



Community Farming in Northern Ireland:
A Catalyst for Change

IMPACT REPORT **2022 – 2024**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Executive Summary

This executive summary summarises from the main report, 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.

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. The key components of 'Community Farming' can be illustrated as follows:



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.

Full report downloadable from the Partners' websites:
www.coopalternatives.coop and www.jubilee.coop

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.



About Jubilee Community Benefit Society / Jubilee Farm

Founded in 2017, Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS) practices & promotes care farming, community-supported agriculture, and conservation education & engagement. JCBS own and operate 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.



Summary of Participating Groups

Visual representation of the location of each of the participating groups:



Azora Community Farm:
Located in Hillsborough, County Down



Glenside Farm:
Located in Comber, County Down



Gortin Wellbeing Collective CIC:
Located in Gortin, County Tyrone



Seedbed at Glebe House:
Located near Strangford Village, County Down



L'Arche:
Located in South Belfast



Laurelbank Farm:
Located in Saintfield, County Down



Tenth Glen Heritage Farms:
Located in the area of Glenravel in the Antrim Hills



Turnaround Project:
Located in Belfast



Wee Farmer:
Located near Moneymore, close to the shores of Lough Neagh



3 of the participating groups are registered charities, 2 are Community Interest Companies (CIC), 2 are Unincorporated Constituted Groups, 1 is a Limited Company and 1 is a Community Benefit Society (CBS).

Out of the 9 participating groups, 7 had a key focus on Health and Wellbeing. 2 groups focused on Animal Husbandry. Horticulture was a key focus of many groups, as are conservation and biodiversity.

Overall Impact in Numbers

£100,000

invested into the CCF initiative over the last 2 years

9 Groups

completed the 2 year CCF project

40+ Days

of expert support provided to each of the participating groups

37 Acres

of land made accessible across NI for community initiatives

17.2 Acres

of land given to conservation

£45,000

of additional income generated across the 9 participating groups through social economy activities

15,000

Volunteer hours delivered across the 9 CCF projects



Overall Impact in Numbers

1587
 individuals engaged with or interacted with across the CCF Project

650
 Volunteering opportunities created through the CCF Project



10+
 Networking and skills-sharing workshops held (and hosted by participating groups at their site/farm)



7.4 Acres
 of land given to food production

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)

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

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

2 Groups provide part-time employment

1 Group engaged in supply chain contributions

1 Group delivered a Community Supported Agriculture Scheme (CSA)

1 Group contributed to Agritourism

1 Group provided work placement opportunities

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

This SROI analysis has shown that for every pound invested in the Project, **£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.

The majority of the total social value for the CCF initiative is attributed to the social impact, emphasising the projects 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.

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

Total Value	Total Value ROI Ratio	Total Value ROI Ratio
£351,630	352	1:3.52
Social	Environmental	Economic
£316,242	£28,007	£7,381
Number of Metrics	Monetised	Non-Monetised
12	11	1

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).

Short Process Definition:

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

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”.

Conclusions

Community Farming Landscape in NI:

It was clear from 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 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 into 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.

Recommendations

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** (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs) 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 **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) & the 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 and 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 (Theory of Change) to measuring their individual impacts going forward, as well as SROI (Social Return on Investment) principles and data collection in the evaluation of their work.

3) Dissemination

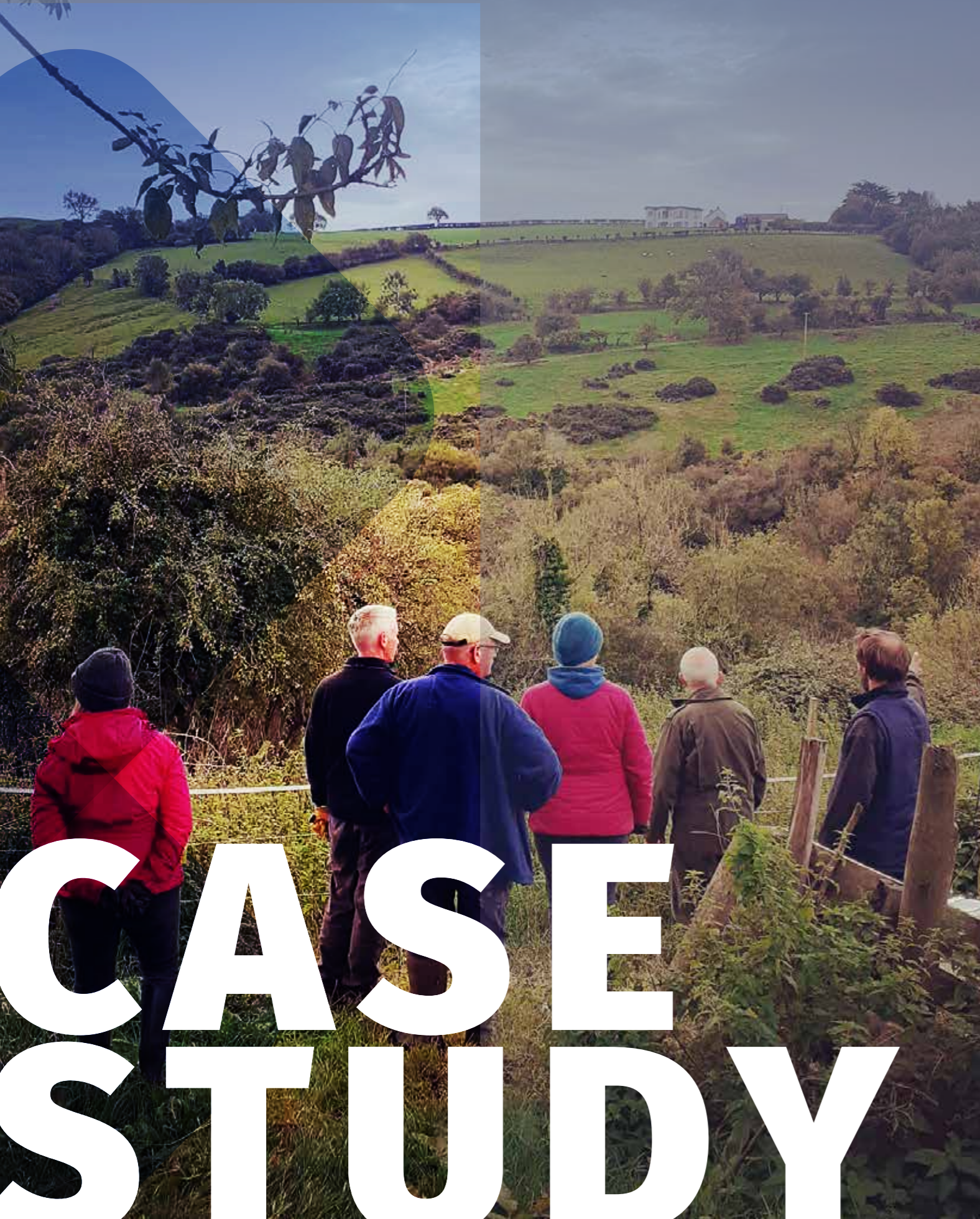
To showcase the impact of the CCF initiative, **Co-operative Alternatives and Jubilee Community Benefit Society** should disseminate the results of this study widely both internally and externally through various mediums.

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.



Jubilee Community Benefit Society



CASE STUDY

“As Farm Manager at Jubilee Farm the CCF project has been key to building relationships and a like minded commitment to Co-op Alternatives. There have been enjoyable occasions of networking, and equally opportunities to learn and share skills and ideas at events throughout the year. 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.

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 co-ops. This is something we would be keen to build on and share more widely with our volunteer team”



Farm & Feast Laurelbank Farm



CASE STUDY

“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. 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.

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”.



Tenth Glen Heritage Farms



“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.

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.

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



Gortin Wellbeing Collective (GWC)

CASE STUDY



“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 (0.8 acres) 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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”.

Glenside Farm

CASE STUDY

“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.

Our vision is to provide a place for health and well-being 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. 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.

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.

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. 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”.



The Field at L'Arche



CASE STUDY

“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.

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”.



The Turnaround Project



“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.

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). 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).

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. During that 3-5-year period organisations require pump priming with philanthropic donations or grants from intelligent and flexible grant funders. In the current post-pandemic cost of living crisis with many charities facing a cliff edge to funding, the funding context is drastically different to that which existed at the outset of the CCF initiative. If we were at the start of our organisational journey, we would have continued to focus on setting up and developing the tree nursery. Currently with resources so tight we have decided to focus our energies on sustaining our existing enterprises. However, this process has not been wasted. The business plan is there, we are now clearer about what we need, and when the context and opportunity arise, we will return to this project. We also now have the knowledge and connections with those who are working in this field that will allow us to save time and money when we do start as we will have benefited from learning from their journeys”.

The Seedbed at Glebe House



CASE STUDY

“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.

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.

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.

Although we hadn’t identified funds specifically, the



The Seedbed at Glebe House *continued*

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.

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.

We have established strong partnerships with local schools, particularly St. Malachy's Primary School in Kilclief. Children from the school are actively engag-

ing 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.

Our approach is characterised by a "do as you go" strategy, adapting and acting in response to the seasonal nature of the project. That's why we scheduled the first workshop for January, and we had a turnout of 15 participants. Looking ahead, we are considering organising workshops on topics such as soil health and more in the future.

To conclude, our involvement in the CCF project has accelerated the development of the Seedbed project, providing valuable guidance from Tiziana and the network of ten participating groups. It helped shape our ideas and allowed us to draw up a detailed action plan.

The grant release was conditional on having a plausible action plan in place, which helped us stay organised and focused on our to-do list. It has provided conceptual clarity and served as a valuable framework for designing events, workshops, and community engagement activities. In late July, we hosted a community engagement event with a focus on media and storytelling, aiming to effectively convey our project's narrative. The concept of the elevator pitch, a concise summary of our mission and objectives, has helped us articulate the "whys" and "hows" of what we do. Community engagement has been a key aspect, and our understanding of its importance has helped us successfully roll out initiatives. For example, we set a launch date despite having unanswered questions, knowing that those questions would be addressed during the launch workshop. We invited people to bring their ideas, emphasising that our project was still a work in progress. By formulating targeted questions and organising group discussions, we were able to gather valuable input. The launch event took place in November with around 20 attendees, and the official opening occurred just two weeks ago".



Azora Community Farm



CASE STUDY

“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.

We have found that being part of a cohort of groups within the CCF network, it has given us impetus to keep going when things are hard.

The outcomes we have achieved through our CCF involvement included greater clarity on land strategy, stronger governance and growing our support base.

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 volunteering 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.

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.

We had a QUB student to do some work for 6 weeks, she is doing project on Azora for food composting. We offer workshops on teaching people how to make items out of natural occurring materials, and community and training gatherings.



Community Farming in Northern Ireland:
A Catalyst for Change

IMPACT REPORT 2022 – 2024

