



# Sutton Community Farm



### Location

Sutton, Greater London



### Founded

2010



### Legal structure

Community Benefit Society



### Description of services

Community farm providing fresh produce to the community via a veg box scheme and a shared space for people to cultivate skills, get exercise and make new friends

## Overview of the business

The Farm was established in 2010 following a consultation with local people, which revealed a desire for local, fresh, organic produce and a place that could contribute to local health and wellbeing.

The Farm aims to increase access to fresh, healthy, sustainable food and provide a shared space for people to cultivate skills, get exercise and make new friends. The farm sits on a 7.1-acre smallholding leased from the council. Most of the produce is used for a veg box scheme and some is supplied to London restaurants.

SCF has a membership of 405 member-shareholders following a crowdfunding in 2017, which attracted 300 new investors. The minimum investment was £30 to make membership accessible and affordable for people on lower incomes.

*'We're very inclusive and have an open-door approach... to be a true community, you don't want to turn people away.'*

## Why is community accountability important?

One of the clearest lines of accountability is between SCF and its members. However, as one employee stated: 'we have only truly been a community-owned farm for a year. We're still feeling our way as to what that means.' Being accountable to its members and local people was part of the aim to build a better community:

*'... we suffer in society from feeling things are out of our control. Organisations like ours invite people to participate and take a stake in the local area and help empower them to be the change they want to see by doing something positive and practical to make the place they live better... we live in a segregated society – culturally, through class divides – food brings people together in a way that other things don't. It brings people together with all sorts of views and agendas and encourages compromise and debate.'*



Community accountability helps makes the farm a relevant local business: 'you answer to your community as an operation that is held accountable by a number of stakeholders'. For example, the farm is accountable to its customers:

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*'We're transparent and honest in all sorts of ways, for example about the fact that we have to source aubergines from Spain. These are things we struggle with – we've looked into this and this is the best option available [to keep veg boxes interesting during the 'hungry gap'].. we're trying hard to grapple with these issues – we are open about this and ask people to tell us if they're not happy and we try to respond to peoples' wishes in a way that many businesses do not.'*

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Having a large membership of local people that want the farm to succeed is important for things like negotiating and extending the lease with the council. It has helped build credibility and the reputation of the business.

As well as the immediate local community, there was also a sense of accountability to future generations:

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*'Accountable to the community that you love. You have to give to the community so you can grow. It's giving and receiving. And what you are trying to impart to children, I see this community accountability as wider, broader.'*

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## What does accountability look like locally?

Here we use three categories to provide a snapshot of some of the mechanisms and methods that the business uses in community accountability. These categories are not hard and fast; there is some overlap between the areas outlined.

### Structures

- Membership means individuals have invested in the business. After three years, the business aims to pay a 2% return on members' investment.
- Members have a vote on issues at the AGM and are allowed to raise special issues.
- The Management Committee is comprised of local people and elected members. Members are voted in for three years and meet every two months. Two members of staff attend Management Committee meetings. Recently a volunteer was elected to the Management Committee as a way to make sure volunteers' voices are represented at this level.

### Relationships

Engagement with stakeholders happens in many ways. For example, the nature of working outside/manual labour means there is lots of time and space for chatting, and feedback is gathered in this way. There are also regular team meetings where staff often say things like *'a volunteer said...'*

The Farm opens to volunteers on weekends every second and fourth Saturday so that people who can't come during the week can get involved. Being responsive also means offering different types of activities to suit different needs, for example seed sowing for those that can't/don't want to do more manual work.

### Communications

The Farm often surveys customers and volunteers. This has been an important tool to make sure they are responsive and to generate evidence of the Farm's relevance to the community i.e. that members, schools and others want to go there. There is an annual celebratory event for members. A regular newsletter is sent to members and interested parties.