unit Cost Database for public sector costs. We considered the fact that a lack of quality data can result in a change in valuation methodology, or it being judged that an outcome cannot currently be robustly monetised.

04.

Conducting additionality analysis and application of economic treatments: The Loop system applies a number of additionality factors, multipliers and economic treatments to every valuation, tailoring their levels. For example, deadweight, attribution, displacement, duration, drop off, discounting, inflation, and marginal utility of income.

Table 2. 4-step approach to monetisation

2.3 Limitations for Data Collection and Analysis

Despite this adherence to a robust methodology and efforts throughout the study to increase the reliability of findings, the analysis of the CCF initiative includes some limitations that may impact the robustness and usefulness of findings. Given the nature of the study, there were limited baselines available for some of the stakeholder groups prior to the CCF intervention beginning.

The study is reliant on the outcomes reported by each of the participating groups, their beneficiaries and stakeholders engaged with. While CiCo were able to identify, through site visits, semi structured interviews and workshops with each of the groups that some used a degree of measurement tools individually, there was no standardised tool used by all of the participating groups from the outset of the CCF initiative.

3.Strategic Context

The Cultivating Community Farming initiative contributes to a wide range of national, regional and local strategies, and notable policies as set out below in table 3. Within this section, each strategy has been analysed to ascertain the strategic fit and alignment with the CCF initiative.



Table 3. Strategic alignment

3.1 National Strategy Alignment

Draft NI Programme for Government 2021[5]

The Draft Programme for Government (PfG) Framework, is the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive's approach to address collective societal wellbeing outcomes. Of the 9 outcomes, the CCF initiative strongly aligns with several. Such as "Our children and young people have the best start in life". By providing educational programmes and fostering essential life skills through school links for example, the CCF initiative supports young people in achieving their potential. By offering support, skills development, and community engagement opportunities, particularly for elderly people, CCF aligns with a caring society that supports people throughout their lives. CCF's eco-friendly farming practices contribute to environmental sustainability, reducing carbon emissions, and protecting natural spaces, aligning to "We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment". By contributing to the broader goal of sustainable development and encouraging environmentally responsible choices in food production, CCF aligns with "Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced, and carbon-neutral".

Department for Communities – Building Inclusive Communities Strategy 2020-2025[6]

This strategy focuses on long-term societal and economic recovery for communities following the pandemic. The document highlights the importance of addressing community needs, particularly those most marginalised and vulnerable, through building and strengthening communities. Sustainability and inclusive growth are central in the strategy: the Department pledged its support to 'citizens and communities' to maximise their potential through 'economic, cultural and environmental interventions'. This includes support for the development of community ownership and community-led initiatives working across the public, private and third sectors. Community wealth building requires support, independence, autonomy, and the space to continue the development of economic, environmental and community-driven solutions such as community farming. One of the strategic priorities is to '*grow and scale community wealth building*'. The CCF initiative can be considered as an example of a 'bottom-up' and community-led approach to current needs such as access to land. The CCF initiative also addresses its cross-strategy themes including Wellbeing and Inclusion, supporting wellbeing through the promotion of social opportunities and recreation. CCF also emphasises anti-poverty, particularly food poverty and sustainability, increasing community connectivity within the area of rural and urban communities, combatting social isolation and need.

NI Executive – Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland[7]

The strategy underscores the pressing environmental challenges tied to a global economy reliant on fossil fuels. Recognising the unsustainable nature of current practices and the need for a sustainable future, the Strategy places a significant emphasis on the responsibility to act for the sake of future generations. Several principles within the Strategy align with the objectives of the CCF initiative, as outlined overleaf.

[5] Draft NI Programme for Government 2021 (www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government-pfg-2021)

[6] Building Inclusive Communities Strategy (www.communities-ni.gov.uk)

[7] NI Executive – Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland (www.niopa.qub.ac.uk)

Respect our Planet: This principle resonates with the CCF initiatives' commitment to reduce wasteful resource usage and promote the development of a circular economy.

Collaborate: Both the Strategy and the CCF initiative prioritise collaboration, emphasising the importance of working collectively and learning together to secure solutions that maximise positive outcomes.

Measure Progress: The strategy and the CCF initiative share a commitment to data-driven decision-making, with an emphasis on regularly evolving actions through continuous learning and improvement based on measuring impact.

The CCF initiative actively contributes to shared wellbeing while striving to establish inclusive green public spaces. Furthermore, the CCF initiative aligns with the UK Government's net-zero carbon emissions target by 2050, offering opportunities for green job creation. These efforts result in improved well-being and increased social returns across NI. Moreover, it promotes collaboration fostering sustainable commercial opportunities and diversification within the agricultural industry.

NI Executive – Infrastructure 2050 The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland[8]

The strategy recognises that infrastructure investment is pivotal in realising the vision of a more environmentally sustainable and equitable society. Among the strategy's five primary objectives, the CCF initiative makes significant contributions in the following areas:

To Decarbonise our Economy and Society: The CCF initiative plays a role in advancing a circular economy by implementing practices that ensure materials are kept in use, including efficient recycling and water recycling systems.

To Enhance Our Communities and Places: Through the CCF initiative, the promotion of social infrastructure is promoted. This entails ensuring access to high-quality local open green spaces, and fostering a strong sense of community identity. By providing appealing gathering spaces, the project reaps social benefits and enhances the overall sense of place within communities.

Sustainability for the Future – DAERA's Plan to 2050[9]

DAERA's plan is driven by the objective of instilling confidence in the future for farmers while delivering numerous public advantages. Although this policy is heavily focused on mostly large farmers, and there seems to be limited (if any) support for small scale production, the plan centres on four key strategic priorities. Underpinned by Green Growth, the CCF initiative aligns closely with the Natural Environment priority in particular, advocating its significance of championing the wellbeing of future generations. Furthermore, the plan recognises strategic risks that could potentially hinder the realisation of the strategy's outcomes up to 2050. These risks, which the CCF initiative aims to mitigate, encompass Food Security, where sustainable land management practices are initiated; Climate Change, in response to the UK Parliament's declaration of a climate emergency and the commitment to carbon neutrality by 2050, with the

[8] NI Executive – Infrastructure 2050 The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (<https://isni.gov.uk>)

[9] Sustainability for the Future – DAERA's Plan to 2050 (www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

CCF initiative actively contributing through sustainable cultivation and social practices; Demographic Change, as the population over 65 is projected to reach 25% by 2041, CCF type initiatives will become pivotal in providing social and well-being opportunities, particularly crucial in rural areas; and Funding, with the CCF initiative focusing on innovative funding potential, ensuring farmers maintain confidence in their future while delivering numerous public benefits.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework 2021[10]

The CCF initiative closely aligns with the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework, primarily emphasising the following strategic priorities:

Building Connections Between Health/Wellbeing and Food: The CCF initiative contributes to this priority by promoting healthy, nutritious, and sustainable food as the preferred choice, fostering collaboration on issues such as physical health, nutritional standards, and food poverty. It also aligns with the principles of 'One Health', recognising the interconnectedness of human, animal, and ecosystem health.

Building a Food Culture and Food Conscious Society: The CCF initiative supports this priority by promoting a culture of civic pride in NI as a hub of high-quality food. It aims to nurture and celebrate the social value of food, reconnect people with the origins of their food, and advance the appreciation of local quality produce.

Protecting and Enhancing Our Natural Resources: The CCF initiative contributes to this priority by focusing on sustainable land management practices, circular economy principles, and carbon reduction efforts. It actively participates in minimising food waste and promoting the responsible use of natural resources.

Northern Ireland Land Matters Taskforce - Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland[11]

The CCF initiative aligns with several key general principles outlined in the "Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland" as follows:

The CCF initiative promotes responsible land use and management that benefits both communities and the environment. It aligns with the principle of regulation that strikes a balance between public interests and the needs of businesses and landowners. The CCF initiative places importance on sustainable agriculture, and recreation on community-owned land. The CCF initiative acknowledges the cultural and environmental significance of land. It aligns with the principle of respecting the cultural and historical values associated with land use and management decisions. The CCF initiative actively addresses climate change challenges by implementing sustainable growing and social practices. It aligns with the principle of considering climate change adaptation and mitigation in land use decisions. The CCF initiative supports responsible access to land, outdoor recreation, and the promotion of health and wellbeing. It aligns with the principle of encouraging outdoor activities and tourism opportunities.

[10] Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework 2021 (www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

[11] Northern Ireland Land Matters Taskforce - Towards a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland (www.nienvironmentlink.org)

Draft Rural Policy Framework for NI 2021[12]

In this framework, rural communities were provided with an opportunity to re-evaluate their rural policy approaches and how they can provide support to their communities. The drafting of the Rural Policy Framework incorporated insights gathered from Working Groups. Among the framework's five thematic pillars, the CCF initiative aligns with the following:

1. Innovation and Entrepreneurship: The policy is dedicated to fostering a culture of rural innovation. The Innovation and Entrepreneurship working group identified the necessity for "Farm Diversification". In 2019, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) discovered that while farm diversification strategies were being pursued in NI as a response to the 23% drop in farming incomes in 2018/19, challenges such as resource availability, succession planning, and funding constraints posed obstacles. Nevertheless, activities like social farming showed potential for growth.

2. Health and Wellbeing: The CCF initiative plays a role in reducing rural isolation and enhancing the health and well-being of rural residents. The Rural Health and Social Wellbeing Working Group recognised social farming as an innovative approach to utilising agriculture for therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education, and social services in rural areas. This approach has the potential to make a positive contribution to both mental and emotional wellbeing as well as physical activity.

10X Economy - An Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation[13]

The 10X Economy- An Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation sets forth a pathway for fundamental change to the NI Economy focusing on innovation and collaboration. It is about creating a step change in how we think about our economy and how economic gains mean something to all businesses, people, and places across Northern Ireland.

Of the 10 principles, the CCF initiative contributes to the following: Deliver positive economic, environmental, and societal outcomes: Through community social farming, the CCF initiative addresses societal challenges related to health and wellbeing. By providing opportunities for individuals to engage in meaningful agricultural activities, it promotes both physical and mental health improvements. Support a greener, sustainable economy: The CCF initiative encourages environmentally friendly and sustainable farming methods, such as organic farming, minimises the use of synthetic chemicals, preserves soil health, and conserves water resources. By doing so, the CCF initiative contributes to mitigating climate change. Provide a fairer distribution of opportunities for all our people: The CCF initiative creates opportunities for individuals from various backgrounds, including those who may be distanced from the labour market, i.e., rural dwellers. It is an inclusive initiative that enables community members, including vulnerable or marginalised groups, to participate in farming activities. Inspire the future generations to thrive: By creating inclusive opportunities for individuals of all ages to engage in agricultural practices and experience the benefits of working with nature, the project sets an example for future generations and creates intergenerational cohesion.

[12] Rural Policy Framework NI (www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

[13] 10X Economy - An Economic Vision for a Decade of Innovation (www.economy-ni.gov.uk)

DAERA - Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI)[14]

The TRPSI framework is centred on supporting rural communities in combating social isolation through collaborative initiatives, enhancing the quality of life for vulnerable rural residents. The framework concentrates on three key areas for targeted actions, namely Access Poverty, Financial Poverty, and Social Isolation. It underscores the decline in the number of farms in Northern Ireland and the unpredictable nature of farming incomes in recent times, while also highlighting the limited accessibility of healthcare services for those living in rural areas. Moreover, the framework highlights the prevalence of social isolation among rural residents and endeavours to address this issue through interventions designed to expand opportunities for social interaction, with a particular focus on individuals at the highest risk of isolation, such as farmers. The CCF initiative aligns with the targeted action areas laid out in the TRPSI framework, helping to combat social isolation for rural residents, while promoting positive wellbeing.

Department for Health – Mental Health Strategy 2021 – 2031[15]

This strategy sets out a clear direction of travel to support and promote good mental health. The CCF initiative contributes to Promoting Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Good Mental Health Across Society, by improving access to natural and green environments, something widely evidenced as supporting recovery from mental health issues through opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Social Farms and Gardens - The Case for a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in Northern Ireland[16]

Although not a statutory policy, but an aspiration, the CCF initiative aligns with the key recommendations outlined in this benchmark standard published by Social Farms and Gardens. It actively promotes and supports community growing spaces, addressing several key recommendations as follows:

Provision of Community Growing Space: The CCF initiative is committed to expanding community farming initiatives, which provide community growing spaces. It aligns with the recommendation to adopt a target to Councils in NI to provide a level of provision, ensuring that these spaces are accessible to the community, contributing to food security and community well-being.

Community Development and Training: The CCF initiative emphasises capacity building, including horticultural training, for community projects. This aligns with the recommendation to provide funding and support for community groups, enabling them to effectively manage and develop growing spaces.

Community Asset Transfer: The CCF initiative encourages land use cooperation with public bodies, like the recommendation that councils adopt a proportionate Community Asset Transfer policy for community garden projects. This approach ensures community-led development of land for growing purposes.

[14] DAERA - Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework 2016 (www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

[15] Department for Health – Mental Health Strategy 2021 – 2031 (www.health-ni.gov.uk)

[16] Social Farms and Gardens (www.farmgarden.org.uk)

Community Engagement and Strategy: The CCF initiative actively engages with communities to establish and develop community farms. It also aligns with the recommendation to establish clear points of contact for communities interested in growing and to create community food growing strategies for their areas.

Coordination with Public Bodies: The CCF initiative actively collaborates with various stakeholders and public bodies, ensuring coordination for sustainable land use. This aligns with the recommendation to investigate coordination opportunities with other landowning public bodies.

The CCF initiative closely aligns with these key recommendations, actively promoting community growing spaces, capacity building, community engagement, and coordination among public bodies to support sustainable food growing initiatives in NI. The CCF initiative has also provided some insights into the promotion of food growing and increased community spaces among private farmers and charity land-owners, expanding the benefits of community farming to other important stakeholders in the transformation of farming and communities.

Rural Support Social Farming Standards NI[17]

Although not a statutory policy, Rural Support is committed to the continuous improvement of the Social Farming sector for farmers delivering a service and participants benefitting from engagement across NI. As such, the charity has developed Social Farming Standards for the Social Farming sector in Northern Ireland. The Social Farming Standards involve an application process that is coordinated through Rural Support's Social Farming Support Service. There is alignment for the CCF initiatives involved in social farming in particular as it's focused on an innovative use of agriculture to promote therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education, and social services in rural areas. In delivering a Social Farming service, farmers give their time and experience to help others while also benefiting from the support and using their farm in this way. JCBS was one of the first farms in NI to achieve this standard.

Local Council Strategic Alignment

Across the various Council areas in which each of the participating CCF projects are located, the CCF initiative aligns with local strategy, and in particular the Community Plans of each Council. For example, *The Fermanagh and Omagh '2030' Community Plan, Belfast City Council Draft Community Plan, The Belfast Agenda 2023 - 2027, Antrim and Newtownabbey Community Plan "Love Living Here", Mid and East Antrim Community Plan "Putting People First", Lisburn and Castlereagh Council Community Plan 2019-24, Ards and North Down Council Community Plan, "The Big Plan" and the Newry, Mourne and Down Council Community Plan "Living Well Together"*.

Further, each Council across Northern Ireland has a manager dedicated to the Sustainable Food Places Network[18]. This is a network that brings together pioneering food partnerships from towns, cities, boroughs, districts and counties across the UK that are driving innovation and best practice on all aspects of healthy and sustainable food. Sustainable Food Places is a partnership programme led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming. It is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The National Lottery Community Fund. The CCF initiative aligns very closely with this.

[17] Rural Support Social Farming Northern Ireland (www.ruralsupport.org.uk)

[18] Sustainable Food Places (www.sustainablefoodplaces.org)

Conclusion

From this comprehensive strategic review, it is evident that the three pillars of the CCF intervention (i.e land, community & enterprise) are consistent with the broad strategic aims at national, regional, and local level. Key issues identified in terms of strategic alignment are: **1) Community:** Increase the quality of life, health and well-being for rural & urban communities, enabling them to tackle social deprivation, thrive and diversify economically, through providing opportunities to engage in community farming and activity; **2) Enterprise:** Develop community farming projects that are sustainable & economically viable; **3) Land:** Foster connections and collaboration in communities, increasing linkages between stakeholders, offering safe spaces for connecting, growing on and developing land.

On a national level, the initiative aligns with the 10X Economy vision. For example, it propels economic, environmental, and societal advancements, fostering innovation and inclusivity. The CCF initiative aligns with the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework, promoting healthy, sustainable food choices, and the responsible use of natural resources. Moreover, it aligns with the principles of the Land Matters Taskforce, embracing responsible land use and management, climate change adaptation, and promoting outdoor recreation. The Draft Programme for Government 2021 is aligned with the CCF initiative, championing societal well-being outcomes for all segments of the population. The CCF initiative closely aligns with the key recommendations within the Social Farms and Gardens benchmark standard, supporting community growing spaces and enhancing community development and engagement. At a regional and local level, the CCF initiative aligns with various local council community plans across Northern Ireland, advocating for physical and mental well-being, educational opportunities, and social cohesion, while contributing to economic prosperity and sustainable environmental practices through community farming. It also aligns with Rural Support's Social Farming Standards as a means to continuously improve social farming in Northern Ireland.

However, through engagement and consultations with a number of key stakeholders as part of this strategic analysis, it was referenced how some key policies and governmental departments is mostly focused on large scale farming.

The consensus from those consulted alone was that there is limited support for small scale production. For example, in NI currently there is no grant aid for small scale green energy or insulation. Some respondents felt that farm diversification seems not to have much relevance, as this is deemed by some as “alternative business development”.

It was noted by a number of key stakeholders consulted that going forward, it would be worth exploring how farms leasing for example, in small areas of ground close to urban areas (i.e allotment renting) could give solid return on investment. Overall, though, the CCF initiative demonstrates how community farming can foster connectivity and positive change, ultimately creating a more inclusive and sustainable Northern Ireland for all its residents. Through this strategic alignment, it demonstrates possible impacts that community-driven, sustainable agriculture can have on a multitude of strategic objectives, across Northern Ireland.

4. Impact Report & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The overall impact of the CCF initiative is measured by data collected from 10 of the original participating farming projects (9 completed the programme, and 1 group who left). As highlighted previously, methods of data collection included a mixed-method approach, capturing both quantitative and qualitative data from each of the participating projects, as well as Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society. Through this, insights have been provided that demonstrate the overall impacts of the 2-year CCF initiative.

Figure 2 below gives a visual representation of the location of each of the participating groups.



Figure 2. CCF project locations

Table 4 overleaf highlights the key characteristics and baseline data of the 9 participating CCF groups. This information was ascertained through a detailed web-based survey which captured responses from each of the participating CCF groups. See Appendix 3 for full survey responses.

4.2 Baseline Data and Key Characteristics of Participating CCF initiatives

Project	Council	Structure	No.	Target Group	Volunteer Hrs	Land Dedicated to CCF	Community Activities	CCF Contributions	Focus
Azora	Lisburn and Castlereagh	Community Benefit Society (CBS)	30	Older People	1040	2.4 acres	Engagement Events	Learning and Educational initiatives	Health & Wellbeing
Laurelbank Farm	Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	Limited Company	132	Older People, Ethnic Minority	1600	7 acres	Engagement Events	·Learning and Educational initiatives ·Supply Chain Contribution	·Market Garden ·CSA
Glenside Farm	Ards and North Down Borough Council	Community Interest Company (CIC)	392	Older People, Ethnic Minority, Young People	724	7.9 acres	·Workshops ·Engagement Events ·Space Hire	·Part-Time Employment ·Sold Goods ·Generated Income	·Animal Husbandry ·Social Farming ·Conservation ·Health & Wellbeing
Gortin Well-Being CIC	FODC Council	Community Interest Company (CIC)	250	Older People, Young People	200	0.8 acres	·Workshops ·Engagement Events ·Wellness Programmes ·Conservation Projects	·Upskilling Learning and Educational Opportunities	·Horticulture ·Conservation ·Health & Wellbeing ·Forest Garden
L'Arche	Belfast City Council	Registered Charity	230	Persons with disabilities. Older volunteers. Refugees. LGBT community	200	4.4 acres	·Workshops ·Conservation Projects	·Work Placements ·Learning/ Education.	·Horticulture ·Animal Husbandry ·Social Farming ·Market Gardens ·Conservation ·Health & Wellbeing
Turnaround Project	Belfast City Council	Registered Charity	130	Ex-Prisoners	1080	0.24 acres	Engagement Events	Provided Part-Time Employment	Horticulture

Community Farming in Northern Ireland: A Catalyst for Change

Project	Council	Structure	No.	Target Group	Volunteer Hours	Land Dedicated to CCF	Community Activities	CCF Contribution	Focus
Seedbed at Glebe House	NMDC	Charity	60	Older People, young people, BME	1200	0.49 acres	·Workshops ·Events ·Conservation Projects	·Learning and Educational ·Community Engagement	·Horticulture ·Social Farming ·Conservation ·Health & Wellbeing
Wee Farmer	ANBC	Constituted Group	45	Older People, Persons with Disabilities	2860	0.49 acres	·Workshops ·Wellness Programme	·Learning ·Sold Goods / Generated Income	·Horticulture ·Health & Wellbeing
Tenth Glen	MEA Council	Constituted Group	300	Older People, Persons with Disabilities, Young People	150	15.5 acres	·Workshops ·Engagement Events ·Wellness Programme ·Conservation Projects	·Learning ·Sold Goods / Generated Income	·Social Farming ·Conservation ·Tourism ·Health & Wellbeing ·Farming Heritage

Table 4. Key characteristics and baseline data



4.3 Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) model[19] is similar to a logic model, which is defined as a systematic and visual representation that outlines the logical relationships between the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and goals of a programme or project. It serves as a tool for planning, implementing, and evaluating projects. It plays a pivotal role in guiding efforts to measure impacts at 'the outcome level'. The ToC model is the framework CiCo Consulting uses in impact measurement and programme evaluations to describe how a specific intervention or programme (i.e the CCF initiative) will create meaningful and lasting change in a given context. It serves as a framework for impact measurement and programme evaluations, particularly for projects like the CCF initiative. This model interprets the connections between inputs, programme activities, intended outcomes, and lasting impacts, providing a structured understanding of how interventions bring about meaningful and transformative change within a specific context.

The following are the key components and characteristics of the Theory of Change model.

Inputs

In the context of the Theory of Change, inputs represent the essential resources, investments, and contributions dedicated to a project, such as the CCF initiative. These inputs in the context of the CCF initiative encompass various elements, including financial support from entities like Co-op Foundation, Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society, initial seed funding, the valuable commitment of staff and volunteers, expertise, and mentorship, as well as the resources and time allocated by each of the participating groups. These inputs collectively form the foundation upon which the CCF initiative operates to create meaningful and sustainable change in the context of community farming in Northern Ireland.

Activities

Activities within the Theory of Change framework encompass the wide range of actions and efforts undertaken by the CCF initiative and its participating groups. These activities span numerous areas, including cultivation and farming practices, conservation efforts, agritourism initiatives, exploration of legal structures for community farm setup, hosting various meet-ups and workshops, providing mentorship, and training opportunities, implementing specific community-focused initiatives, acquiring land, and delivering essential services. These activities collectively represent the diverse strategies employed by the CCF initiative to drive positive change and outcomes within community farming across NI.

Outputs

Outputs, as defined within the Theory of Change framework, encompass the tangible and quantifiable results achieved by the CCF initiative and the 9 remaining participating groups. These outputs encompass a variety of areas, including the quantity of produce generated, the exchange of knowledge and learning among community members, the volume of volunteer engagement, the number of governance training provided, the number of capacity-building initiatives undertaken, and the amount of land made accessible and utilised for groups' respective community's benefit. These outputs serve as indicators of the project's activities and

[19] UK Aid Connect: Theory of Change Guidance (publishing.service.gov.uk)

provides the platform to then demonstrate the immediate, measurable outcomes arising from the CCF initiative's efforts.

Outcomes

Outcomes, within the context of the Theory of Change, represent the broader changes that the CCF initiative has achieved. Examples of these outcomes includes the development of a clearer vision, mission, and values for the 9 participating groups, an increase in self-esteem and overall wellbeing among stakeholders, enhanced clarity regarding land strategy, strengthened governance structures, the expansion of a project's support base, improved community connections, increased opportunities within the community, adoption of sustainable farming and food practices, and the successful delivery of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programme, among other transformative changes. These outcomes reflect the deeper and more meaningful shifts that the CCF initiative aims to bring about within its participating communities and the 9 participating groups.

Impact

Impact, in the context of the CCF initiative, refers to the long-term and wide-reaching consequences that stem from the collective outcomes achieved by the initiative over the course of the 2-year period of project delivery.

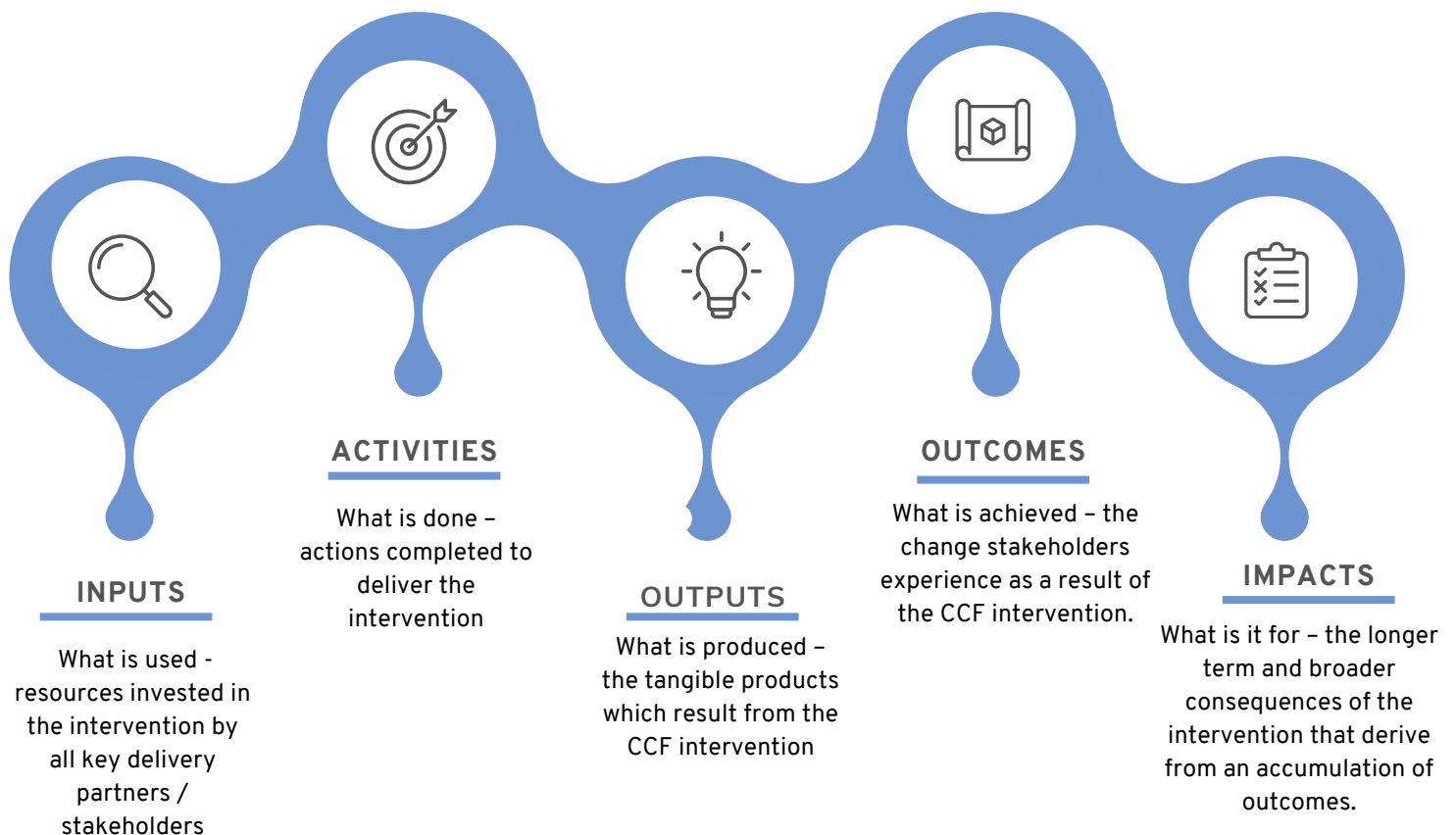
These impacts extend beyond the immediate project goals and are relevant to various aspects of social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Impact assessment within the CCF initiative focuses on how the emerging community farms in Northern Ireland contribute to broader societal, economic, and environmental changes. It involves evaluating the sustained benefits, changes in community wellbeing, economic growth, and environmental improvements that result from the continued success and growth of the 9 community farming projects.

Ultimately, this impact assessment demonstrates the significant and lasting positive (and other) effects that community farming can have on communities across Northern Ireland.

Overleaf is a visual representation of this framework, which has been implemented to establish the Theory of Change for the CCF initiative.

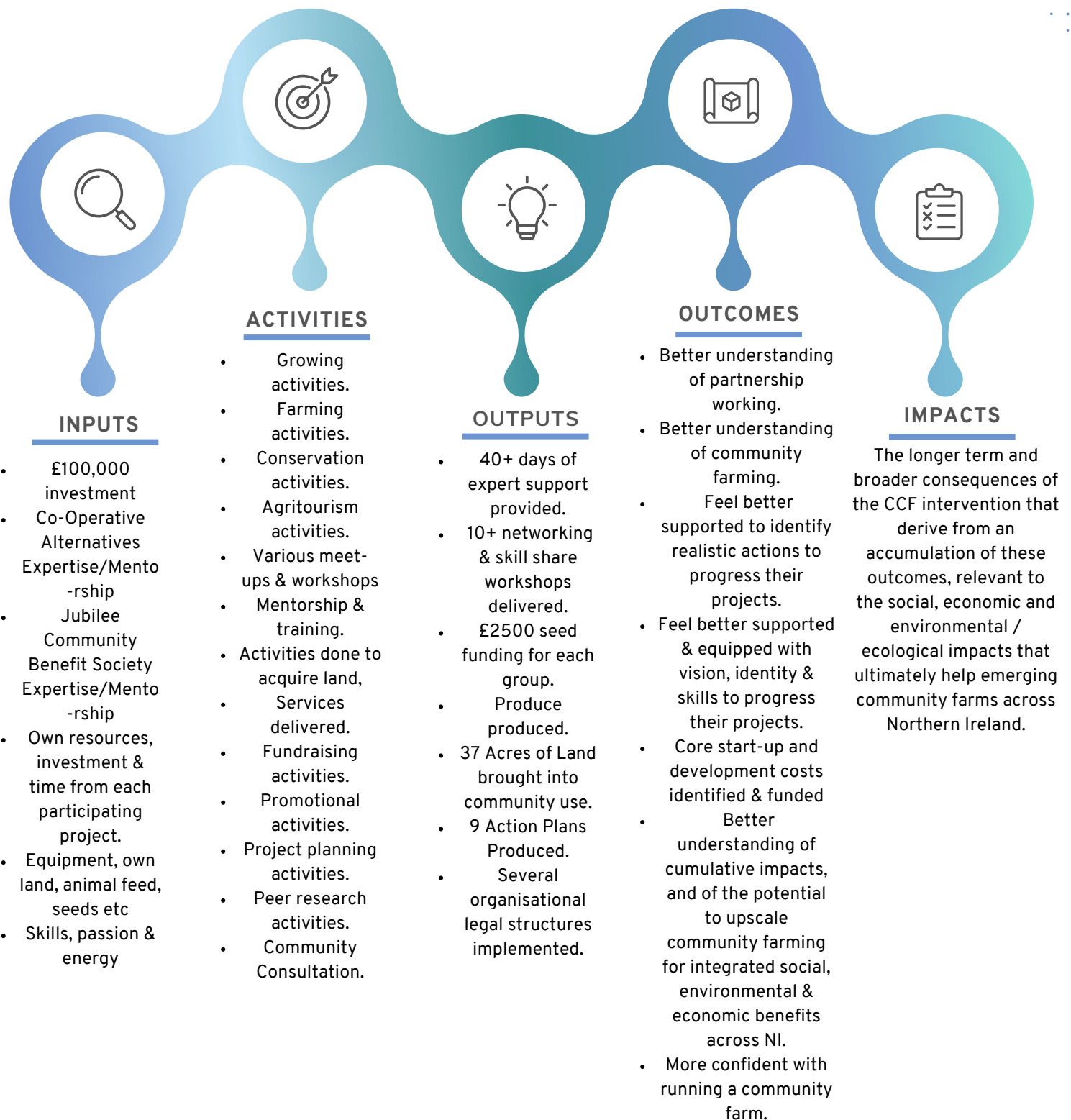


Table 5: Model Theory of Change Framework



Overleaf we have developed an example Theory of Change model for the Cultivating Community Farming initiative, which summarises specifically the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes to date of the CCF programme.

Table 6: The CCF Initiative Theory of Change



OUR IMPACT IN NUMBERS



£100,000 **9**

Invested into the CCF initiative over the last 2 years

Groups completed the 2 year CCF project

40+

Days of expert support provided to each of the participating groups

10+

Networking and skills-sharing workshops held (and hosted by participating groups at their site/farm)



1,587

Individuals engaged with or interacted with across the CCF Project.

650

Volunteering opportunities created through the CCF Project

37 ACRES

Land made accessible across NI for community initiatives



9

Action plans produced for each of the participating groups

7

Organisational legal structures refined and implemented across each of the participating groups (Charities, CICs, Limited Company or Community Benefit Society)

1

Group provided work placement opportunities



3

Groups sold goods / generated income through a 'farm shop' type set up

7

Groups provided upskilling / learning / educational opportunities themselves within their community.

1

Group contributed to Agritourism





2

Groups provide part-time employment

1

Group engaged in supply chain contributions

1

Group delivered a Community Supported Agriculture Scheme (CSA)



15,000

Volunteer hours delivered across the 9 CCF projects

7.4 ACRES

Land given to food production.

£45,000

Additional income generated across the 9 participating groups through social economy activities.

17.2 ACRES

Land given to conservation.

4.4 Impact Discussion

A summary of our key findings is as follows. See *Appendix 3* for a detailed overview of all survey response data collected, which highlights in depth the wider impacts of the CCF initiative.

4.4.1 Organisational Impacts

There are **3 registered charities, 2 Community Interest Companies (CIC), 2 Unincorporated Constituted Groups, 1 Limited Company, and 1 Community Benefit Society (CBS)** who participated in the CCF initiative.

Participating groups were asked about their legal structures, and if there were any benefits or restrictions relating to their structures. Feedback revealed that “CICs” and “Registered Charities” structures found it advantageous ‘to access funding’, with CIC status ‘enhancing credibility’. Limited Company status ‘encountered obstacles in securing funding’ due to its structure, and the CBS structure ‘experienced delays in establishing bank accounts’ due to its specific structure.

As illustrated in table 7 below, the focus of each of the CCF projects varied. 7 groups had a key focus on Health and Wellbeing. 2 groups focused on Animal Husbandry (for example rearing award-winning Glen Cowie Pedigree Cattle, and rearing poultry). Horticulture was a key focus of many groups, as is conservation and biodiversity

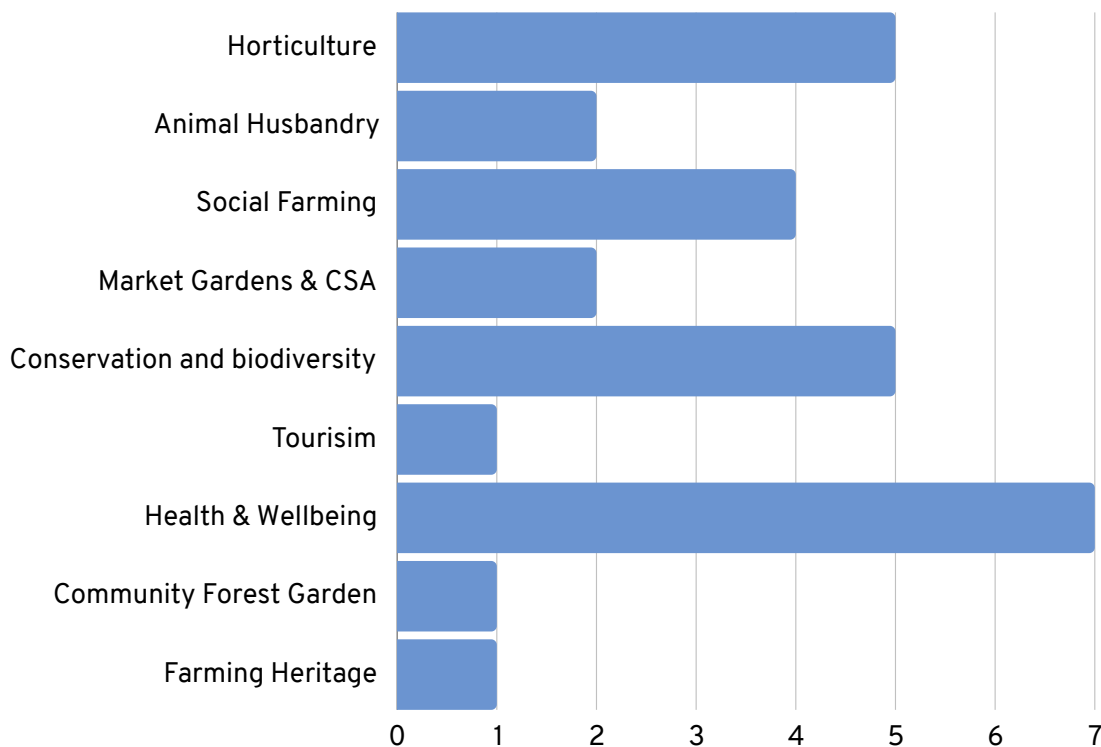


Table 7. The focus of each CCF project

When asked to demonstrate their status as an organisation just before starting to participate in the CCF project, responses included:

- 3 of the groups noted that they “had an idea about developing a community farm, but didn’t know where to start”.
- 3 of the groups already had a functioning farm.
- 1 group had plans already developed for a community farm but hadn’t progressed anything yet.
- 1 group was established and delivered some programmes but needed support on their vision, mission & values as an organisation.
- 1 group had a broad plan for a community garden and environmental project but had no detailed plans in place.

As illustrated in table 8 below, when asked to select the top 3 reasons they INITIALLY engaged with the CCF Project, the vast majority of groups noted that they wanted to **1) diversify their existing business, 2) increase their community outreach and 3) connect with like-minded people/projects.**

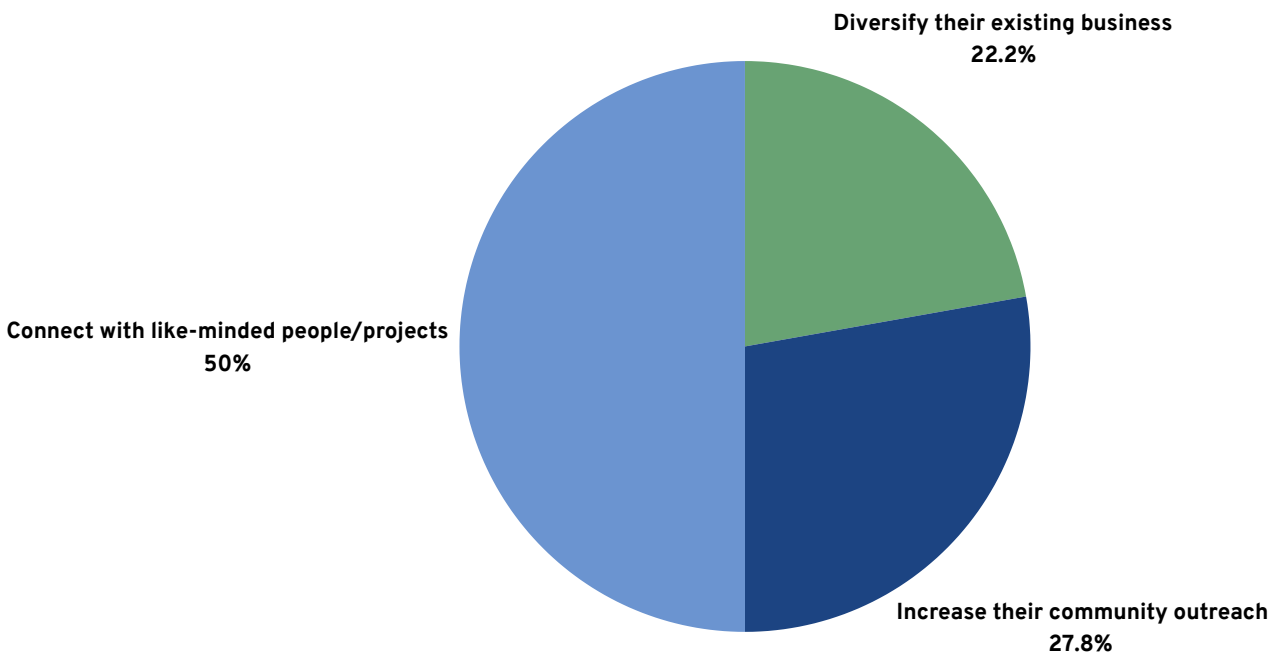


Table 8.. Top 3 reasons for CCF project engagement

As illustrated in table 9 below, when asked “Have you achieved what you initially set out to achieve” within the CCF initiative, the majority (88.9%) noted that they “More than” (11.1%) or “somewhat achieved” (77.8%) what we set out to achieve.

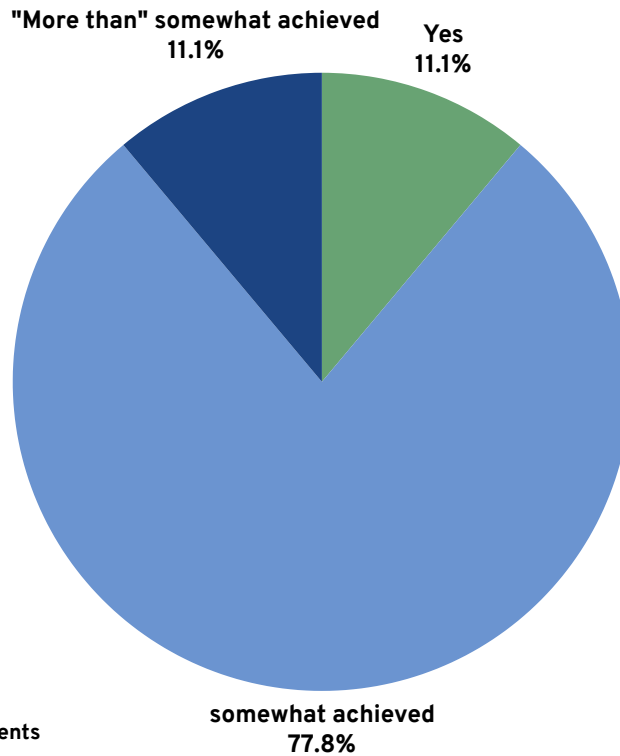


Table 9. Project achievements

When asked “which of the following best describes the progress that your CCF project has made to date”, the majority noted they “were continuing to develop their project, and making good progress”. 1 group noted how their project is “up and running, and they are doing lots of projects, initiatives and growing! Quicker than they thought!”. 1 group noted that they had “stopped trying to set up the CCF project, but still intend to try and start in the future”. 1 group noted that they are “continuing to develop the CCF project and making some progress”. 1 group unfortunately has dropped out of the programme completely.

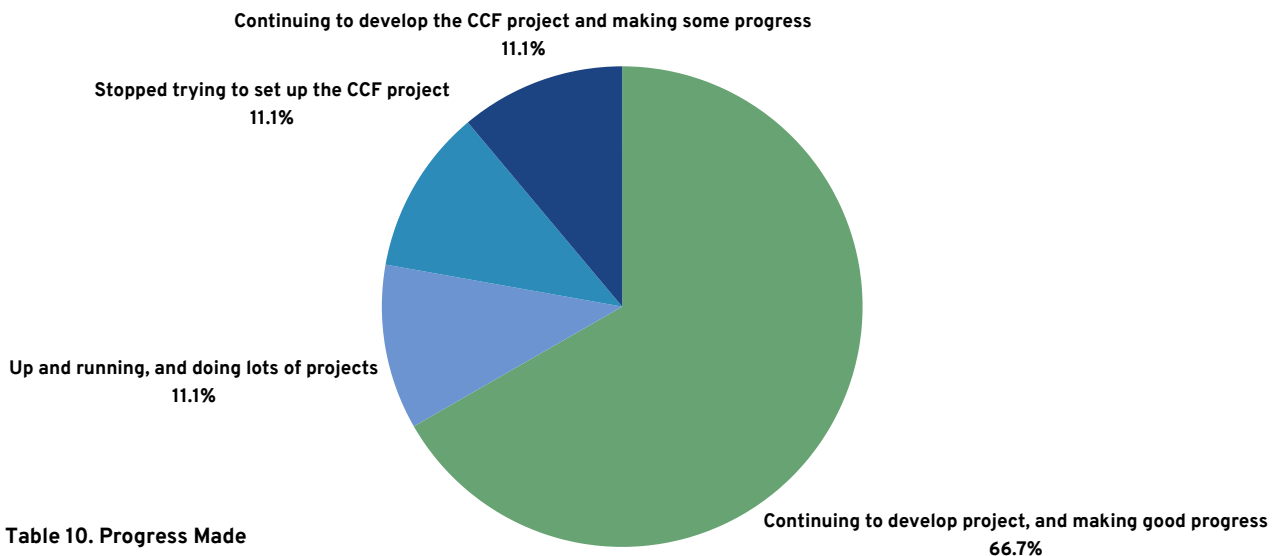


Table 10. Progress Made

Participating groups were asked to highlight obstacles faced that have prevented them from progressing their CCF Project. The main obstacles identified were a lack of **financial resources, land issues, and the time devotion required**. 3 groups believed they **did not have the necessary skills required**, and it was **more difficult than expected**. Other obstacles included **health challenges and rising costs due to the cost of living crisis**.

When asked about the support received through the CCF initiative, and how likely each group would have started their initiative anyway (without Co-op Alternatives / JCBS), the majority of groups noted the following:

- Probably would not have started anything (2 groups),
- Would have started, but in a smaller scale (2 groups) or would have but at a later date (2 groups).
- 1 group noted how they would have started their CCF project, but at a smaller scale and at a later date.
- 1 group noted how they probably would have started the CCF project in the same manner and timescale regardless of the support from Co-op Alternatives / JCBS.
- 1 group noted that they may have started something, but it would have been unsustainable as they had not appreciated the business model.

When asked “As a result of the advice or support received to date, did you change your approach to any aspect of creating your CCF project”, the majority (4 groups) noted “**Yes - A Big Change**” or “**Yes- Some Change**” (3 groups). As highlighted below.

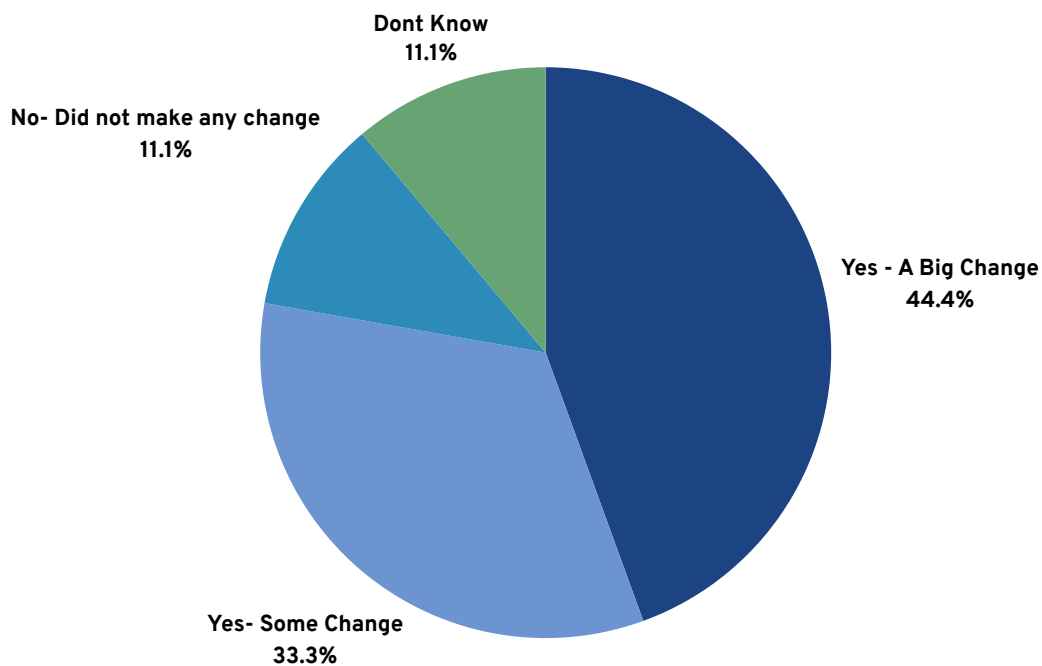


Table 11. Changes in Approach following Advice / Support

When asked “On balance, and in light of the support that you have received to help you develop your CCF initiative, do you consider that the advice and guidance received acted as ‘tipping point’ in helping you decide to start / grow / focus more on your project?” **8 out of the 9 groups noted “YES”.**

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1= no difference & 10= substantial difference) participating groups were asked to rate the “positive differences” they felt their projects had on the ‘land’, ‘communities’ and ‘local economy’, **the majority results where between 6 / 10 - 10 / 10 (table 11 below).**

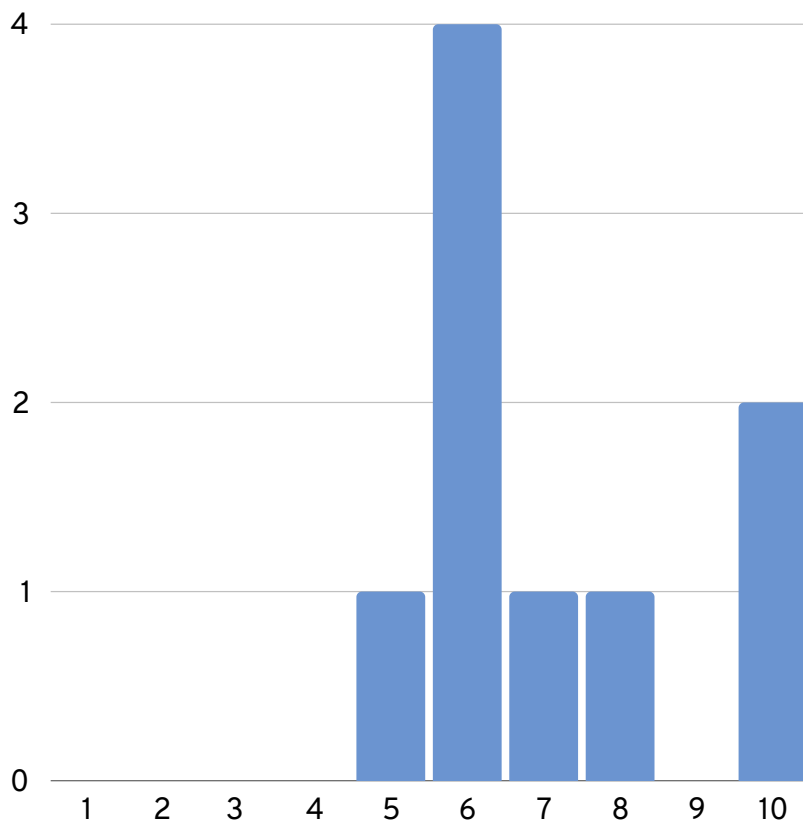


Table 12. Difference projects had on ‘land’, ‘communities’, ‘local economy’

4.4.2 Community & Engagement Impacts

When asked “Has your CCF Project engaged with communities/volunteers/members in co-designing new spaces?” 8 out of 9 groups noted “YES” (as presented in table 12 below).

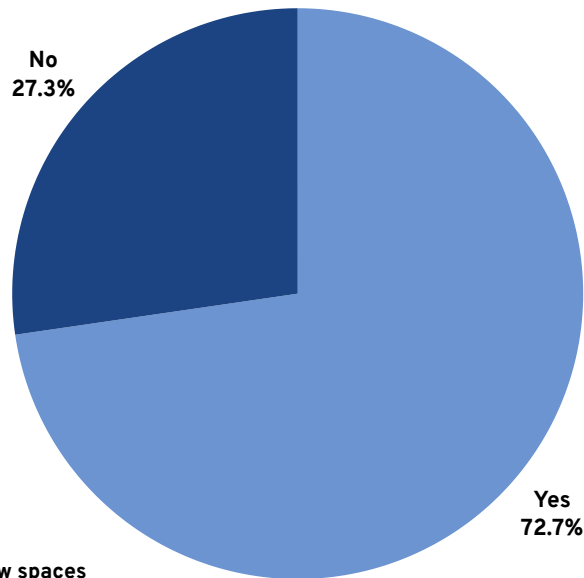


Table 13. Co-Designing new spaces

Participating projects identified their main engagement groups, with the majority highlighting **Older People & Younger People** as their main demographics engaged. **Charities and Local Families** were also important stakeholders/groups across the projects (table below).

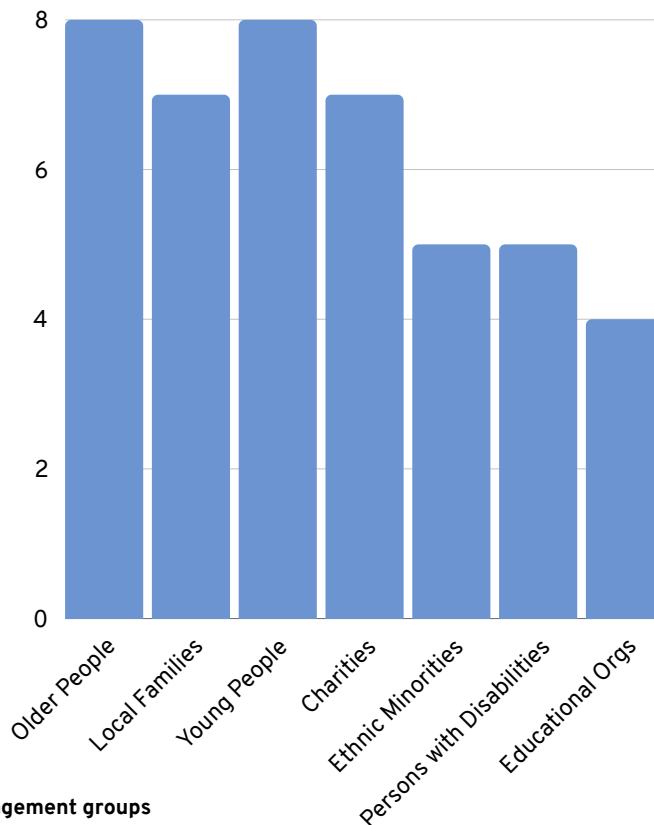


Table 14. Main engagement groups

When asked “On a scale of 1 to 10, how has participating in the CCF Project improved your overall health and wellbeing? And the wellbeing of participants across your project”, the vast majority of groups ranked their overall health and wellbeing improvements at, at least 7 out of 10 (3 groups), 8 out of 10 (1 group) and 10 out of 10 (3 groups). As highlighted the table below.

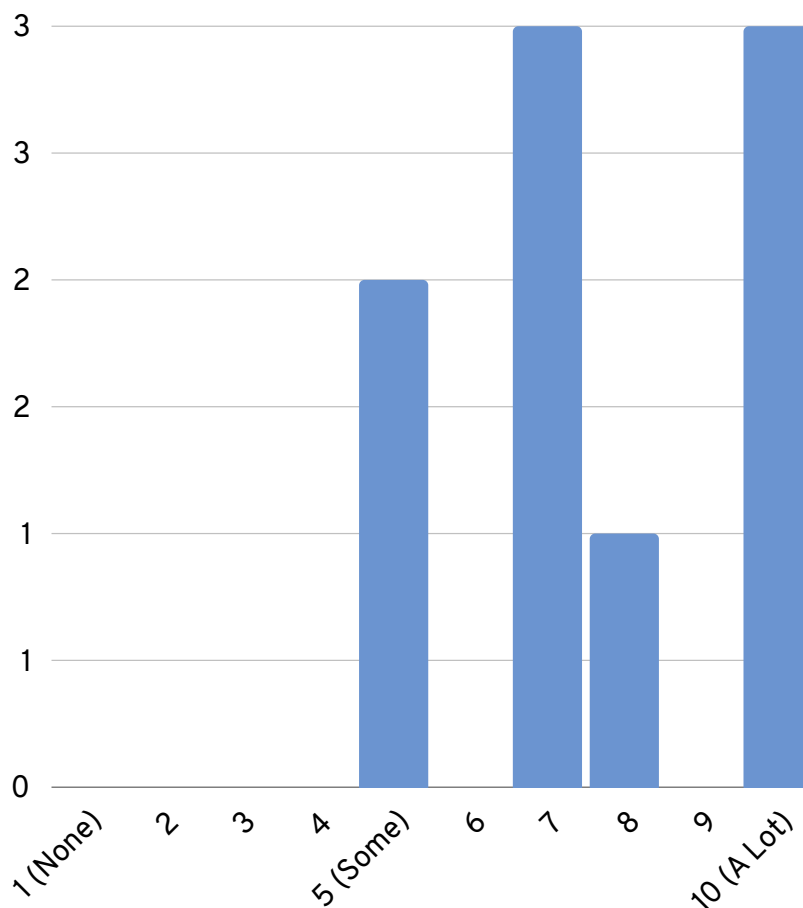


Table 15. Improvements to overall health and wellbeing

4.4.3 Educational Impacts

When asked “Has your CCF Project engaged with communities/volunteers/members in co-designing new spaces?” 8 out of 9 groups noted “YES” (as presented in table 12 below).

All 9 participating groups noted how they had been involved in various forms of training and skill-share sessions delivered through the CCF project to date. For example, some comments included:

“We learned a lot from the general meet-ups, ranging from interview techniques, identifying our stakeholders, good governance and also being inspired from the different projects and sites that we visited”.

CCF Participant

“As well as the CCF workshops we were also involved in some workshops run by Nourish NI, Grow NI, National Trust and Nature Friendly Farming Network UK”.

CCF Participant

“We attended workshops about Horticulture / Social Farming / CSA Fundraising / Governance”.

CCF Participant

“We attended the open day at Jubilee teaching on the market garden and CSA boxes”.

CCF Participant

“From vision to action, Telling the story, Community engagement: do's & don'ts, Harvesting the learning, The importance of good governance, Funding applications, Horticulture Workshop, Conservation Workshop, Marketing and Tourism for Community Farms, Causeway Coastal Route speed networking event, Social Farms and Gardens cob house building demo, MEA Digital Boost online & social media mentoring, Mid & East Antrim Digital Boost Business Escalator Program mentoring - website development”

CCF Participant

A number of participating groups provided a range of training / workshops, for example:

Gortin Wellbeing Collective CIC conducted engaging workshops for children aged 7 to 10, focusing on trees, vegetable cultivation, biodiversity enhancement, and pollinator-friendly plantings. Although no formal qualifications were provided, the workshops successfully educated and involved the participants.

The Wee Farmer collaborated with a local community group, TIDAL, to host garden and crafts classes aimed at alleviating anxiety exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A joint effort with a health trust resulted in a beginner garden certificate awarded to a group of 8 individuals facing more challenging mental health issues. They participated in a graduation ceremony, and it was well received.

Tenth Glen Heritage facilitated diverse workshops encompassing basket weaving, wool spinning, natural dyeing, quilting, pottery, bushcraft, nature art, and livestock farming. These workshops catered to a wide range of participants, including families and a disadvantaged youth group. The workshops reached a total of 48 participants over multiple sessions.

L'Arche Belfast delivered several workshops focused on growing and woodwork.



Linkages to Wider Social Impact

There is a clear social impact from the CCF initiative, with outcomes that significantly contribute to the wellbeing, engagement, and empowerment of the respective communities in which each of the participating groups operate. Among the participating groups, a substantial portion, specifically 7 out of 9, focused on health and wellbeing, emphasising the importance of fostering healthy communities. An additional 4 groups prioritise social farming as their focus, highlighting the role of these projects in promoting social cohesion and individual wellbeing.

What is evident is that the desire for connection and collaboration lies at the heart of these community-driven initiatives. When asked about their initial engagement with the CCF initiative, 100% of groups stated their motivation was to connect with like-minded individuals and projects. This collective aspiration for collaboration underscores the community-building ethos that underpins these projects, and collectively the CCF initiative.

The reach of the 9 participating groups extends to a diverse range of individuals and groups within their communities as highlighted-8 out of 9 groups have engaged with older people, while 7 had engaged with local families and young people. Others engaged with persons with disabilities and diverse groups, including ethnic minority communities and asylum seekers. The scope of engagement is extensive, with one group notably engaging with 100 children and another with 12 older people from a church group. Such inclusive community involvement showcases the CCF initiatives' commitment to fostering social inclusivity and creating spaces for diverse participation.

In terms of numbers, the impact on community engagement is significant, with nearly 1,600 people involved and interacting with the CCF initiative to date. This provides not only educational opportunities but also serves as a respite and therapeutic space. For example, one group has 80 people in their garden on any given week, while another project engaged 15 families in 2022, increasing to 31 families in 2023. These figures illustrate the reach and positive influence of the CCF initiatives in creating thriving and inclusive communities.

Volunteering opportunities created by the CCF projects are substantial, totalling nearly 650 volunteering opportunities, with one group hosting 500 volunteers over 71 days. The projects primarily engage elderly individuals through volunteering, although they also extend opportunities to ethnic minority groups, persons with disabilities, and young people. These opportunities not only promote community participation but also contribute to individual skill development and empowerment.

The dedication of at least 15,000 volunteer hours to these projects underscores the commitment of volunteers and the lasting impact of community engagement in NI through the CCF initiative. From this research, it is clear that the CCF projects have become vibrant community hubs, with numerous workshops and activities delivered in their communities, ranging from educational programmes for children to garden and crafts classes for all ages. These initiatives empower individuals, enhance community well-being, and contribute to a sense of belonging and cohesion. The social impact of the CCF initiative goes beyond farming and horticulture, impacting the lives of community members across all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. These initiatives serve as valuable community assets, creating spaces for learning, social interaction, and wellbeing

ultimately promoting the principles of social inclusion, engagement, and collaboration. The CCF initiative's ability to bring people together in a spirit of collective effort and shared learning stands as a testament to the power of community farming in fostering healthier, more connected societies across Northern Ireland.

4.4.4 Land & Environmental Impacts

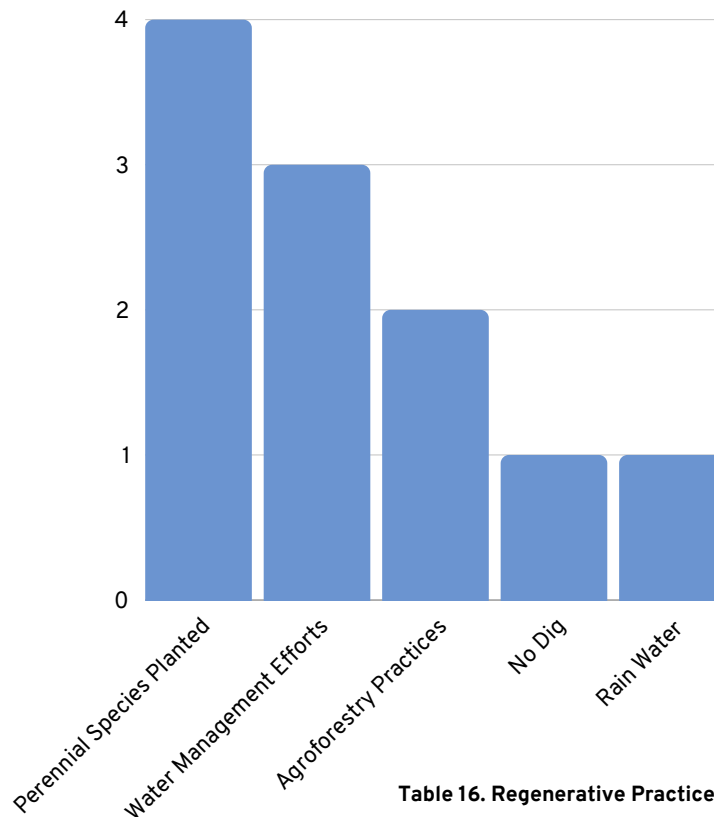
Groups implemented regenerative and agroecological farming and land management approaches. These approaches consider a farm as an ecosystem and attempt to manage it for and with diversity in mind. Their environmental impacts are therefore partly in the practices they minimise or avoid, such as using synthetic pesticides or monocultures. Similarly, they promote positive environmental impacts through putting diversity at the centre of managing water, soil, plants, livestock, other farm resources, shortened supply chains and wild nature. The practices and impacts of the CCF groups in each of these areas are discussed below in turn.

Firstly, beneficial environmental impacts were realised from a range of management practices implemented on-farm; with only one group were these formalised through organic certification. Four groups implemented water conservation practices. An example of this was “plans to harvest rainwater from a composting bay roof and dig swales on the site to capture it”. Managing and improving soil health was the area of, arguably, greatest environmental impact. Practices here included: composting (6 groups); organic soil amendments (4 groups); crop rotations (2 groups); and cover crops (2 groups). One group, for example planted 1 hectare (2.4 acres) of white clover overseed as a nitrogen-fixing fertiliser alternative.

Inevitably, there was some overlap between regenerative practices for soil health and regenerative practices for plant health, such as through crop rotations. This reflects the close connection between the two areas in an agroecological farming system. Integrated Pest Management practices were implemented by three groups, and biological control approaches by one group. The wide range of fruit and vegetables grown by the groups are a reflection of these approaches, including:

- Fruit: 3 varieties of Apples (Boscoop, Katy and Discovery), Conference Pears, Victoria Plums and strawberries.
- Vegetables and herbs: Basil, Beetroot, Calendula, Celeriac, Coriander, French Marigold, Jerusalem Artichoke, Kohlrabi, Lettuce, Nasturtium, Peas, Red Cabbage, Shallots, Rhubarb, Garlic, Onions, Calendula, Borage, Chamomile, and other herbs

The follow-on from healthy soil and healthy plants is healthy animals. Here, positive environmental impact was generated by a focus on mostly native breeds - adapted to local conditions and requiring minimal bought-in feed - and regenerative grazing practices. Livestock reared included pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle as well as pedigree Blue Texel, Jacob, Ileyn and Suffolk sheep. Several projects keep poultry, and a number kept donkeys. Integrating manure production from these livestock into the composting process, and then back into the soil for vegetable production, is another example of the environmental impacts of circular agroecosystems like these. One group, for instance, used shorn sheep fleeces as natural mulch for fruit trees to retain moisture and suppress weeds.



Thinking beyond the biological and ecological aspects of their farm systems, participating groups also **utilised recycled materials to minimise their environmental impact. Examples included recycled timber for the construction of a veg wash shed; recycled pallets for compost systems; stone and timber from onsite demolitions used to build vegetable supports, compost heaps, a celebration solstice arch, salad wash station, benches, firepits, dry stone walls and raised beds; an old lorry container used for equipment storage; food trays re-used for seed trays; recycled bell tents and furnishings.** Given the significant amounts of embodied energy in all of these materials, a significant environmental impact from the project - as with agricultural practices not implemented - is all of the new materials not purchased.

This is also true with the **short, local supply chains created by several of the groups**, especially those involved in trialling or establishing veg box schemes to sell their plant produce through. **One group, for example, filled 275 vegetable boxes in 2022 and 800 in 2023.** As with avoided practices and products, the main environmental impact here is from the avoided processes ie. trucking, shipping or flying in all of this produce from outside of Northern Ireland and instead growing and supplying it locally.

Lastly, the final part of the groups' environmental impacts was their focus on **wild nature. Five of the groups were involved in conservation activities. These included, for instance, the planting of 20 trees on one farm and the planting of 500 willow shoots on another.** Another had a conservation specialist from JCBS visit to provide advice on managing part of their land for wildlife. Overall, this final component of the regenerative and agro-ecological practices employed by the groups demonstrates the environmental impact that can be generated - and avoided - from taking a holistic approach to farms as ecosystems, comprising water, soil, plants, animals, people, other resources and nature itself.

Linkages to Wider Environmental Impact

The impact on the land and the wider environment resulting from the CCF initiative showcases the influence of the 9 community farming groups on the accessibility, utilisation, and preservation of land resources in NI. As highlighted, 5 out of the 9 groups primarily focused on horticulture, with 5 groups directing their efforts towards conservation and biodiversity. The ability to access and dedicate land to these purposes was identified as a motivator for their involvement in the CCF initiative.

The impact of the CCF initiative on land access and utilisation is quantifiable. The project has made 15.83 hectares (39 acres) of land accessible, of which 2.93 hectares (7 acres) are dedicated to food production, demonstrating a substantial contribution to the local supply of fresh, sustainable produce. Moreover, an extensive 7.4 hectares have been committed to conservation efforts (18 acres), emphasising the significance of environmental stewardship within the 9 community initiatives. The remaining 5.5 hectares of land have been utilised for relevant infrastructure such as buildings and parking to support wider access to land.

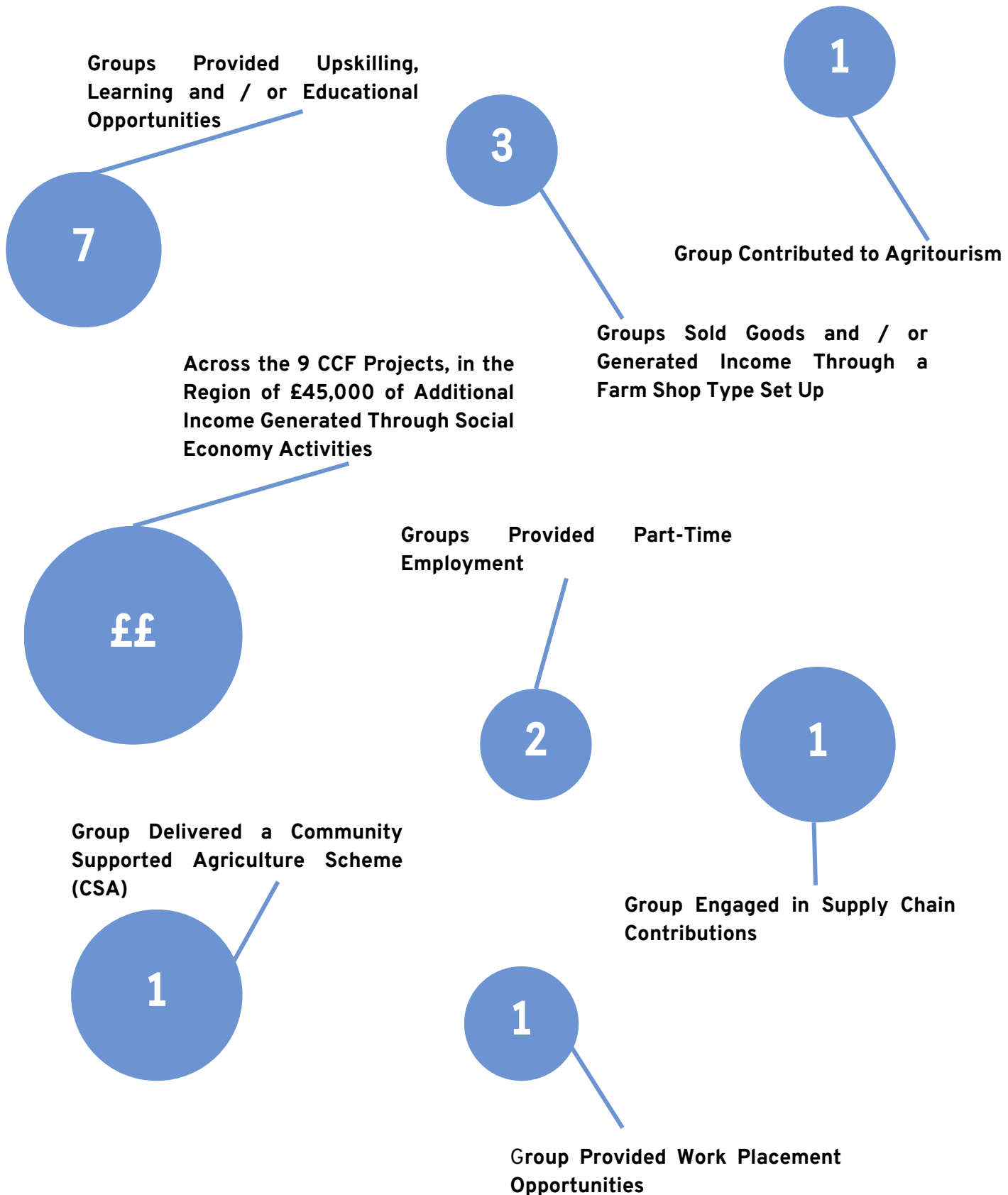
Sustainability is a cornerstone of the CCF initiative's land impact. Whether certified or not, several groups have adopted organic farming systems as noted, and recycling and repurposing materials is another aspect of the CCF initiative's environmental impact. Participating groups have demonstrated resourcefulness. This resource-efficient approach not only minimises waste but also aligns with the principles of environmental sustainability and community-driven land utilisation.

The CCF initiative's impact on land is a testament to the transformative potential of community farming initiatives, with tangible outcomes that go beyond traditional agriculture. The utilisation, preservation, and regeneration of land for horticultural, conservation, and sustainable purposes underscore the significance of community-based efforts in enhancing land accessibility and promoting eco-friendly farming practices.



4.4.5 Financial and Enterprising Impacts

The following summarises some of the key enterprising activities of the CCF initiative.



When asked to demonstrate what they did with the initial CCF seed funding, groups commented as follows:

- Getting operations running on our pilot farm.
- 6m bell tent construction.
- Materials and tools.
- Seeds and compost purchases.
- Wood to construct beds in Polytunnel.
- Part-time individual with Horticultural experience.
- Resource the community space and develop the space for children.
- Dehydrator and laid path in garden and to polytunnel.
- Polytunnel purchase.
- Veg wash area, wood store, and pottery shed.

Linkages to Wider Economic Impact

Participating groups have made meaningful economic contributions to their local economy, often through diversified activities. For example, as noted 1 group have ventured into agritourism, 3 groups opened farm shops or generated income directly from their community farming activities and 2 groups provided part-time employment, while 1 group provided work placement opportunities. These activities have undoubtedly created income streams and fostered opportunities for longer-term financial sustainability of their projects, and wider economic growth within the communities they serve over the medium to longer term.

Seed funding, a key component of the CCF initiative, has proven to be a vital part of the initiative and for financial stability at the beginning for each group. It has enabled groups to make essential investments in equipment, infrastructure, and services.

The tangible returns on investment are evident, with some groups reporting financial returns as noted. For example, **1 group generated £2,900 from holistic events and educational workshops, while another recorded a turnover of £11,000 from its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) venture, with projections reaching £25,000 in year 2.**

The economic success of the community farming initiatives is mirrored by a broader trend across the UK. Community farming projects across the country have been contributing to local economies and strengthening food supply chains. The CCF initiative aligns with this; not only providing financial support but also helping participating groups gain traction with other funders, as also demonstrated by the 9 groups during consultation who told us they were able to tap into additional funding as an indirect result of their CCF activities.

When queried about longer-term plans, groups highlighted the ability to demonstrate tangible achievements facilitated by seed funding making them more attractive to potential funders. Additionally, other groups highlighted that as they continue to expand and secure their positions as vital local suppliers, their ambitions to create salaried positions, host holistic events, and expand their operations are reliant on longer term core funding investment.

Each of the participating groups are therefore poised to make lasting contributions to the economic landscape in NI, reflecting a broader trend of sustainable, locally focused community farming throughout NI, so long as longer-term investment / funding is secured.

4.5 Challenges & Barriers

While the CCF initiative has demonstrated significant positive impacts, several challenges and barriers have been highlighted. For example:

Funding / Financial Sustainability: Although each of the participating groups are delivering valuable economic, environmental, and social benefits, it was raised during the consultation process about financial sustainability over the medium to long term. Securing longer term core funding and financial support are challenges that participating groups are worried about, and which could limit the long-term viability of their projects.

Strategic Focus: At a strategic level, the focus seems to be on large-scale farming. The consensus from those consulted was that there is limited support for small scale production, regenerative practices, or reference to this within strategic policies. Those consulted also highlighted strongly that ‘Farm diversification’ does not seem to have much strategic focus. This is often seen as “alternative business development” which can cause challenges for them.

Access to Land: One of the most significant challenges faced by the groups was securing suitable land. Several participating groups cited the difficulty in securing quality land as a significant obstacle. This difficulty is further confirmed through consultations with these groups and site visits. For example, land quality and land availability have limited the expansion of at least 3 of the participating projects. The recognition of this challenge underscores the importance of projects like CCF, which can help address the need and access to suitable land for community farming initiatives.

Community Engagement: While community involvement has had a major positive impact, continuing to reach and engage a continuous range of community members may be challenging for some of the groups. Ensuring that the benefits of community farming are promoted, and are accessible to all demographics may require targeted outreach, marketing, and programming.

Market Access: While some projects aim to generate income through the sale of produce, gaining access to markets and establishing distribution channels has been highlighted to be a challenge. Building relationships with local markets and consumers is vital longer term as the projects develop.

Sustainability and Resilience: Achieving long-term sustainability and resilience in the face of economic and environmental uncertainties can be challenging. Projects have highlighted how they must adapt to evolving circumstances and develop longer term innovative strategies to ensure continued growth and success post the 2-year CCF initiative concluding.

5. Calculating the Social Return on Investment (SROI)

5.1 Introduction

Having identified and categorised the stakeholders, and the outcomes most relevant for each, this section will calculate the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of the CCF intervention.

CiCo Consulting uses the National Social Value Standard (SVS), which is a measurement framework for the appraisal of social value – at the forecasting, monitoring, and evaluation stages. Developed by social value economists via the Loop software system, using the latest government and academic best practice, such as the HM Treasury Green Book.

5.2 SROI Results

£351,630

Total Value

352%

Total Value ROI

1:3.52

Total Value ROI ratio

£316,242

Social Value

£28,007

Environmental Value

£7,381

Economic Value

Appendix 4 provides further details on the 12 metrics used and their values. Please see the National Social Value Standard (SVS) guide for information on the methodology used, and Appendix 5 for more information on the SVS SROI. Appendix 6 provides all 800+ metrics.

Breaking down the total social value, we observe the distribution across the three key impact areas: Social: £316,242 Environmental: £28,007 and Economic: £7,381. These figures elucidate the multifaceted benefits that the CCF initiative has delivered across different domains.

5.2.1 Social Impact SROI

The majority of the total social value is attributed to the social impact generated by the CCF intervention. This encompasses the positive changes in community dynamics, enhanced skills and knowledge of participants, and the sense of connection fostered among participants. The significant percentage of the total social value devoted to social impact underscores the transformative effect the initiative has had on individuals and communities across NI.

5.2.2 Environmental Impact SROI

The environmental impact, accounting for a significant portion of the total social value, reflects the strides made toward sustainability and eco-friendly farming practices. This includes a reduction in carbon footprints, biodiversity enhancement, and the adoption of environmentally conscious agricultural techniques. The £28,007 assigned to environmental impact represents a tangible commitment to ecologically responsible farming. The full list and detail of Environmental Impacts is outlined in much more detail in section 4.5.4 of this report.

5.2.3 Economic Impact SROI

While the economic impact comprises a smaller fraction of the total social value, it is nonetheless an important area. The CCF initiative has contributed to increased local economic activity and economic resilience within participating community farming projects. The £7,381.00 allocated to economic impact emphasises the initiative's role in bolstering the economic fabric of local communities.

5.3 SROI Conclusions

By doing an SROI study on the CCF initiative, it enables us to put a financial value on the impact of the initiative, that otherwise may not be given value and therefore may not feature in decision making. (As noted, for more details on the background, principles and methodology of our SROI see Appendix 4, 5 & 6).

This SROI analysis has shown that the CCF initiative benefits a wide range of “stakeholders” and that for every pound invested in the Project by the Co-op Foundation, £3.52 of social value is generated. In other words, the value of the investment is more than tripled.

The total social value of £351,630, with a Social value ROI of 352%, underscores the efficacy of the initiative in generating positive outcomes for stakeholders.

This value is likely to be an understatement, as we have been cautious in our calculations. For example, several outcomes and stakeholders were excluded from the analysis, and it is likely that financial proxies have underestimated the value of some outcomes. This is because of the subjective nature of monetisation within impact measurement, which needs to be approached robustly. If it isn't approached robustly, then it can lead to misleading figures and overclaiming. This includes accepting that not all impacts can be monetised robustly and that a certain standard of data and methodology is required.

The majority of the total social value for the CCF initiative is attributed to the social impact, emphasising the project's role in fostering community dynamics, enhancing skills, and building connections among participants.

The contribution to environmental impact reflects a commitment to sustainable and eco-friendly farming practices, with tangible benefits such as what has been outlined in much detail within section 4.5.4 of this report.

Additionally, the economic impact, though a smaller fraction, highlights the CCF initiative's role in boosting local economic activity and resilience, and its economic potentials longer term.

SROI is about much more than just the investment ratio. For example, the SROI analysis has also been beneficial for Co-operative Alternatives (CA) and Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS) as co delivery partners, to recognise the value of the initial project over 2 years. Overall, the SROI findings affirm the CCF intervention's success in creating holistic and lasting positive change within community farms across Northern Ireland.



6. Outcome Based Definition of Community Farming

A key component of this impact report and assessment of the CCF project is to increase understanding of ‘community farming’. This has been achieved by capturing an outcome-based definition of ‘community farming’ based on the feedback of each of the participant groups, Co-op Alternatives (CA) and Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS).

During the site visits to each participating group between April and August 2023, we asked them to think about their own experiences, learnings and journey through the CCF project.

We asked them “what does community farming mean to you”. We reinforced that any definition of community farming must be aligned with the outcomes they have achieved, and that it is a collective definition which is driven by all the key stakeholders as participating groups. This ensures ownership.

Further, as noted, in-person workshop focus group sessions were held with representatives from each of the participating CCF groups, as well as Co-operative Alternatives, and Jubilee Community Benefit Society (September 2023 & February 2024).

The half-day session in September focused on key themes such as refining the Theory of Change (ToC) and outcomes framework, the social, ecological/environmental and economic outcomes of the CCF interventions reported by each participating group. In small groups, we asked those in attendance to jot down keywords, phrases, terms and references that they think define community farming.

Through this, we identified the changes that have occurred and then ultimately capturing an “outcome-based definition” of community farming in which each of the participating groups had full ownership of.

To complement this further, we have also documented ‘community farming’ through the case studies presented within this report- from JCBS as the first community-owned farm in Northern Ireland and “good practice” example, as well as from each of the participating groups.

The case studies were an important opportunity for each group to tell their own personal story from their own perspective. The case studies provided are a first-person narration of each groups journey within the CCF project (and from JCBS as a key delivery partner), which presents the narrative through the perspective of a key stakeholder from their own personal point of view.

The case studies provided context to the overall quantitative data collected. This contextual understanding is crucial for interpreting impact data accurately and ultimately understanding ‘community farming’ better.

The case studies allowed us to uncover valuable insights about the experiences and perceptions of how each group has been affected by the CCF intervention, and ultimately it was an opportunity for each group to tell THEIR story.

Considering all the above, the following 'short definitions' were identified:

"Community farming is a process of collaborative transformation at the intersection of land, community and enterprise"

Short Process Definition

"A community farm is a place of collaborative transformation at the intersection of land, community and enterprise"

Short Place Definition

Therefore, a full outcome-based definition of 'community farming' is determined as follows:

“Community farming is a process of collaborative transformation at the intersection of land, community, and enterprise. A 'community farm' is a place where collaborations happen and transform our relationship with the land, communities and the environment. Community farms are welcoming and safe spaces where farming and enterprising activities such as growing food and rearing animals are connected to social and educational activities to benefit communities and the environment. People involved in community farms come together because they share a common aspiration for sustainable farming, growing communities and developing enterprise activities”.

Full outcome-based definition of 'community farming'

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Concluding Remarks

This impact report, spanning the period from April 2022 to March 2024, aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the CCF Initiative and measure its social, economic, and environmental impacts. From this, it's clear that the CCF Initiative has made significant strides in promoting and supporting community farming across Northern Ireland. It is also clear from this report, that community farming aligns closely with a number of key strategies in Northern Ireland.

This impact report, alongside a detailed strategic analysis and SROI, highlights the potential for community farming and other community food businesses to deliver a wide range of benefits across Northern Ireland- socially, environmentally, and economically. The following are the key overall conclusion points:

Community Farming Landscape in NI:

It was clear from the beginning that community farming in NI, while exhibiting diverse approaches, faced a lack of official support compared to other regions of the UK.

It can be concluded that the CCF Initiative has emerged as a pioneering effort, bringing together community farming projects with the support of Co-operative Alternatives, Jubilee Community Benefit Society, and funder the Co-op Foundation.

Objectives of the CCF Initiative:

The CCF Initiative had a number of objectives at its inception, including providing seed funding to empower community projects to get up and running, and then enhancing understanding of community farming, defining project identities, building capacity, fostering connections and ultimately measuring impact.

These objectives were designed to create a thriving community farming network in NI, and overall it can be concluded that the CCF Initiative has successfully achieved this.

Overall Achievements:

It can be concluded that the CCF Initiative has successfully achieved several milestones, such as facilitating shared learning across each of the participating groups, promoting collaboration, and empowering participating projects to overcome start-up challenges.

The outcomes are reflected in the enhanced community engagement, improved farming practices, and the positive impacts on local communities across Northern Ireland where the CCF projects are based.

Key Impact Areas:

Social Impact: Through stakeholder engagement and beneficiary involvement, the study measured the social impact of the CCF Initiative. Findings indicate increased community cohesion, skill development, and a sense of ownership among participants in terms of developing their community farming initiative.

It is apparent that communities have been actively engaged, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility across the CCF initiative from day 1.

Environmental Impact: The CCF Initiative has contributed positively to the environment by promoting sustainable farming practices. Groups implemented regenerative and agroecological farming and land management approaches, and have adopted eco-friendly approaches, aligning with broader environmental goals in NI.

Economic Impact: The economic impact assessment reveals positive outcomes, including increased local economic activity, employment opportunities, and the sustainability of participating in community farming projects. The CCF Initiative has played a role in fostering economic resilience and reducing dependency on external resources, with potential to develop further in the future.

Learning and Knowledge Exchange: The CCF Initiative has successfully achieved its objective of building capacity and sharing knowledge. Workshops, skill-sharing sessions, and site visits have facilitated continuous learning, empowering participants with the skills necessary for sustainable and community-driven agriculture.

Collaborations and Network Building: Fostering connections and collaborations among participating projects has resulted in a network of like-minded groups transcending organizational structures. The CCF Initiative has successfully created a supportive community that shares resources, experiences, and expertise across Northern Ireland.



7.2 Recommendations

In light of the work concluded within this impact report, the following recommendations are offered for consideration.

1) Policy Advocacy

Given the evident success of the CCF Initiative, increased official support and recognition from relevant governmental departments is required. Further financial support should be given to organisations working to improve access to land for new community farming initiatives.

The following asks are highlighted for consideration:

- **Enabling the development of community farms in NI**

It is recommended that DAERA develop a policy to support the development of community farming across Northern Ireland, in a similar manner to their support of social farming across the province. In particular, it is recommended that there should be a strategic focus on small scale farms (less than 5 hectares) adopting regenerative and agroecological practices with their proven beneficial impacts on the environment, bio-diversity and food production.

DAERA should address the barriers experienced by community farming, among them, limited access to land (public and private), lack of financial funding for development and capacity building, burden of planning permissions for infrastructure on site, lack of support for horticultural activities etc.

Research on local community farms' benefits on the environment must also be invested upon since it provides a valid route to a greener agriculture for the region.

- **Embedding community farms in an inclusive growth strategy**

The Department for Communities must implement a more transformative Community Wealth Building programme and include community farms among the community-led initiatives that would enable a 'socially productive use of land and property', one of the pillars of the policy. A collaborative approach of DfC and the Department for Economy (DfE) in supporting community farms could achieve the creation of community wealth, local prosperity with the creation of new jobs, and 'value for people' rather than 'value for money'.

- **Raising the profile of community farms as 'promoters of better health for all'**

In light of the clear social and health benefits (in particular mental health) demonstrated within this report, it is recommended that the Department for Communities (DfC) & Department of Health (DoH) consider developing a policy to support the development of community farming across Northern Ireland that is focused on how Community Farms can be used as an innovative approach to promote better mental health, therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion across NI.

2) Embedding Impact Measurement & SROI

It is recommended that each of the participating CCF groups, Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society continue their journey of impact measurement by further embedding suitable frameworks such as ToC to measuring their individual impacts going forward, as well as SROI principles and data collection in the evaluation of their work.

A positive ratio of £1:£3.52 has been evidenced through this study in terms of SROI. It is recommended that each participating CCF group, Co-Operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society consider revising their existing models for data collection so that each can report on indicators separately. This will enable a more accurate statement of the value created by each stakeholder going forward.

A critical part of the embedding process is understanding who the organisation's stakeholders are and devising a mechanism to effectively engage with them. The stakeholder analysis and resultant consultation for this study captured data from each of the participating CCF groups, as well as Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society. A more diverse range of stakeholders should be considered in future, than is currently illustrated. We recommend that this be augmented to reflect additional strategic level stakeholders (government departments, service users etc) and their desired outcomes.

It is recommended that Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society work with each of the participating groups to consider building on existing data collection processes so that outcomes for all stakeholders can be evidenced and valued longer term.

3) Dissemination

To showcase the impact of the CCF initiative, Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society should disseminate the results of this study widely both internally and externally through the mediums of succinct infographics with links to the full report and supporting documents.

The findings should also be optimised to position Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society in any future funding bids for additional resources and longer-term core funding for Community Farming in Northern Ireland.

It is reasonable to assume that any future additional resources invested in Community Farming would at a minimum generate impact as identified within this study, and social value aligned to the ratio return of £1:£3.52 calculated for the duration of this study.

4) Further Research

While the current study begins to shed light on the value of Community Farming in Northern Ireland, more rigorous research on the impacts of community farming initiatives is needed to help develop deeper and more robust understanding of impact, particularly long-term. It is recommended that opportunities for future research on the subject are pursued to advance the knowledge and information available about interventions such as community farming.



CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY: JUBILEE COMMUNITY BENEFIT SOCIETY

“As Farm Manager at Jubilee Farm the CCF project has been key to building relationships and a like minded commitment to Co-op Alternatives. Having taken on a new role at Jubilee Farm it was a good time to make connections with other growers and producers connected to their community”

“The opportunity to lead and deliver workshops gave me the chance to consolidate our planning process for the next season. Discussions with the workshop participants helped me to be able to communicate our steps for the growing calendar with members of our farm community such as our volunteers. The process encouraged me to communicate the plans and the steps involved more clearly than I had been up to that point.

This meant that all involved at Jubilee were better able to participate in the process and develop their own skills, as well as me being able to share knowledge and experience with the workshop participants. It was great to hear different styles of planning from the project participants and I’ve been considering ways of incorporating them in to my planning”.



”
There have been enjoyable occasions of networking, and equally opportunities to learn and share skills and ideas at events throughout the year.

CASE STUDY: JUBILEE COMMUNITY BENEFIT SOCIETY... Continued



“Beginning my role as Marketing & Communications Manager at Jubilee Farm I joined the project after its commencement date and immediately I could see the potential for collaboration and best practice. I was delighted to welcome participants to take part in a workshop that engaged their commitment to a strategic focus on marketing. As mentor it was reassuring that what we were implementing at Jubilee Farm was relevant to others to use as a skill, even if starting out in marketing.”



“It was easy to see how each participant of the CCF project was different, but we all shared common frustrations, cautious confidence, willingness to collaborate and skill share as well as common aspirations and goals. Being assigned mentoring time was an honor to guide and encourage those participants at the infancy of their projects.

As active participants there is a greater level of confidence in what we have and will be continuing to plan and deliver at the farm. It has given us a baseline on which to build our understanding and commitment to being a co-op.

Although not all staff and volunteers have been able to meet all participants in the CCF project, we are aware of our common goals and aspirations as a co-op. This is something we would be keen to build on and share more widely with our volunteer team”



CASE STUDY: FARM & FEAST

LAURELBANK FARM

“Over the two years of being part of the cultivating community farming mentoring scheme, my project has gone from an idea on paper, to a successful CSA scheme and a real and thriving community. Today we harvested our 29th veg box of the season for our 30 members.

There have been challenges every week of those two years. Some challenges were logistical – installing new irrigation systems, employing people for the first time, putting up a polytunnel in a race against the weather. Some were horticultural – slugs, weed control and unseasonal weather. And some challenges were financial – vegetables are fundamentally hard to grow at current market prices on a small scale, where quality, flavour and freshness are paramount”.



“But fundamentally, the most satisfying achievement of Farm & Feast has been the community of people that now exist around it. I have 30 families signed up, many fabulous volunteers, and a handful of brilliant employees. I thought this was a project about vegetables and sustainable agriculture, but it’s actually been a project about people and about reconnecting people to each other and to the seasons and the soil, through the joy of delicious food”.



CASE STUDY: FARM & FEAST LAURELBANK FARM... Continued



“Despite all the challenges of growing organic vegetables, by hand, I would never want to stop. And the aim of our CSA is to share the absolute joy that I get to feel from knowing the land, growing vegetables, and transforming them into meals for myself and my family. I feel very fortunate that we’re now on our way to changing this little corner of County Down into a diverse, ecologically balanced, productive and inspiring farm”.

“Our Farm & Feast CSA does not embrace modern convenience – in many ways it rejects it. Our members come to the farm to get their weekly share of vegetables. We even have a “Pick your own” element during our peak season. On a monthly basis our member come to the farm on a Saturday with their family to get involved, to plant, dig, harvest or mulch. They get to know the farm, the soil, the produce and the place. Coming here to collect or harvest vegetables isn’t a chore to add to their to-do list – it’s a family day out”.



CASE STUDY: GORTIN WELLBEING COLLECTIVE (GWC)



“In October 2022, we held our first GWC event. This was called Forage and Feast. We arranged for a guided forage around community grounds and then cooked a feast for the group, over the camp fire in the woods. We had around 30 people buy tickets and the event was a real success”.



“The idea for GWC came out of conversations between a group of friends, during the latter stages of the Covid pandemic. We were witnessing the potential breakdown of the food supply chain and it was apparent at how fragile it seemed to be. That got us thinking that we should be growing our own, nutritious, organically grown veg and focusing on food sovereignty and well-being. So, we looked into setting up a small social enterprise and got some mentoring from the Council. We decided to set up a Community Interest Company and registered ourselves as Gortin Well-Being Collective CIC.

Soon after applying, we got the news that we’d been accepted onto the CCF project and we started our journey, with expert guidance and tutorage from Johnny and Tiziana and the chance to network with the other groups that were involved. We soon realised that our plans for a market garden on Gortin community grounds were not going to happen any time soon. Tiziana advised for us to think of another project that was in a better place to commence with. So, we hit on the idea of securing a small (0.8acres) patch of community land, to create a community forest garden. We approached FODC, who the community leases the grounds from and they agreed that we could sub-lease the plot and they advised us to work out the rest with the community development company”.

CASE STUDY: GORTIN WELLBEING COLLECTIVE (GWC)...

Continued



“I think the mentoring from the CCF project has been invaluable. It provided a direction and focus on which path we should take and the best ways to go about achieving this. I do feel that GWC is stuck out on a limb a bit, as we are the furthest West of the participating groups and the majority of events and gatherings have been in the East, which has meant a lot of travelling”.



“Our next event was to arrange a Holistic evening in the community centre. We hired the whole building and had over a 100 people attend, where there were market stalls from local producers, free taster treatments, from local holistic practitioners, and talks. We provided healthy, snacks/refreshments and drinks. This was really hard work to organise and synchronise all the stall holders, therapists and ticket sales etc...but another really successful evening.

Over the course of the last year, we have delivered 2 pollinator/tree workshops to a local school, hosted healthy cooking workshops for the community, arranged a programme of 6 ‘permaculture’ workshops in the community garden and hosted workshops on worms, compost and ‘computer skills’ with a local over-60’s group. These early days were a bit of a whirlwind to be honest. Trying to figure out how a Community Interest Company works, what our responsibilities were as Directors, how to start generating some income and really just trying to figure out the jargon and processes of how to run a business. It’s been a difficult, yet rewarding journey over the last year and a half. The hardest thing has been trying to fit the social enterprise around our full-time jobs and family lives. I feel that our group definitely needs more training on Governance, as I feel we are lacking professionalism in this regard”.

CASE STUDY: GORTIN WELLBEING COLLECTIVE (GWC)... Continued



“We’ve had a pretty even balance of money generated from sales, and from grants/funding. We will continue to apply for funding, but would like to increase sales and workshops, as this will provide us with an income”.

“On a personal level, we are trying to figure out how we should move forward as a business. Everything for GWC has been on a voluntary basis so far, so no wages have been paid to date. Its difficult to keep the motivation going, without some financial recompense. We need to improve on our governance, and we need to agree on a more reliable, sustainable way of generating enough income to reinvest into the project and to pay wages.

I’m quite proud of what we have achieved and think that we’ve come a long way since our initial ideas and phone conversations. I think that GWC has made a name for itself in the community and has become one of the ‘go-to’ voluntary organisations in our local vicinity”.



CASE STUDY: TENTH GLEN HERITAGE FARMS



“Creating an action plan at the start of the program was a challenge for us as it was all new ground, and we didn’t know what we didn’t know. This did cause some difficulty about 6 months in as we couldn’t really see how to progress in a way that made sense for us. Ultimately any project at that stage of infancy is going to evolve so much in a short space of time. The support and flexibility of the CCF program really embraced that and helped us to grow the project how we needed it to. Sign posting rather than railroading”.

“My wife and I started the CCF program with not much more than an idea, not even a formed concept. We knew the sort of things we wanted to be doing, why we wanted to do them and what we wanted to achieve, but little idea of how to go about it or even where to start. We are now a branded entity with a constituted committee working towards becoming a community interest company. We have support from local authorities, have developed partnerships with other organizations and are positively progressing down funding routes that could sustain our project for 10+ years.

We have got operations underway, ran successful events and have already welcomed dozens of people onto the farm. Everything we have learned on the program, even if we didn’t think we would need it at the time, has ended up being of use, right down to surviving our first radio interviews”.



CASE STUDY: TENTH GLEN HERITAGE FARMS... Continued



“One of our favorite aspects of the program were the quarterly meet ups with and at each other’s projects. This was a chance to really see what everyone else is doing but also to bond with and learn from a truly inspiring group of people“.

“It is perhaps the nature of these types of projects that the people involved are on a journey of improvement of some form or other, be it personal, environmental, social, community, health, or wellbeing and that created refreshingly collaborative and positive environments that were truly motivating and inspirational for us. In that way, the CCF program provided more than just strategic and technical support but important emotional support also. The journey to start up any enterprise is full of ups and downs, and I know we wouldn’t have made it this far without the CCF support”.



CASE STUDY: GLENSIDE FARM



“Our vision is to provide a place for health and wellbeing for all. We do this by giving access to the farm for groups and individuals from the community to experience farming, nature and community. When the ‘Cultivating Community Farming’ programme became available, we applied and were successful in joining the two year programme that would enable us to explore and define our work as a ‘community farm’. It has been incredible to be part of the cohort of farms being mentored where we have had support, learning forums, networking opportunities and so much more.

The induction to the programme was held at Glenside Farm and gave us the opportunity to share our space and introduce the world of pedigree livestock. It was encouraging to meet the cohort of people on the programme and to hear about their vision.“

“Glenside Farm is a working farm rearing RUAS award-winning pedigree livestock in Comber, County Down. It is home to Iain and Malini and their family. Iain grew up in County Down and is from a three generational farming family. Malini is very much a city girl and a novice to farming. We began our journey into community farming by attending ‘An Introduction to Community Farming’ during lockdown on zoom. As we explored what it means to be a community farm and hearing stories from across the world, it led us to explore what it would mean for Glenside Farm to become a community farm. From conversations with beneficiaries, Glenside Farm Comber CIC was birthed.

The directors of Glenside Farm comber CIC have benefitted from the expertise of both Tiziana and Jonny as they have supported us on our annual away days. In Year 1 we developed our statements for our vision, mission and values and in Year 2 we explore strategic planning for the next 3-5 years. The outside input from the programme which brings a depth of insight has allowed the directors to think broadly and clearly when looking at the workings of the community space for Glenside Farm”.

CASE STUDY: GLENSIDE FARM... Continued

“It has been helpful to revisit the initial action plan and to assess how we are progressing and where changes have needed to be made. We would like to develop a conservation area but this needs to be a longer term project as it requires in-depth planning, funding and a team of staff/volunteers. This highlights the necessity for ‘Cultivating Community Farming’ to be much more than a two year programme, if spaces and ideas are to develop and be embedded in our communities. We have also become more aware of the pace at which ideas can develop when we are working with the community and are dependent on grants to fund projects.



“It was evident that all of us were on a similar and yet very different journey, but having the space to share, to wrestle with ideas and challenges, to support one another was invaluable in what has over the two years become a safe space to grow as community farms.

When we created the action plan for the Cultivating Community programme we were able to hone in on what our priorities for developing our space would be over the two years. The seed funding we received enabled us to purchase equipment for the community room and for volunteers on the farm. We were also able to allocate funding to create a sensory area, which would be fenced off from the paddocks used for the sheep and lambs.



CASE STUDY: GLENSIDE FARM... Continued

“We have award winning pedigree livestock and would like to see volunteers celebrating with us in preparing the livestock for shows such as the RUAS. However for this to happen, we need to train and educate volunteers throughout the year on what it means to show at a pedigree level and to allow volunteers to be part of this journey. We are passionate that community farming is creating a space for people to connect, to engage and to find rhythms that are beneficial for health and wellbeing”.



“The challenges are creating strong communities both in terms of people and in terms of sustainability. This programme has given us a glimpse of possibilities but there is so much more we know we can do, so are excited for community farming to be more recognised and embedded into spaces across Northern Ireland”.



CASE STUDY: THE SEEDBED AT GLEBE HOUSE



“We started our community engagement efforts in relation to seedbed only in November 2022, and opened the project in practical terms March 2023. It is still a work in progress though.

The support from CCF was valuable in helping us to think through and clarify the fundamental aims and purposes of the project and so give us a solid cornerstone for the detailed practical planning.

By visiting and learning from other initiatives through our CCF involvement, our group gained valuable insights and inspiration, which helped us co-design our own project. We organised seminars, including the first one focused on determining what our project should entail. During planning sessions, diverse ideas were shared about the potential directions we could take.”

“The timing of the CCF call for applications was ideal for the stage we had reached in our Seedbed planning. The deadline for applications and the timeframe for producing a business plan definitely forced the pace for us as regards planning. For example, since then we have transformed the access to land, which was previously limited to gated and overgrown fields. It was challenging to reach the back fields, but we cleared the area and opened it up. The initial seed funding we received was crucial for this process, as it allowed us to create a pathway, install cabling and lay a water pipe to the fields. This initial CCF funding was particularly significant because it served as leverage for securing additional funding from other sources. We applied for funds from PowerNI to establish a power cable connection for example. We have made very significant progress towards achieving our aims within the CCF project. The exposure to other groups within the CCF project has had a positive impact on our group, allowing us to become more cohesive.”



CASE STUDY: THE SEEDBED AT GLEBE HOUSE... Continued



“Although we hadn’t identified funds specifically, the focus was more on creating a social space rather than a green space initially. Since our formation, our main goal has always been about bringing people together. The Seedbed project naturally fits into our overall nature development plans. The additional funds from the CCF have helped us, but the networking with the other CCF projects has been equally valuable, allowing us to learn from others.

The funding from the CCF project has played a crucial role in leveraging our progress. However, it's ironic that despite having received the funds, we have encountered challenges in breaking the soil and moving forward with the project. One significant obstacle we faced was acquiring a polytunnel, which has proven to be a complex task. Additionally, unfavorable weather conditions further hindered our ability to deliver the polytunnel as planned initially.”

“Our steering group, consisting of our senior staff, a biodiverse expert, and a Marine Ecologist, brought passion and strong governance to the project. The steering group was formed in June, and since then, we have dedicated time to carefully consider the project's basics and formulate a clear vision for its implementation.

While volunteering has experienced a decline overall at Glebe House, particularly in the realm of youth work, we still have a committed group of 30 individuals actively interested in participating in the Seedbed project.

The WhatsApp group for the Seedbed project currently consists of 26 members, representing a diverse range of individuals. The focus of the project is an adult-oriented programme. In our planning, we aim to incorporate raised beds at a level suitable for individuals with physical disabilities, ensuring accessibility for all participants. Additionally, there is currently one person of refugee background from Syria who is interested in engaging in land cultivation. We can offer her a plot of land as she had been actively searching for one.”

CASE STUDY: THE SEEDBED AT GLEBE HOUSE... Continued



“We have established strong partnerships with local schools, particularly St. Malachy's Primary School in Kilclief. Children from the school are actively engaging with our Seedbed activities and programmes, thanks to the efforts of our dedicated youth worker. In January, we hosted lectures focused on biodiversity, and we have been following a process of talks and workshops as part of an ongoing programme. This programme is designed to run indefinitely, and we are actively engaging with speakers and teachers to facilitate these sessions”.

“Community engagement has been a key priority for us, and developing our Seedbed project has helped us advance our outreach further. We have seen increased rurally isolated older women for example attend our project, retired individuals, and improved cross-community connections in a shared and social space. We have been trying, and will continue to try, to engage with people with disabilities, both learning disabled and people with activity limitations, and are planning to make the Seedbed as accessible as possible.

The resident house in Kilclief Village, have had some interaction with our Polytunnel, but our aim is to make local people aware of our presence and ensure they feel welcomed to use it as a community resource. We have also had engagement from the Kilclief GAA Club. The Seedbed project has provided a meaningful purpose for individuals to engage with Glebe House. It has become a key tool for involvement and participation. We put out a call for individuals interested in forming a men's sheds in our area. There is a possibility that the Strangford Men's Shed will be based at Glebe House, serving as a hub for their activities and initiatives”.

CASE STUDY: THE TURNAROUND PROJECT



“We joined the CCF initiative because we believed we could develop our vision for supportive communities built around environmental enterprise more effectively by focusing on a place/land-based solution. Initially we were drawn to the programme because of the opportunity for networking and the programme delivering very specific knowledge that would help us to understand the community farming sector. We were keen to understand how we could develop a farming enterprise that could deliver the model we have adapted to deliver our charitable purpose (that of providing 12 month paid employment, strengths-based coaching, and access to a supportive community).

“The Turnaround Project was set up in 2017 with the vision of creating a community where everyone has hope and opportunity. We have two main aims: to help people who are serving sentences, in prison or in the community, to turn around their futures; and to turn around the wider community, encouraging others to support people on their journey. We provide 12 months transitional employment in one of our two social enterprises to people who have served, or are serving, sentences in prison or the community. Transitional employment provides people with stability, routine and self-esteem that enables them to manage their mental health, sustain their tenancies and improve their relationships with family or neighbours. Outwork is our award-winning social enterprise that offers grounds and property maintenance services. We support people to learn work skills, provide 1:1 strengths-based coaching and develop supportive communities to walk alongside people on their journey.



CASE STUDY: THE TURNAROUND PROJECT... Continued



“Having recruited a working group of experts from around Northern Ireland, we utilised the CCF grant to commission an individual to research and develop a business plan for a Native Tree and Hedge Social enterprise. We have since tested this plan by visiting native tree nurseries recently set up in Belfast and on the North coast. These nurseries are in their first few years of operation, and it seems prudent at this time in our development to watch and learn from these trail blazers, one of which is also working in the field of justice and rehabilitation. If the context was different, we would have focused on securing land and developing this business without being as cautious. However, there is always a 3–5-year lag between when a social firm (a social enterprise employing its beneficiaries) gets started and when it starts to generate enough income to sustain the salaries of its beneficiaries.

“One of the biggest benefits of the 2-year programme was helping us to quickly understand that the Community Farming Model could never accommodate our charity model without much diversification (farming is a capital intensive but low revenue activity). This seems like a very negative outcome from undertaking a 2-year CCF initiative, but the reality is that we could have gone down the route of spending a lot of resource to develop an aspirational business plan and funding applications, and securing funds, only for us to find out two or three years down the line that it would have been an impossible model to sustain.

The programme gave us the time and the wisdom of peers to support us to pivot to explore the concept of horticulture farming (native tree and hedges). This enterprise would see us expanding Outwork, our existing enterprise, to operate one step up in its own supply chain and have a positive impact on the environment (by reducing the emissions created by importing trees and plants into Northern Ireland for the use of commercial grounds maintenance organisations)”.

CASE STUDY: THE FIELD AT L'ARCHE



“Due to delays, we utilized CCF grant funding to initiate work on a vegetable wash workshop, crucial for processing the produce from the field.

Within this space, we also constructed a wood store/workshop and a cement pour workshop. To maximize our resources, we engaged our team in the construction work, using recycled materials whenever possible. While we didn't realize the dream of completing the field within the CCF project's time frame, we remain hopeful that we will secure the land soon and commence work next year. Thanks to the CCF project, we've connected with like-minded individuals and groups sharing similar dreams.

This networking has been a great source of encouragement and support. With the incredible support from Tiziana and Jonny, we've never felt alone on this journey”.

“Over the past two years, L'Arche Belfast has collaborated with the CCF to establish a new market garden, orchard, and small farm on a 4.5-acre field adjacent to our main day opportunities project site, L'Arche Village, on the Manse Road in Belfast. Our current site, boasts gardening, cooking, arts, and social activities and engages over 100 individuals with and without learning disabilities each week. Given that the growing space at the village site is more suited to light gardening, with ornamental gardens and limited growing space, we aim to expand our vegetable and food production, offering more physical work opportunities for some of our capable teams.



The land, has been the subject of positive meetings and discussions over the years. We've submitted plans outlining our vision and how we intend to develop and fund the development of the field in the coming years. While we've had encouraging meetings with the land owner, and they recognize our plans and ability to cultivate the land, there has been some delays. Although it appears likely that we will acquire the land, a definitive date is yet to be confirmed”.

CASE STUDY: AZORA COMMUNITY FARM



“Our focus is on growing and learning, skills transfer for parents and families. Longer term we hope to grow commercially, but currently do not have a supply chain.

We currently offer volunteer gatherings, planting, weeding and clearing at the weekends. We have had governance issues throughout the year, there was a delayed development of what we wanted to do, and CCF offered us that support and community.

Our volunteers consist of local individuals who come to us through personal connections. They come from a diverse population, with some of them being originally from outside the area. Last year, we also had volunteers from Lisburn who joined us naturally, primarily from church groups. We have a core team of 12 volunteers that we can call upon.

We have gained oodles of informal partnerships. We have already had donations of plants from traders, local growers, different people work with us and connect with us”.

“We are a community benefit society, where we have a small plot on Edentrillick Hill, Hillsborough. Being a community benefit society has some what hindered us for example, setting up a bank account.

We feel that we have somewhat achieved what we set out to achieve as part of the CCF initiative. For example we faced challenges over land, and we have been actively searching for alternative land ever since. Although we had a plot for three months, this fell through. Currently, we are on new land, but without a formal contract, which has resulted in further delays.

One of the challenges we face is the lack of access to electric power and a reliable water supply. We do have access to domestic water supply, but we are aware that if we were to sell our produce commercially, it could cause issues. Therefore, we are considering this and exploring alternative solutions, with advice and guidance from within the CCF network.

Through workshops held last year we had support from 20 years’ experience of a community grower, talking about seeds, and growing and cropping, we had up to 20 participants at each workshop, ran from end of January to April.

We fully expect to use CCF grown produce in the shop and we want Azora to be known for herbs, edible roots etc. Something about the specialization approach, we learn from other CCF groups and their activities”.

Community Farming in Northern Ireland:
A Catalyst for Change

IMPACT REPORT 2022 – 2024



CO-OPERATIVE
alternatives

**co
op**
Foundation



CîC