

Annual Gathering 2025



Sheffield
13 June



SUMMARY

The Better Food Traders Annual Gathering 2025 brought together ethical food retailers, growers and campaigners committed to transforming the way we produce and sell food in the UK. The event served as a dynamic space for sharing knowledge, building relationships, and strengthening our collective impact on the food system.

This year, we were joined by more sector partners than ever before, by which we mean people working in different ways to rebuild an independent, sustainable food system. We were thrilled to host 70 people from a range of businesses and community organisations across the UK, including bakers, shop-keepers, veg scheme managers, logistics coordinators, wholesalers, food producers, growers, campaigners, community organisers, researchers, and a Sheffield Council representative.

Our event was held in Sheffield, a city shaped by an industrial past that is now working towards a sustainable future. Bringing the city to life for attendees who had travelled far and wide (from Cornwall to Belfast) was an important part of the day. Sheffield's story of reinvention and community found its way into the discussions and conversations throughout the day.

After a panel focusing on Sheffield's Better Food Traders, attendees learnt about each other's work and strategised around ideas/solutions to strengthen our movement, supply chains and individual enterprises - through panel discussions, workshop sessions and plenty of informal networking time. We were particularly keen to explore how others are navigating shared challenges, such as rising costs, collaborative potential, and scaling impact without compromising values. The event offered rich conversations and inspiration from peers tackling these issues with creativity and integrity by focusing on nine key themes, set by attendees prior to the gathering itself.

- *"It was fantastic to workshop solutions with other individuals/organisations coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and working models. Collaboration feels key to making progress in growing the better food movement."*
- *"Fantastic people in the room, great informal and formal opportunity for sharing ideas and networking"*
- *"Plenty of time for unstructured conversation. Loved the focus on Sheffield."*

This document outlines key insights from the sessions, and reflections on what we're taking forward in our own work. Whether you're part of a food co-op, a veg box scheme, or a mission-driven food retailer, we hope this summary offers useful takeaways to support your business. If you're an organisation supporting the grassroots, we hope this summary of the day provides insight that can help us work together to strengthen the better food, farming and retail sector.

KEY THEMES



FOCUS SUBJECTS

Justice

Racial and economic justice are integral to building a fairer, more sustainable food system. What would a just food system look like? Delegates said: the opposite of what is currently all too common, ie extractive relationships, depleted communities, food deserts, institutional gaslighting and invisible structures. Enterprises would understand how to navigate tensions between being equal and equitable. It would feel like freedom for all. Collective ownership, land and resources.

To move towards justice: give the resources to the people and leave them to self-organise! The people most impacted by decision making should be the ones empowered to make the decisions. Change our perspectives and framing; center the question 'why is there exclusion?' Prioritise genuine relationships. Local Authorities should prioritise food and those working at the small scale creating high social value. Decentralisation.

A message to those with the power: don't suck the life out of communities. Keep it vibrant and distinct! Ensure that those who have come up with solutions for their local area are supported to follow those ideas through, rather than a 'solution' or particular use of a building being imposed on them.

Rural Economies

Many rural enterprises remain reliant on relationships with urban customers, in order to subsidise the more expensive work of delivering rurally. Meanwhile, some of the biggest problems for enterprises in rural areas are the same as those experienced in urban areas: everyone is buying in supermarkets and struggling to access local outlets.

Key questions: how do we get suppliers to start up or increase supply without a guaranteed market already established? Supply and demand need to be looked at as twin challenges, and joint solutions may be needed.

If you can't beat them, join them? Could we tap into existing places where shoppers go by creating regularly-serviced Better Food Traders-branded stands in convenience stores and petrol stations?

Other ideas include enterprise-stacking to make local food visible/accessible in different ways; help overcome lack of access to public transport through mobile delivery services that tie into existing veg box deliveries; and research into what percentage of the supermarket sales ethical/indie traders need to claim to be viable and make real progress.

FOCUS SUBJECTS

Collaboration

Collaboration can offer the potential for furthering the systems change we need on a larger scale and at speed, but productivity and reach is not the only benefit. Working together can reduce isolation, foster supportive networks, and provide moral support. It also helps break down barriers, build trust, and promote a sense of unity through shared experiences.

Collaborative efforts are essential when aiming to create meaningful impact, especially in busy environments where roles and responsibilities need to be shared effectively. But there needs to be a recognition that all of this work takes time and energy that business owners potentially may lack, and there could be some work to help create support networks for the activators that are doing the important work of bringing us together.

We should tap into the energy of collective responsibility, and support people working in food systems who are already doing this. While collaboration is vital, there are also actions individuals or small groups can take independently. These include setting up local food partnerships, aligning businesses with national campaigns like Totally Locally, organizing meetings, and creating informal social spaces such as WhatsApp groups or weekly coffee mornings.

Working with the public sector

What's needed to work more effectively? It needs to start working at all! Currently so much is reliant on Government intervention, as seen in Wales. We need to encourage more bidding and applying for tenders, individually or as collectives of small traders working together to meet scaled and consistent supply. There is also a need for infrastructure to be in place to support direct trade between local, sustainable producers and institutions, and to enable SMEs to bid for tenders.

What can we do? Educate chefs, caterers and processed food producers to source and design menus based on nutrition, seasonality and locality. Create local speed dating for buyers, chefs, producers and hubs/wholesalers, plus regional trade fairs. Support SMEs with a guide on how to bid for tender opportunities.

FOCUS SUBJECTS

Supply chains

How to scale to increase demand? Initiatives to create shared buying power, farming clusters and collaboration between growers are all happening; they're centering slow relationship-building, enabling greater access to funding and grants, facilitating collaboration and breaking down the dominant system of competition.

But in some parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, organic supply chains are more nascent than others, and a lack of infrastructure, land, transport and investment for growers are barriers to strengthening the local organic supply chain. Organisations like Better Food Shed are already doing important work to lengthen supply chains in London, improving communication between growers and traders and building new collaborations to avoid situations such as seasonal gluts of one crop from several growers all at once.

There's no magic wand to remedy this and there's a need to better understand how to level the playing field. Shared processing infrastructure; logistics/transport coordination by and for small growers; regional food hubs; and building a strong economic case to invest in the local food economy could all start to fill some of these gaps.

Measuring success as a business

Measuring success as a Better Food Trader means more than just financial success, it means environmental, social and economic success. But measuring and telling the story of success is challenging when it means different things to different stakeholders, e.g. success for a co-op may be being able to pay people a meaningful wage, have agency/decision making, and meet the needs of the wider community - but success for a bank might be measured differently. To be able to work out what to measure, you need to have clarity about what it is you are working towards.

What we know success feels like: Joy. Impact. Still going. Relationships. Creativity. Knowing what you want to achieve. Financial, social and environmental elements. It's always about more than money... It's about people and the planet too.

How can BFT help? Enterprises need benchmarking data and peer relationships to help them measure their success and make business choices. They also want quantitative and qualitative data, communications support, industry specific meet-ups, funding opportunities, financial and diversification advice, and sector-wide trends analysis. All of which BFT does - and we'll continue to develop how we can do these even better!

FOCUS SUBJECTS

Public perception

To build demand we have to start with showing customers what's in it for them - to highlight the real value we offer and make it relevant to their daily lives. It's about tapping into local culture, shared experience and building a community around businesses.

While projects like the food conversation by FFCC spark important policy discussions, they aren't always suited to marketing. Effective outreach doesn't often come from deep explanations but from emotionally engaging stories. Sheffield's growing food scene also shows how local food movements can emerge from hardship, and resonate with community needs whilst referencing a wider cultural legacy.

Ultimately businesses need to get to a place to do this work themselves as external marketers can often lack the authenticity and context essential to creating genuine connections. Direct engagement such as trading at farmer's markets and having one-on-one conversations helps to build trust and drive meaningful, long-term demand in a busy world full of distractions and external economic pressures.

Veg Box Schemes

Running and growing a veg box scheme comes with unique challenges that aren't easy to solve with a one-size-fits-all approach, as they often relate to their context. Limited time, lack of space, minimal staff and unsecure finances can make them difficult to expand, let alone start from scratch.

How do you attract new customers and keep existing ones? Building strong relationships is key. Simple practices like welcome calls, check-ins, and exit surveys can boost customer loyalty and build up important data to run a box scheme effectively. Adapting to provide what your customers need is key - such as including recipes or seasonal tips to keep boxes exciting. There are also a lot of ways to think about how to market your veg box including working with local chefs on Instagram, encouraging word-of-mouth via recommendation schemes, and using volunteers as community advocates.

Direct, in-person outreach still works best. Physical newsletters or notes in veg boxes cut through crowded inboxes, and add a personal touch to keep your scheme front of mind with existing and new customers.

FOCUS SUBJECTS

Farmers markets

Farmers' markets aren't a solution to everything, but they play a valuable role in helping producers, especially smaller and local ones, connect directly with customers - it's not just about making money it's also a powerful marketing tool. They have the potential to serve as meaningful events that bring people together, for example they can provide a space for smaller producers to engage with their community.

To be effective, a market needs a clear purpose. Organisers of farmers' markets should ask: Why this market, in this place, at this time? Successful markets come from telling the story of your vendors, offering predictability through regular scheduling, and making the space feel special, welcoming and inclusive.

Organisers of farmers' markets should thoughtfully design them to support local economies and create a sense of place and belonging. Through this they have the potential to become vibrant community gatherings that celebrate diversity, culture and connection, all while supporting producers in building sustainable, direct relationships with their customers.

KEY LEARNINGS FOR BETTER FOOD TRADERS



ENTERPRISE SUPPORT

- **Support rural enterprises**, by tapping into existing places where people shop, e.g. create regularly serviced 'Better Food Traders' branded stands in convenience stores/garages and get BFT members into ordering catalogues.
- **Practical guidance for working with the public sector**, including advice on how to navigate relationships with local authorities/'procurement lite'; thinking about how menus can be designed based on seasonality and nutrition; guidance on how to write tenders, including training, templates, contract-readiness; mapping out the low hanging fruit of public tenders/procurement opportunities.
- **Bespoke advice for enterprise development**, including on business strategy; diversification; funding opportunities; financial planning.
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer support and knowledge-sharing**, e.g. peer mentoring in shop-keeping; improving financial profitability of food hubs (wholesale and veg box and +++) by sharing knowledge of different models.
- **Training on marketing and successful storytelling.**
- **Encouragement and facilitation for BFT members to collaborate with each other**, especially regionally.
- **How to measure success as a business**, including benchmarking; communications support; industry specific meet-ups, e.g. bakeries, and identity specific meet-ups, e.g. neurodiversity.

RESEARCH & POLICY

- **Generate evidence and stories that help the movement define clear goals**, for example: how many shoppers (as a proportion of those walking through supermarket doors/hour and their average spend) would we need to attract to shop elsewhere to make an alternative indie shop/veg box scheme viable?
- **Challenge the status quo and advocate for specific policies**, including 3-year peppercorn lets to community/co-op start ups; challenge models of remuneration in areas of high deprivation and promote 'co-op' business training and support; make the economic case for investing in local food economies.
- **Understanding and communicating the impact of national policy** on small, local food enterprises, e.g. the impact of NI contribution increase.
- **Ensure Better Food Traders are represented and included in national policy discussions.** For example, feeding into the National Food Strategy and lobbying for policies that support the grassroots, sustainable food industry; supporting the transition to more local and sustainable institutional food procurement; advocating for transparency in national food policy discussions.
- **Support Better Food Traders to be represented at regional and local policy level**, including help finding the people in local authorities to advocate for local, sustainable food.

PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS

- **Show that we are bigger than the sum of our parts**, by running campaigns like the Soil Association's Organic September.
- **Help make the case for improved public sector buying from Better Food Traders**, including informing and educating procurers/buyers to understand what our food looks like and why it is better; creating info and training for chefs and caterers; and highlighting 'whys' in terms of public health and sustainability, resilience, jobs and the public purse.

MOVEMENT BUILDING

- **Help build relationships** between local traders and similar organisations, e.g. matchmaking and networking.
- **Promote/facilitate connections between BFT members and power brokers/institutions** for cross-fertilisation and discussion.
- **Develop working groups around:**
 - Working for racial and economic justice with BFT members and sector partners
 - Different business types amongst the BFT membership. Aim to support each other and benchmark against each other. Convene on topics such as choosing how to split product range, access financial advisors, access to different funding sources.
- **Support B2B members**
- **Create an online community space/forum for Better Food Traders that is not Facebook or Whatsapp.**

ATTENDEE FEEDBACK

For attendees themselves, 78.5% of feedback respondents said they were leaving the Annual Gathering with an idea about something they can do differently to improve their enterprise and/or better support traders. 97% said the Annual Gathering provided a good opportunity for building relationships and making useful connections. Thanks to everyone who offered thoughtful feedback! Here are some highlights:

“It was very useful to see the bigger picture today and share our experiences with other growers and traders. I’m leaving this gathering feeling empowered and positive, our voices are not as small as we thought and we are being heard.”

“Great mix of varied and interesting folks. The panels were also very informative and the ice-cream was a stroke of genius. Very tasty lunch also - thanks. Enjoyed the group brainstorming too.”

“Lots of space to chat, some structure to chat to people we don't know and really great questions to kick-start things. Facilitation was great, thank you! And the panels also super fab. Really appreciated the balance between those and open space!”

“The food and snacks were amazing. This is not a glib answer. Living your values through how you feed people is so important.”

“I am leaving really committed to working on our comms and telling our story to hopefully increase brand engagement.”

“Reminded us of the need to both collaborate AND to be visible about the process”

WHAT NOW?



NEXT STEPS

The Annual Gathering generated a huge number of ideas about activities that Better Food Traders working across the UK need to support them to thrive.

Our next steps are to review these suggestions - alongside ideas and information from the many members not in the room - as part of our annual strategic planning process in July 2025. Through that, we will decide what we can take forward this year, what can wait until next year and what we need to mobilise additional resources around.

As a small team of part-time and freelance staff, the Better Food Traders core team does not currently have the capacity to act on all of these ideas/requests. By sharing these here, we are demonstrating what this network of better food, farming and retail enterprises need from the organisations that support them.

If this is you, let's work together to ensure the needs and ambitions of these traders are met. [Get in touch with our team.](#)

If you're not a member yet and you'd like to come along to our next gathering then [sign up to become part of our growing network of better food traders today.](#)

THANK YOU

We couldn't support so many brilliant enterprises (and in turn, routes to market for climate-and nature-friendly farmers) without guidance from our brilliant board members and funding from:

- Our members and supporters
- [Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#)
- [Farming the Future](#)
- [The Collective Imagination Practice Fund](#)
- [Evan Cornish Foundation](#)
- [School for Social Entrepreneurs](#)
- [AFN Network+](#)
- [UKRI](#)

We'd particularly like to thank Farming the Future for funding our Annual Gathering, as part of their support for field building among networks of supply.

We also want to recognise the work that went into making our gathering unique and successful, so thank you to these Sheffield enterprises:

- [Regather](#) for supplying beautiful flowers for our tables
- [Beanies](#) for providing snacks and refreshments for the day
- [Marmadukes](#) for our delicious lunch spread of salads and focaccia
- [Fennell's](#) for the tasty afternoon ice-cream treat
- [Channing Hall](#) for hosting us in their wonderful venue
- [Hideaway](#) for the perfect courtyard for our post gathering drinks
- [YouCan Hire](#) for the tableware, cutlery and glasses.

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