



Learning from the Field

The joys and sorrows of setting up
a community food enterprise



As part of the Just Growth programme, the Real Farming Trust has been advising and mentoring enterprises that are looking to produce food and farm agroecologically ie in a way that nurtures and protects the biosphere and produces good food for everyone forever. Many of the enterprises that we have supported have been start ups or in a very early stage of their development.

These enterprises face significant challenges particularly around access to land, money and finding the right people to run the enterprise.

Using the experience of one of those enterprises, Food Up Front Elderfield, we look at the challenges that food social enterprises can face in their start up phase.

We are grateful to Seb Mayfield for sharing his experience and to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding the mentoring support.

Photo: Seb Mayfield proudly displaying new planting plans at Elderfield



Food Up Front Elderfield

lessons from the frontline by Seb Mayfield

In 2014 I was managing a scoping exercise for the food bank, Winchester Basics Bank, to explore how the local charity could make a transition from purely focusing on emergency food distribution to putting more of an emphasis on prevention and maintenance.

The exercise included interviewing a number of the food bank's referral agencies across the Winchester District. One of those referral agencies was a rehabilitation charity for ex-offenders and people at risk of offending. They had a rehab centre, known as Elderfield, on the outskirts of Winchester in the village of Otterbourne.

People had told me about the amazing piece of land sitting unused at Elderfield.

I'd repeatedly hear the same message:

'someone needs to do something with that land. It's a waste of an opportunity otherwise.'

When I visited the site I couldn't believe how much in the way of infrastructure there was still in place and how it had been left to decay. There were a number of polytunnels, including two very large ones, all in a varying state of disrepair. There were also two shade tunnels, a number of concrete raised beds and a wonderful variety of fruit trees which were producing lots of fruit that just rotted on the ground.

On my first meeting with the manager at Elderfield, I learnt that up until about 10 years ago the service users worked in the gardens as a condition of their stay at Elderfield, alongside the key workers and under the supervision of a horticulturalist. At that time there was a small shop in the car park by the main road, where the fruit and veg were sold, either by service users or using an honesty box. Later the focus shifted to production and sale of ornamental plants, also sold "at the farm gate". This ceased in 2002, due to health and safety issues and stipulations from Elderfield's main funder that service users should not be required to work as a condition of their stay.

The shop helped give the charity and its clients a connection with the villagers, with whom there could sometimes be tensions. The work also gave many clients a sense of purpose, pride, and a valuable structure to their days and weeks.

In other interviews with referral agencies I was told that there was a need for a place in the Winchester district that was totally inclusive, had no stigma attached to it and where people could come together and learn new skills.

The site at Elderfield seemed to provide that opportunity and the charity that owned the site agreed to me resurrecting the land and creating a community food enterprise.



Elderfield – my vision

My vision for the site was to bring the 8 polytunnels, 14 raised beds and 17 fruit trees back into production and develop a therapeutic horticulture programme based around the residents at the Elderfield rehab centre. The aim was that the sale of the produce plus fees from the therapeutic horticulture work would create a financially sustainable social enterprise. I also hoped to find ways to engage the local community in growing and volunteering activities. This would create opportunities for local people to learn new skills and also help break down some of the barriers that had developed between the residents of Elderfield and the local community.

Having secured some seed funding for equipment and insurance I began working on the site, clearing it and developing relationships with the Elderfield manager and some of the residents, a couple of whom began to join me on site to help. Meanwhile I started talking to anyone and everyone that I could locally about the project, trying to encourage people to get involved.

I organised an open day which was well attended and resulted in the recruitment of George Walker, a local resident who was to become a key volunteer. I also advertised for volunteer support with specific tasks (growing, administration) and this resulted in the recruitment of two further volunteers (Sarah and Oli) who would prove to be critical to the development of the project. With my core team of 4 people in place, it felt like I had the hands on support to take the project further. I also developed good relations with local agencies that supported volunteers and people with learning difficulties. Both of these were to

prove a useful source of volunteer help in the start up phase of the project.

At the same time I used some of the seed funding I had secured to seek expert advice from Ru Litherland from the food social enterprise Organiclea. Ru carried out a site visit and produced a detailed report on the soil and the growing potential of the site.

I also recruited a post graduate business student from Southampton University via the Winchester Hub Social Impact Internship Scheme who helped me develop the business plan.

Access to land

It became clear to me that in order to raise further funding for the development of the site, a more formal agreement would need to be drawn up with the owners of Elderfield. Up until this point I had been working on the site without any written agreement in place. This worked well for both sides as Elderfield wanted to see how the project developed, and I did not want to take on a lease without having the money and people I needed to make it a success.

Now, however, I was in a chicken and egg situation, where in order to move forward and try to secure some more money for development I would need a more formal agreement in terms of my access to the land.

Initially Langley House Trust (LHT), the owners of Elderfield, agreed to a lease with a break clause in it, but then backed down. Furthermore, having initially agreed to me using the whole site, LHT now decided to exclude one large field and the orchard from the site that I could occupy. Their reasoning for this decision was that if they allowed these areas to be cultivated then this could in the future make the land less valuable because it would make it more difficult to sell.

Governance

I had needed a formal legal structure to secure initial funding and incorporated the project as a company limited by guarantee, as this was the quickest and easiest legal

structure to set up. However, my wish was always for the project to become owned by the community, for the community.

With support from the Just Growth programme I started looking into community models of governance and decided that the community benefit society model (CBS) would be a good structure for the project. This structure would give the community the opportunity to own the project and support it financially, not only through buying the produce but also through share ownership. With mentoring support from Just Growth we began the process of converting to a CBS.

Selling the produce

We knew from local people and the managers of Elderfield, that there was a lot of interest in buying produce from the site. Residents of the village of Otterbourne had to drive to Winchester to buy fresh produce since the site had stopped producing fruit and veg. Further afield we had spoken to six retail and catering outlets that all expressed an interest in buying our produce.

Within the village of Otterbourne itself we had formed a relationship with one of the village pubs, The White Horse. The company that operates the pub is an advocate of organic, locally produced food and they were not only interested in buying the produce but also offered to add a pound on to every bill over the Christmas period to assist our fundraising efforts, as well as organise a fundraising dinner. They also offered us the front of their premises for a regular market stall, which was right on the main road through the village. So we were confident that with all these potential outlets we had a ready market for the produce.

Creating a financially sustainable business in small scale horticulture however is very challenging because of the low margins, perishability and competition from the wholesalers and supermarkets. However, with the potential that the site also had for therapeutic horticulture, we built a financial model where the therapeutic services would cross subsidise and support the growing and together create a viable business.



Photos top to bottom:
a view of one of the polytunnels;
a polytunnel in dire need of repair;
corporate volunteers from Elanco.



A critical time – funding cuts

Just before Christmas 2015 I heard that Elderfield had been told that the council was pulling its funding, as a result of widespread funding cuts.

As the council was the major funder of the service that Elderfield offered this threw the future of both the service, and our development of the site, into doubt. Elderfield set about looking for a new funder and developing a new more holistic and therapeutic model for their service to include the growing site.



Whilst this was very positive in bringing the growing site back into being viewed as an integral part of the services that Elderfield provided, it put a question mark over the role that our organisation would play in its onward development. It soon became clear that Elderfield wanted me to provide a lot more in terms of volunteer and training sessions with the residents of the site than I was able to do on a voluntary basis. It felt to me that the project as a whole was one or two years away from being able to provide the services that Elderfield wanted me to deliver now.



On top of this I had recently lost two key members of my team principally because the demands made on them as volunteers were just too great and too time consuming to be viable. Given the depletion in my team I now had to decide how to respond to Elderfield's proposal for the site. After much soul searching I decided that it was impossible for me to scale up and provide the services that Elderfield wanted without Elderfield paying for at least one full time member of staff to manage the site. As Elderfield were not able to pay, with a heavy heart, I decided to withdraw from the site and leave Elderfield to manage the site themselves.



Photos top to bottom:

Clearing the beds;

Beds in an uncovered polytunnel in July 2015;

The same beds in June 2016;

The final harvest.

So after 19 months of development work, the project had come to an end. However, the time was definitely not wasted. Through the growing I have done on the site and the connections I have made with the local community and local service providers, I had shown how the site could be used and turned into a viable community food business.

The work that I had done raising the profile of the site locally, means that as it develops it should have much more local support. However, it is clear that money will need to be invested if the site is to be restored and developed. It can only be hoped that the site will get the resources it needs to meet its full potential.

Seb's key lessons from the Elderfield project

1. Do all you can to have a secure land agreement in place

In retrospect I should have delved deeper into why it was not possible for me to have a lease rather than just a license to occupy. At the time of agreeing the license to occupy however, the feedback that I was getting from the landowner was that there was no reason why the license would not be renewed past the initial 18 months. There seemed some logic in having the license to give both parties the chance to see how things went before making a longer commitment.

Anything less than a proper lease agreement leaves you exposed to risk. Always seek advice and be aware of and analyse and plan for the consequences of any changes that may happen as a result of events outside your and/or your landlord's control.

2. Engage the community right at the start

Whilst our open days and volunteer days were popular, I found that few people wanted to step up and formalise their involvement with the project in a more direct way by joining the board. A Community Benefit Society requires a minimum of three board members but there are so many skills required to successfully run such an enterprise that a strong multi-skilled board is key.

I hoped just growing something on the site would help people see its potential and encourage them to get involved. Instead, maybe by doing it this way it is possible that I made people feel disenfranchised from what was happening on the site and as a result less likely to be prepared to help develop it further.

Getting a core team in place to run a project is key. If there aren't people in the local community willing to engage in a direct way in its management then it probably won't work in the long term. You can't do everything yourself.

3. Be really honest about needing help

Looking back I should have been clearer about the practical help I needed. I used volunteer services to advertise volunteer opportunities, gave talks at events and wrote an article for the local parish magazine. However, I had my "PR face" on at all times – talking up the project, being careful to make sure I was as positive as possible about the situation and the future. The reality was that the situation was precarious and I needed more help

Don't pretend that everything is fine when it isn't! Be honest with your local supporters. People will come forward to help if they feel that a project is under threat in a way that they won't if you give the impression that everything is fine.

Seb's key lessons from the Elderfield project (continued)

4. Not everything can be done on a voluntary basis

The core team of project supervisors consisted of me and two other volunteers. All of us had to rely on other paid work and we were being pushed to the limit of our capacity keeping the project going.

This became even clearer when one of the two key volunteers reluctantly had to walk away from the project as he simply couldn't afford to give any of his time for free anymore.

Whilst all projects rely to some extent on voluntary labour, you will need some paid staff too. It isn't possible to run a project of any scale without some staff.

5. Choose what funding you apply for wisely

When you are in start up mode it is often tempting to apply for every pot of funding you see regardless of how small or big it is. Often small pots of funding require less work in terms of the application, but sometimes spending time on these is not time well spent. I wish I had steered clear of a few of the small pots I applied for. Yes, the applications were successful and a few hundred pounds isn't anything to be sniffed at but small grants don't give you any mid to long term security.

Be strategic in your fundraising and prioritise your time on developing a strategy to raise funding from your local community through community shares or crowdfunding. Having your local community financially involved with your project is likely to make you far more financially resilient in the long term than if you are reliant on external grant based funding.

6. Be clear about what support you need and focus your time on getting it

I had lots of support with business planning and governance. What I didn't have was the hands on support on the project that I needed. The opportunity to develop the site came first and it was a challenge for me to develop the people and money elements of the project fast enough to meet the demands of developing the site.

With a start up enterprise it is always difficult to get the three critical elements – land, people and money - at the same time. Inevitably the development of these three elements takes place at a different pace which can put the organisation under a lot of strain. There is no magic way to address this, but an appreciation of the need for these three elements to be developed in tandem will enable you to clarify where your focus should be at every step of the process.

7. Spend time researching your customer base

We did a lot of work researching the market for our produce and our therapeutic services and built a lot of relationships with key customers very early on.

It is never too early to start researching and nurturing your customer base. Knowing who your customers are and what they want will create the backdrop for a solid business plan. This in turn will put you in a strong position to seek funding. These customers will help develop and extend your connections with the local community and provide a ready pool of potential investors if you decide to raise funding from your community.

About Just Growth

Just Growth is a funding programme run by the Real Farming Trust (RFT) and designed to encourage the growth of community based food and farming projects. The aim of the programme is to support social enterprises that are producing food in an environmentally and socially just way – hence Just Growth. RFT is working in partnership with **Community and Co-operative Finance** and the **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation** to deliver the project. For more information visit www.feanetwork.org/our-projects/just-growth



About Seb Mayfield

Seb has been involved in the community food movement since 2007, including working at **Sustain** between 2008 and 2015 to develop the **Capital Growth** network. In 2015 Seb became a **Winston Churchill Fellow**, leading to the formation of the **Independent Food Aid Network**. He is also a 2016 **Clore Social Fellow**.

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