



**OPEN FOOD
NETWORK
AUSTRALIA**

RAPID NEEDS & VALUE ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY FOOD ENTERPRISE SECTOR IN VICTORIA

Project lead:

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Timing:

March - June 2023

Project Partners & locations:

Baw Baw Food Hub, Warragul
Out of the Box Sunraysia, Mildura
Merri Food Hub, Fawkner
Bendigo Community Farmers' Market, Bendigo
Hepburn Wholefoods Collective, Hepburn
Bright Food Co-op, Bright

Funders:

Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation
Sustainable Table

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Introduction

Community Food Enterprises (CFEs) are an essential component of a healthy, sustainable, regenerative, and just food system.

CFEs can be defined as locally-owned/-controlled food businesses or ventures founded around a desire to create positive outcomes for the communities they serve, with no costs externalised. This may be in the form of improved social or environmental outcomes, increased access to healthy food and support of local producers by providing fair farm gate prices.¹ Victoria has been a leading State in support for and recognition of a growing and diverse ecosystem of CFEs.

Open Food Network acts as an intermediary organisation working 'across ecosystems to understand gaps and opportunities, mobilise support, and strategically partner(s) with local organisations'² to co-create experiments and test solutions with communities.

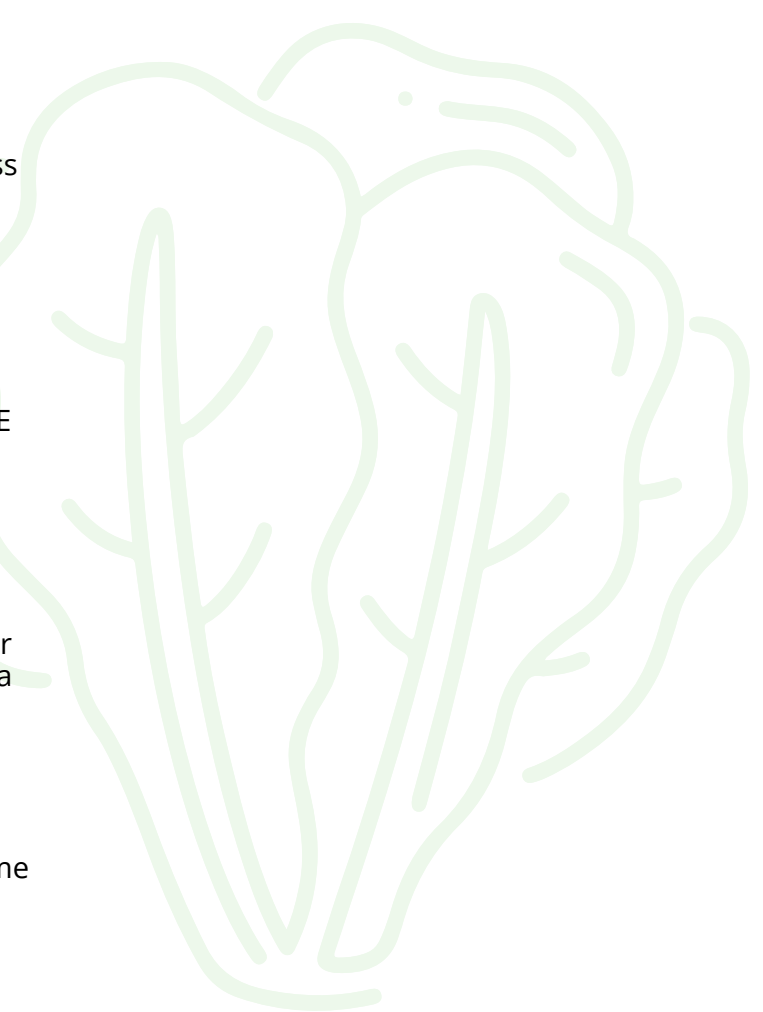
Over the past year, we have observed a serious situation unfolding within the CFE sector across Australia.

Our network continues to alert us of the dire need for support due to lower than pre-Covid sales, the impacts of increasingly frequent extreme weather events, the cost-of-living pressures (fewer buyers, spending less), constraints from a long-term lack of funding opportunities, and general exhaustion amongst the dedicated people (many of whom are volunteers) that keep CFEs operating.

These pressures have already forced some CFEs to close with many others on the brink, or severely constrained by limited resources at a time when their communities need them even more.

Thanks to funding from Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and Sustainable Table, Open Food Network has worked in collaboration with several CFEs from across Victoria to rapidly assess the needs and gather evidence of the public value of the Victorian CFE sector. The featured impact 'report cards' demonstrate the significance and unique value that each CFE holds within their communities and the public good outcomes their activities and operations create.

Recommendations from this report inform the next steps for a collective bid for funding and support for the Victorian CFE sector from both government and philanthropic sectors.



¹ <https://about.openfoodnetwork.org.au/project/community-food-enterprises-report/>

² (Egan, L. (2022). Churchill Fellowship Report: To investigate the use of venture philanthropy to grow enterprises that foster economic inclusion).

Methodology

Stage 1: Inviting CFEs to participate

Due to the short timeline and rapid approach of this project, a purposive sampling approach was adopted to invite a group of CFEs to participate. This involved the following criteria and process:

1. Participating enterprises meet the definition of a CFE.
2. Diversity in type and scale of CFEs represented i.e. food hubs, farmers' market, food enterprises, farmers.
3. Representation from across different regions of Victoria (regions as defined by Regional Development Victoria³).
4. Representation with the type of marketplace: online, in-person or both.

Stage 2: Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using a mixed methods approach. The mode and extent of participation by CFEs was carefully designed by Open Food Network given the known limited capacity within the sector; most, if not all, people engaged hold volunteer positions in the participating CFEs.

Quantitative data was collected via an online questionnaire. The questions and survey format initially drew on the Collective Impact Measurement Framework developed as part of the Merri-bek FLAG project. Questions were then refined in collaboration with two CFEs to ensure simplicity/efficiency and that the framing of questions was relevant across the breadth of CFEs participating. The questionnaire form was built within a shared Google document - enabling each CFE participant (with set permissions) to easily access the document as many times as needed to complete the questionnaire whilst also viewing how participants responded.

Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured in-person or over the phone short interviews with CFE beneficiaries. In line with the need to be sensitive to the resource constraints and other pressures faced by CFEs, we leveraged interviews on existing gatherings where possible.⁴ Beneficiaries were suggested and introduced to Open Food Network by each of the CFEs and included long-standing volunteers, committee members, farmers or producers, buyers or dedicated shoppers. Refer to the Appendix for a full summary of beneficiaries interviewed. Interviews followed the principles of 'most significant change' methodology. This technique is about focusing on what most significant change has occurred as the result of their involvement and interaction with a CFE, and why they think that change occurred.⁵

Stage 3: Data analysis and impact assessment

An iterative process was undertaken to build the impact report card template that integrated both quantitative data from the questionnaire, and qualitative data from the interviews in a way that could tell both individual and collective sector story to potential funders. The template highlights the importance of a mixed methods approach and a clear objective (i.e. presenting a compelling case for funding) in demonstrating the greater story of impact, value and future potential, at both an individual and sector level for CFEs.

³ <https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/victorias-regions>

⁴ The project budget had in-built a small resource allocation to either support celebratory gatherings for participating CFEs in recognition of the service they are providing to the community, or provide tailored in-kind support (such as marketing advice) to align with the needs of participating CFEs.

⁵ "The Most Significant Change technique helps monitor and evaluate the performance of projects and programs. It involves the collection and systematic participatory interpretation of stories of significant change emanating from the field level— stories about who did what, when, and why, and the reasons why the event was important. It does not employ quantitative indicators." <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27613/most-significant-change.pdf>

DATA SNAPSHOT

	BAW BAW FOOD HUB (BBFH)	OUT OF THE BOX SUNRAYSIA (OOTB)	MERRI FOOD HUB (MFH)	BENDIGO COMMUNITY FARMERS' MARKET (BCFM)	HEPBURN WHOLEFOODS COLLECTIVE (HWC)	BRIGHT FOOD CO-OP (BFC)
YEARS ESTABLISHED	9	5.5	1.5	3 FOR MONTHLY MARKET / 5 FOR WEEKLY MARKET	11	3
FY 21/22 SALES TURNOVER	\$1.1M	N/A	\$19K	\$62K	\$107K	\$36K
FY 21/22 REVENUE SHORTFALL VS. OPERATING COSTS	-\$9K	N/A	N/A	-\$4K	-\$8K	\$200
SHOPPER TRANSACTIONS PER WEEK	500	N/A	45	N/A	175	18
PAID HOURS	100 MONTHLY	33 WEEKLY	0	60 MONTHLY	0	0
VOLUNTEER HOURS PER WEEK	70-80	30	37	44	80	36
EXTERNAL FUNDING CURRENTLY RECEIVED FOR OPERATING COSTS	NO	NO	\$20K	NO	NO	NO
IDEAL OPERATING COSTS COVERED BY EXTERNAL FUNDING (%)	5%	15%	70%	27%	20%	50%
IDEAL EXTERNAL FUNDING REQUIRED BASED ON CURRENT OPERATING COSTS	\$54.3K	To be established following figures from first full year of operating.	\$35K	\$16.8K	\$23K	\$17.8K

Identified Public Good Outcomes

CFEs deliver multiple public good outcomes by providing food that is good for people and the environment, with no costs externalised.

These outcomes are often not clearly articulated or communicated by CFEs due to resource capacity constraints and for many, constantly being in "survival mode". The report findings highlight the many compelling reasons for funding the diverse outcomes generated by CFEs as activation sites of resilient, community food systems.

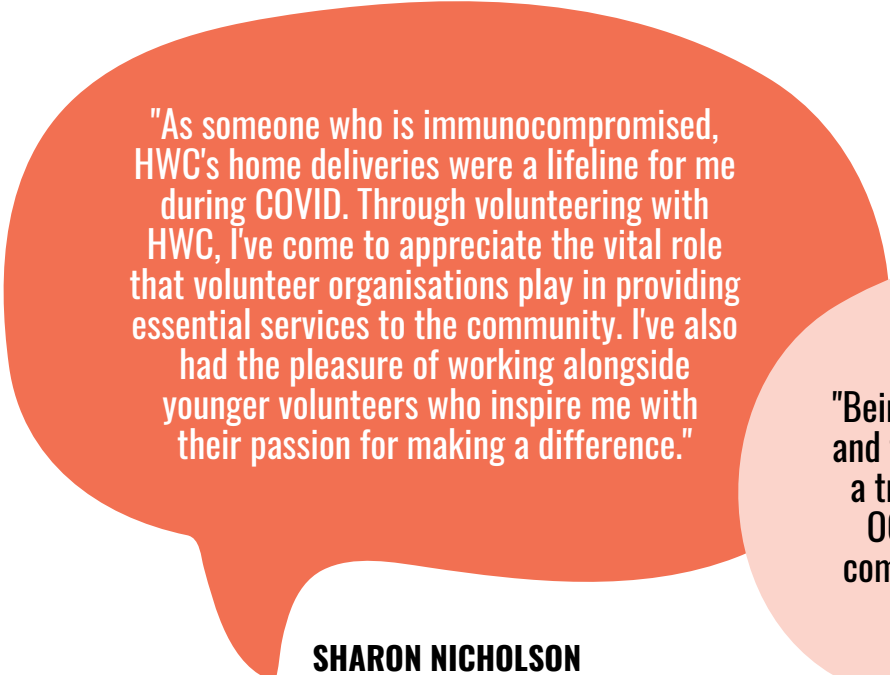
These include: social connection and engagement, food access, regional relevance, enterprise incubators, environmental initiatives and values based supply chains.

Social Connection and Engagement

CFEs are powerful sites of community activation through the multi-faceted programs and activities that they facilitate.


As one example of social engagement amongst many, the breadth of community activities that Merri Food Hub do as their core activities including Food processing, Aggregation, Wholesale (to local community), a market Stall, Community services and activities (including "Test Kitchen": social enterprise kitchen business incubator), Delivery services (+3 pick up locations around the neighbourhood). In addition to these core activities, they also provide educational and social development spaces in partnership with their local library, host ad-hoc free lunches and a hospitality table for tea, biscuits and a chat, and have now run three dinners that celebrate multiculturalism in their community.

2



"As someone who is immunocompromised, HWC's home deliveries were a lifeline for me during COVID. Through volunteering with HWC, I've come to appreciate the vital role that volunteer organisations play in providing essential services to the community. I've also had the pleasure of working alongside younger volunteers who inspire me with their passion for making a difference."

SHARON NICHOLSON
HWC VOLUNTEER



"Being a part of Out of the Box (OOTB) and the local food movement has been a transformative experience for me. OOTB has become like a family, a community I'm always connected to."

RACH KENDRIGAN
LOCAL FOOD ACTIVATOR

Partnerships

Community partnerships are pivotal to the CFE sector. Participating CFEs noted varying forms of mutually beneficial partnerships (in-kind and material) that aid collaboration and support from other values-aligned community organisations and businesses. This included site access for “peppercorn” arrangements or very affordable rent, shared infrastructure and people power, and small local government grants.

"Fossey's Gin provide us with packing space, a cool room and the hippest pick-up place for affordable rent - we would not be viable without them. The Italian cafe is our regular wholesale customer - they cater for our events and feature local produce in their daily offerings, buying from us every week and loving what we supply them."

**OUT OF THE BOX
SUNRAYSIA**

"Through our partnership with Dumu Cafe, in the shared space we can hold any community events, utilise their commercial kitchen, fridge and freezer space and dry storage area for bulk goods. The community can also shop at the Co-op for bulk dry goods during Cafe opening times as the staff and trainees can assist in processing their payments. This enables our opening time to be extended by an additional 13hrs each week which is critical for shopper convenience and behaviour change."

BRIGHT FOOD CO-OP

Food Access

Even with resource constraints, the desire to improve food access and affordability is at the forefront of several CFEs who are finding innovative ways to try and address and build food access and equity into their models:

"Veggie boxes are offered to those who volunteer, with many people improving their food security each week in this way, throughout the history of the Hub. There have also been two projects conducted with local food relief organisations, providing "voucherless vouchers", giving access to weekly shopping for families. The Hub community is deeply committed to doing more of this food justice work, but hasn't been able to accumulate the funds to do so."

Baw Baw Food Hub

"Not in any formal or structured way. We often have produce left over at the end of the week (from the swap table and people who don't pick up their boxes) and this goes to our network at our discretion. Often boxes will end up in households of new migrants who are our friends, sometimes for them or their church or others they know would appreciate fresh food. If subscribers have to pause their box due to financial hardship we will often send any leftover boxes/produce their way also. Volunteers always get produce/extra produce - some volunteers experience financial hardship. We have donated produce for several events run by a local Aboriginal dance group."

Hepburn Wholefoods Collective

"The Journey Project, which commenced in Mar 2022, is our food security initiative to ensure households on a lower income are able to access fresh, nutritious, sustainable, culturally appropriate fruits and vegetables over a 30 week period or as a one-off helping hand. The Pay-it-Forward donation option is ring-fenced to fund the Journey Project. We need to find farmers who will offer culturally relevant food at an affordable price. Whilst we would love to support more farmers, we have found that their price point is just too high for our demographic."

Merri Food Hub

However, there is a much bigger potential for CFEs to reach and serve a greater proportion of their local communities with improved dignity and access to affordable and culturally-relevant produce with additional and coordinated external funding and program support.

Regional Relevance

This report recognises that every CFE is situated within a unique context both relating to community and place. It is clear that every CFE responds to its local needs which vary significantly across the State.

This was demonstrated through the below CFE statements from Merri Food Hub, located in a low socio-economic metropolitan suburb with nearby urban farms and the Bright Food Co-op which is positioned in an affluent town in rural Victoria:

"Partnerships are so so so important. Fawkner has a tiny population, with the lowest socio-economic demographics in Merri-bek, but we have four strong food initiatives that are reliant on each other: Fawkner Food Bowls, Fawkner Wholefoods Collective, Growing Farmers and us. We continuously share experiences and learnings."

Merri Food Hub

"We relied quite heavily on one producer who acted as a connector and aggregator of several other farmers who then also were able to supply through Bright Food Coop. They would then take turns to deliver to the Co-op. This producer is now taking at least a year off farming which has had a flow on impact on our ability to source local free range eggs, bread and other veggies. We're trying to find a local and affordable courier/logistics option which is challenging with our rural location."

Bright Food Coop

Funding of the CFE sector needs to be responsive to, and supportive of, the diversity in needs pending the regional relevance of CFEs. There is a strong need for a simple approach for government and philanthropy to fund across this diversity at a State level.

Enterprise Incubators

CFEs act as enterprise incubators on multiple levels. From a network perspective, there is a strong collaborative culture within the sector with shared knowledge, insights and support. For example, Baw Baw Food Hub is highly regarded by many other operators for their long and deep experience in the sector.

Baw Baw Food Hub willingly takes opportunities to share their knowledge and insights, as noted in their other activities that includes advocacy and movement building and support/mentoring for other organisations. From a farming perspective, CFEs provide farmers with an entry point that can enable them to gain commercial experience, marketing, testing, and sustainably scaling up their production.

This was evident from conversations with multiple producer beneficiaries, including Julie Savage of Lomandra noting the Bright Food Co-op as a friendly and supportive platform that enabled her to enter the market at her own pace; highlighting benefits such as engaging with customers genuinely interested in her work, organically growing her business, gaining valuable insights into what crops to grow and how to manage successions in the unique seasonal conditions of Bright.

"Out of the Box (OOTB) believed in me from the beginning, providing consistent support as my first customer. Working with them gave me reliable weekly orders and connected me to a supportive community of farmers. I have met others through OOTB, learnt from their expertise and gained invaluable insights that have helped me in my farming journey."

Ben Mitchell, Ben's Bona Fide Food

Environmental Initiatives

"I believe in the power of short supply chains, community resilience, and increased nutritional value in local food. Bright Food Co-op shares these values in promoting zero waste, local sourcing, and chemical-free practices. It stands in contrast to the conventional supermarket system, where food is often treated with chemicals unknown to the consumer, transported over long distances, and wrapped in plastic."

Julie Savage, Lomandra Farm

Participating CFEs expressed strong support for sustainable practices. It was evident that where possible, CFEs had developed initiatives and processes for their operations to minimise their environmental impact, and prioritise circular economy functions. This included:

- **Regenerative Farming Practices:** Three of the participating CFEs sourced over 75% of produce that was considered regenerative and/or organic. Merri Food Hub noted that while they source 10% of their supply from local urban farms and would like to provide access to regenerative food it was simply not affordable for their operation and customer base. Merri Food Hub participated in another research project with OFN⁶ with more in-depth exploration around the issue of affordability and accessibility of regenerative food, particularly in low income populations.
- **Minimal Packaging:** There was a strong emphasis by all participating CFEs that they are looking to have minimal to no packaging at both supplier and consumer ends. Education and process implementation was key components:

"We source all our goods with an emphasis on bulk packaging, with minimal plastic, or re-usable containers (large plastic tubs etc). Our purchases engage in direct conversations with producers to find alternative packaging options if necessary."

**HEPBURN WHOLEFOODS
COLLECTIVE**

"We generate less than half a 50L rubbish bag's worth of landfill waste and our waste produce is first offered to pet owners (worm farms, guinea pigs etc) and the remainder is composted."

MERRI FOOD HUB

- **Low Food Waste:**

"Careful attention to managing ordering in order to match demand, "moving" product quickly where volumes require it, any organic waste goes to animal feed and compost. A commercial worm farm is on our wish list."

Baw Baw Food Hub

"Our Open Food Network shopfront means that we don't waste any produce/items purchased to then sell - as it is all and only based on pre-ordered goods."

Bright Food Coop

⁶ <https://about.openfoodnetwork.org.au/news/lmcf-food-with-dignity/>

Values Based Supply Chains

"Instead of needing to connect to multiple growers individually, Out of the Box (OOTB) serves as our conduit, consistently connecting us with local producers. This partnership saves us time and allows us to focus on what we do best, creating memorable dining experiences while supporting our community's farmers."

Brad Fyfe, The Italian Cafe, Buyer of OOTB produce

As discussed in Sustainable Table's "Regenerative Investment in Food and Farming report" values aligned enterprises working together across the supply chain can benefit each other and make it easier to achieve the social and environmental objectives they share. Often as "first movers" in building a better food system in their region, CFEs attempt to fulfil multiple functions that could be better fulfilled by a network of aligned partners working together.

They play key roles in bringing together this collaboration and early innovation in the supply network, paving the way for others to participate and make a difference. They also work as the "connective tissue" or enabler of collaboration, which is crucial but often not recognised.



CFEs as Community Centres

CFEs serve as catalysts for community development and well-being in addition to their role in ecologically responsible and resilient food supply.

CFEs play a pivotal role in fostering strong and thriving communities by prioritising community connections and engaging in various activities and services. Their dedication to community development leads to meaningful relationships, shared values, and environmental consciousness. By spearheading initiatives and providing opportunities for connection, collaboration, and social cohesion, CFEs contribute to a sense of belonging, well-being, and resilience within communities.

One major finding of this research project is that CFEs have recognised food as a central element for community gathering, learning, connection, and thriving.

"I've come to realise that food is a unifying element that allows me to connect with individuals and communities on a deeper level. What drives me is the shared vision of working towards a bigger picture. Each effort may seem small, but when we join forces with others in our communities, we create a collective sense of being part of something bigger. We believe in the power of change on a localised level, and that belief unites us."

Rach Kendrigan, Local Food Activator

The Fitzroy Community Food Centre established by Cultivating Community and the network of Community Food Centres in Canada serve as inspiring examples. These centres receive public and philanthropic funding to provide locally responsive community services focused on food.

For instance, The Stop community food centre in Toronto, Canada, receives substantial government funding and donations each year, enabling it to offer empowering alternatives to traditional food relief and critical community services around food.⁸

To assist funders it is critical that CFEs can identify and articulate their role and benefits as local community centres, together with the distinct social and environmental benefits derived from their role in the trade/supply of food.

The report cards prototyped and showcased in this report are one tool that can be used to assist with this communication of value.

⁷ <https://cfccanada.ca/en/Home>

⁸ <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/charity-details/126-the-stop-community-food-centre>

IMPACT REPORT CARDS



6 participants:

Baw Baw Food Hub, Warragul

Out of the Box Sunraysia, Mildura

Merri Food Hub, Fawkner

Bendigo Community Farmers' Market, Bendigo

Hepburn Wholefoods Collective, Hepburn

Bright Food Co-op, Bright

3820

Gunaikurnai Country

BAW BAW FOOD HUB

Baw Baw Food Hub (BBFH) is a Warragul based not-for-profit that sources organic and local produce for the community of the West Gippsland region, Victoria, Australia.



SUPPLYING:



"I've been a member of the BBFH since the beginning, and it has given me a true sense of belonging and community. I love seeing the diverse people from local organisations connect to support healthy eating and sustainable living. Despite the challenges faced, I encourage the food hub to keep going because the most significant outcome for me is the sense of connection I feel with others."

**ELLEN
BBFH MEMBER**



"Volunteering has provided me with community purpose and access to local food. I remember a young woman who volunteered to receive a vegetable box for her kids, and it's moments like those that make me appreciate the mutually beneficial exchange that volunteering provides. I am deeply involved in the BBFH because it satisfies my passion for local food and provides a way to contribute to my community."

**LYNN PEMBERTON
BBFH VOLUNTEER**

Warragul Farmer's Market, Baw Baw Food Relief, Baw Baw Sustainability Network, Baw Baw Food Movement, Hogget Kitchen, String and Salt, Baw Baw Shire Council, Open Food Network, CERES Fair Food, Sustainable Table, Food Connect, Cafresco Organics, Peninsula Fresh Organics, Sunny Creek Organic Berry Farm, Tarago Valley Organic Dairy and more. .

The hub thrives through reciprocal support, collaborations, volunteering, events, and promoting food justice.



Community connection



Partnerships

Partnerships foster thriving and strengthened relationships, and propel progress in various initiatives.



Local producers



Sustainability

Referencing the local scale, the focus lies in increasing regenerative food production in the region.

Training staff and volunteers with a wide range of skills.

Promoting packaging-free produce, prioritising recycling, and encouraging sustainable bulk purchases.

CURRENT IMPACT

FINANCIALS:



2021/22

\$1,117,000

Sales turnover

-\$9,250

Revenue shortfall vs. operating costs

.....

BBFH currently receive no external funding. In their ideal case, 5% of operating costs would be externally funded. This would be prioritised to increase community engagement activities.

2023/PRESENT

\$90K-100K

Monthly turnover

\$55

Avg. shopping spend

.....

Avg. number of weekly transactions:
450-500

Currently BBFH has approximately 20 producers from Baw Baw Shire and Greater Gippsland, and 40 producers from other parts of Victoria and Australia.

Ensure a sustainable, resilient future with consistent operations.



Capital access



Economic conditions

Secure permanent resources and allocate time to work on grant applications.



Grant applications

FUTURE PRIORITIES



Volunteer dependence



Capacity to pay staff

Foster loyal, empowered, and happy customers for long-term viability.

Boost capacity to establish a skilled and available team of paid staff.

"We've experienced the challenges of satisfying customer specifications for local, chemical-free organic, and sustainable packaging. Providing an outlet to sell our products, we appreciate BBFH' efforts to support small-scale farmers while meeting the growing consumer demand for locally sourced food, as well as the connection it has allowed us to make to our community."

PHIL ROWE
SUNNY CREEK ORGANICS

3500

Latje Latje Country

OUT OF THE BOX SUNRAYSIA

Out of the Box Sunraysia (OOTB) is a subscription service supporting growers in the Mildura region, promoting methods that enhance soil biodiversity, and providing nutritious food for households to help sustain the local food community.

"OOTB believed in me from the beginning, providing consistent support as my first customer. Working with them gave me reliable weekly orders and connected me to a supportive community of farmers. I have met others through OOTB, learnt from their expertise and gained invaluable insights that have helped me in my farming journey."

BEN MITCHELL
BEN'S BONA FIDE FOOD



"Instead of needing to connect to multiple growers, OOTB serves as our conduit, connecting us with local producers. This partnership saves us time and allows us to focus on what we do best while supporting our community's farmers. The difference in taste and freshness from using local produce is undeniable and influences every decision we make for our menu."

BRAD FYFE
THE ITALIAN CAFE

Pick-up fosters community connections, while highlighting the significant mental health benefits for volunteers.



Community connection



Volunteer relationships

Partnerships cultivate strong relationships with local growers and producers, enabling OOTB's success.



Partnerships

CURRENT IMPACT



Sustainability



Local producers

Local produce within a 30km radius of Mildura is prioritised. Other products are obtained from the closest options available.

Packaging re-use is promoted and compostable bags and wraps are used for loose greens and cut items.

Collaborating with approximately 20 growers and producers with 100% direct sourcing. 90% of produce available is regenerative/organic.

"Being a part of OOTB and the local food movement has been a transformative experience for me. What drives me is the shared vision of working towards a bigger picture. Each effort may seem small, but when we join forces with others in our communities, we create a collective sense of being part of something bigger. We believe in the power of change on a localised level, and that belief unites us."

RACH KENDRIGAN
LOCAL FOOD ACTIVATOR

FINANCIALS:



2022/23

New ownership of OOTB from May '22.

\$19,707

2022-23 year to March 23 net profit

.....

OOTB currently receive no external funding. In their ideal case, 15% of operating costs would be externally funded. This would be prioritised to undertake outreach work to encourage new growers and maintain existing relationships.

2023/PRESENT

\$11K

Monthly turnover

\$34.50

Avg. shopping spend

.....

Average number of weekly customers: 60

Achieve a balanced demand and supply for consistent operations and income.



Managing growth



Demand and supply



Technology

Ongoing supply inconsistencies hinders marketing efforts and acquiring new customers.

Seeking suitable technology to streamline operations and capabilities.



Volunteer reliability

Enhanced capacity for processing & wholesale.

Ensuring volunteers feel appreciated while emphasising a fun-filled environment.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

3060

Wurundjeri Woiwurung Country

MERRI FOOD HUB

Merri Food Hub (MFH) stands for food security and working towards a more sustainable food system. The Melbourne based hub works towards a more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food system for better production, nutrition, environment and life.

"Shopping at MFH has gone beyond affordability and convenience for me. The sense of community and the relief from feeling overwhelmed created a gentler and happier experience. Unlike large food chains, the hub provides a more inclusive environment that considers the needs of individuals with disabilities. I appreciate their efforts to foster a supportive atmosphere."

SEAN FLANNERY
MFH CUSTOMER

6

Volunteers

38HRS PER WEEK

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Delivery
service

Education
spaces

Food
processing

Community
services

Aggregation

Market
stall

Wholesale

SUPPLYING:



"MFH's support is vital for the efficient distribution of our produce and income generation. Our shared values and community roots strengthen our partnership and enhance our goals. We believe in fostering respectful relationships and avoiding competition within our community. Through mutual respect, trust, and appreciation, we strengthen our bond to grow and thrive."

KELLY GILLESPIE
FAWKNER FOOD BOWLS

MFH fosters resilience, strengthens friendships, shares experiences, and embraces growth.

The Pay-it-Forward donation option specifically funds the Journey Project, which aims to find farmers offering culturally relevant food at an affordable price. Challenges arise due to high price points from some farmers that are not feasible for MFH's demographic.



Community connection



Food insecurity

The Journey Project addresses food security, ensuring access to culturally appropriate produce for low income households.



Partnerships

Partnerships are crucial in Fawkner, a small community within a low socio-economic demographic of Merri-bek.



Sustainability



Supporting local

Promoting local produce and sustainable practices, including packaging and waste reduction, is crucial.

Fawkner Food Bowls, Fawkner Wholefoods Collective, Growing Farmers, and MFH, rely on each other for success. Continuous sharing of experiences and learning is a vital component of their collaborative efforts.

Foster loyal, empowered, and available volunteers for long-term viability.



Capacity to pay staff



Volunteer dependence

Boost capacity to establish a skilled and available team of paid staff.



Renting land

Secure spaces to expand operations and allocate time to work on grant applications.



Grant applications



Delivery and pick up

Enhance capacity to streamline delivery service and increase availability of pick-up spots for boxes.

FINANCIALS:



2021/22

\$14,680

Sales turnover

\$2,600

Revenue shortfall vs. operating costs

2023/PRESENT

\$4,850

Monthly turnover

Avg. number of weekly transactions: 45

MFH received \$20K through the Merri-bek FLAG grant in FY22/23. In their ideal case, **70%** of operating costs would be externally funded to cover staff and rent.

CURRENT IMPACT

FUTURE PRIORITIES

"MFH provides me with a connection to the community. As a customer, I love the convenience of fresh, local produce at affordable prices. Volunteering there deepens my understanding of food and connects me with like-minded individuals. It's been a valuable experience for me, especially during my parental leave, as I contribute while embracing a sense of camaraderie."

RACHEL
MFH CUSTOMER AND VOLUNTEER

3550

Dja Dja Warrung Country

BENDIGO COMMUNITY FARMERS' MARKET

"For me, supporting the farmers' market is not just about cost and convenience, but a range of other factors that make it a valuable resource. I recognise the importance of everyone's relationship with food and the need for localised, sustainable and equitable food systems that benefit both people and the planet."

DR JEN ALDEN
CITY OF GREATER BENDIGO
DEPUTY MAJOR

Bendigo Community Farmers' Market (BCFM) is a VFMA accredited farmers' market dedicated to providing the Bendigo community with fresh, regional, and seasonal produce through **weekly** and **monthly** markets.

SUPPLYING:



"I love participating in farmers' markets because of the social aspect and mental health benefits. As a small farm owner, there are limited opportunities for social interaction, but being able to talk and exchange ideas with others keeps me sane. The farmers' community is incredibly supportive, and the market creates opportunities for collaboration and learning from each other."

CEILIDH MEO
PULIA GROVE OLIVES

The market's name deliberately incorporates community to reflect its integral nature.



Community connection



Partnerships

Years of planning and volunteer fatigue due highlights the importance of a Bendigo Food Hub, aiming to connect the market with Bendigo FoodShare, facilitating small-scale production, wholesale selling, storage, and events.

Partnerships foster thriving and strengthened relationships, and propel progress in various initiatives.



Collaborations

CURRENT IMPACT



Sustainability



Local producers

Benefiting from Bendigo's ban on single-use plastics, the market fosters sustainability and recycling.

Strong collaborations are crucial, as demonstrated by the support from local organisations and individuals.

The support from Bendigo Tourism for visitors, the assistance of Journaton CFA in setup, and the valuable contributions of a local graphic designer providing regular free design and marketing.

"I've always been passionate about social sustainability, and being a part of the BCFM has allowed me to turn that passion into action. I take great pride in sourcing my products locally, and I'm committed to using environmentally friendly ingredients. I see my business as an opportunity to make a positive difference. It's about supporting the community and building a sustainable future."

SUE GERDSEN
VINTAGE KITCHEN PRESERVES

FINANCIALS:



2021/22

Weekly/monthly market totals combined:

\$62,433

Sales turnover

-\$4,330

Revenue shortfall vs. operating costs

.....

BCFM currently receive no external funding. In their ideal case, **20%** of operating costs would be externally funded. This would be prioritised to cover promotion.

2023/PRESENT

Weekly/monthly market combined monthly turnover:

\$4,558

.....

Weekly market avg. spend:

\$20-\$100

2-100 customers

Monthly market avg. spend:

\$50-\$200

800-1000 avg. customers

Support and secure loyal, empowered and happy customers.



Economic conditions



Customer retention

Implement a communication plan to increase community profile and involvement.



Staff reliability

Increase committee capacity and develop teams to enable efficient operations.



Grant applications



Facility ownership

Secure a permanent home and allocate time to work on grant applications.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

3460

Dja Dja Warrung Country

HEPBURN WHOLEFOODS COLLECTIVE

Hepburn Wholefoods Collective (HWC) is a Daylesford and Hepburn not-for-profit that supports a thriving and secure local food system by selling whole foods to establish a direct connection between growers and the community.

"It's amazing to see how people with such different skill sets and backgrounds can come together and create something long-lasting, that not only provides local food options but also acts as an informal social outlet for those who may not see many others during the week. HWC is not just a place to shop, it's where the community hums."

LINDY CHURCHES
HWC MEMBER'S COORDINATOR
AND VOLUNTEER



"Having access to whole foods is not just a matter of sustenance but a gateway to a community. When we relocated, we hoped to find both, and HWC provided just that in Hepburn. Volunteering has allowed me to connect with like-minded individuals, share the joy of giving back, and feel a sense of belonging."

Connection through volunteer opportunities, free memberships, social connections, and direct farmer-to-customer sales.

Daylesford Lawn Tennis Club, Hepburn Shire Council, Daylesford Primary School, Dharma School, Open Food Network, SHARE, farmers and producers, members and volunteers.



Community connection



Volunteer relationships

Partnerships, relationships, and the dedication and contributions of volunteers is of highest importance.



Partnerships

CURRENT IMPACT



Volunteer training



Sustainable practices

Prioritised by sourcing goods in bulk and investing in reusable packaging.

Volunteers learn a wide range of skills from customer service to admin duties.

"Accessing stores like HWC that offer bulk products makes sustainable living more feasible and allows us to make a conscious connection to not just the country we are on, but the country that all things we consume come from. There is a real sense of belonging in the HWC community space, where we can support each other and work towards a common goal."

BOB GALWEY
HWC MEMBER

FINANCIALS:



2021/22

\$107,681

Sales turnover

-\$7,714

Revenue shortfall vs. operating costs

HWC currently receive no external funding. In their ideal case, **20%** of operating costs would be externally funded. This would be prioritised to cover all overhead expenses.

Avg. monthly transactions:
175

2023/PRESENT

\$9-\$11k

Monthly turnover

\$42

Avg. shopping spend

Shoppers must be members with an annual fee of \$40/\$20 concession.

Volunteers receive free membership.

Implement a communication plan to increase community profile and involvement.

Increase committee capacity and develop teams to enable efficient operations.



Supplier relationships

Support volunteers to be efficient, empowered and happy in their role.



Volunteer reliability

Secure a permanent home, including a plan for sudden shock events and changes.



Facility ownership



Customer retention



Managing growth

FUTURE PRIORITIES

3741

Dhudhuroa, Waywurru and Taungurung Country

BRIGHT FOOD CO-OP

Bright Food Co-op (BFC) is a volunteer-led community organisation in Victoria's Alpine High Country, prioritising sustainability, local producers, regenerative farming, and healthy food options.



SUPPLYING:



"BFC provides the opportunity to access healthy, chemical-free, and local products. It's a chance to make a positive impact on the environment and foster a strong sense of community. The co-op's presence benefits countless people. It reduces food miles, supports local producers, and strengthens the bond among neighbours, creating a sustainable and thriving community."

GIL PAULSEN
BFC VOLUNTEER AND TREASURER



"I believe in the power of short supply chains, community resilience, and increased nutritional value in local food. BFC shares these values in promoting zero waste, local sourcing, and chemical-free practices. It stands in contrast to the conventional supermarket system, where food is often treated with chemicals unknown to the consumer, transported over long distances, and wrapped in plastic."

JULIE SAVAGE
LOMANDRA FARM

The presence in Dumu Cafe has attracted customers and increased awareness of community programs.



Community connection



Partnerships

BFC shares space with Dumu Cafe, a business transitioning ownership to Thamarrarr Youth, who operate a First Nations hospitality trainee program. BFC has a rent-free MOU agreement with Dumu until end of 2024.

Partnerships have fostered a thriving shared home and strengthened relationships.



Collaborations

CURRENT IMPACT



Sustainability



Local producers

Collaborations are vital for the existence and success of hubs, offering numerous benefits.

Currently supporting 17 regional producers and engaging in bulk buying for economic and environmental advantages.

BFC shares space with Dumu Cafe, utilising their facilities for events and storage. Customers can shop during cafe hours, extending BFCs opening hours. Collaborating with groups like Plasticwise Bright, BFC holds an Open Day with a clothes swap to promote coop membership and awareness.

"What I love most is involving my children in this journey. We walk together to the co-op, discussing our food-buying tiers. We prioritise fresh produce that could be grown at home, followed by dry goods, and finally, resorting to supermarkets. It's important for my kids to understand the effort that goes into growing food and appreciate the connection between the earth and the nourishment it provides."

CLAIRE
BFC CUSTOMER

FINANCIALS:



2021/22

\$35,842

Sales turnover

\$196.88

Revenue shortfall vs. operating costs

BFC currently receive no external funding. In their ideal case, **50%** of their operating costs would be covered by external funding to employ a PT role. This would be prioritised to free up volunteer time and create a local job opportunity.

2023/PRESENT

\$2,622

Monthly turnover

Avg. number of monthly orders:
76 (in-store and online)

\$50 annual membership fee offers discounted bulk dry goods for members.



Managing growth



Volunteer dependence

FUTURE PRIORITIES



Customer retention

Allocate time to work on grant applications and secure funding for future activities.



Grant applications



Logistics

Find a local and affordable courier option that is available within the Bright area.

Recommendations

1

Develop impact report cards for more CFEs - Using a streamlined version of the methodology and template developed through this project to enable improved evaluation and communication of the specific nature and benefits of CFE activities at individual and collective scale.

2

Provide dedicated CFE program funding - External funding is required to support the diverse and locally responsive community services provided by CFEs.

3

Subsidise the food supply functions of CFEs - CFEs generate social and environmental outcomes achieved through their activities and should be recognised and subsidised for this contribution to public good outcomes.

4

Encourage collaboration and synergy between different CFEs within a values-based supply network - As outlined in the Moving Feast's draft strategy, this includes:

- investing in activities that facilitate relationship building and collaboration among the supply network,
- providing shared learning opportunities; and
- fund the development/growth of critical functions that are missing or underdeveloped in the supply network. For example, support ethical wholesale functions that can efficiently coordinate supply at scale to serve multiple CFEs.

5

Provide CFEs with tailored one-on-one capacity building support to address the specific needs of CFEs (examples here).

6

Develop and pilot a specialised fund to increase CFEs' ability to serve low-income households - Such as a Food with Dignity Fund that funnels investment from government and philanthropy through, for example, voucher schemes (design recommendations here).



OPEN FOOD
NETWORK
AUSTRALIA

✉ hello@openfoodnetwork.org.au

🌐 openfoodnetwork.org.au

Appendix - Interviews

Baw Baw Food Hub:

Ellen:

Ellen has been a member of the BBFH since its inception. She highly values the organic food it provides, and growing up in the area, appreciates the sense of community. Ellen tries to grow her own food but acknowledges that it only goes so far, and is grateful for the food hub's presence. She encourages the food hub to keep going despite the challenges they face.

Ellen feels a strong sense of belonging and community through her involvement with the BBFH. She recognises the overlap of people from various local organisations and schools and values the economic diversity of the group. Despite advocating for a simpler approach of only providing vegetable boxes, she admires the food hub's determination to provide extra products and wine, even though it creates more financial risk. The most significant outcome for Ellen is the sense of community and connection she feels with others. As a supporting member of the BBFH, Ellen contributes a set amount of money every fortnight to her account. She can then use the funds in her account to purchase food at the food hub on another day. This system allows her to provide financial security to the food hub, as they can rely on a steady income from supporting members like herself. Ellen values this alternative to subscribing to a veggie box because it provides her with flexibility and allows her to purchase exactly what she needs.

"I've been a member of the Baw Baw Food Hub since the beginning, and it has given me a true sense of belonging and community. I love seeing the diverse people from local organisations connect to support healthy eating and sustainable living. Despite the challenges faced, I encourage the food hub to keep going because the most significant outcome for me is the sense of connection I feel with others. As a supporting member, I contribute regularly to help provide financial security and ensure the food hub can continue to provide healthy food options to the community. I appreciate the flexibility which allows me to purchase what I need and want."

Phil Rowe and Cathie Taylor from Sunny Creek Organics

Phil Rowe and Cathie Taylor from Sunny Creek Organics have been part of the organic farming movement for decades. They understand the challenges of selling locally and the difficulties in satisfying customer demands for local, chemical-free organic, and sustainable packaging.

Phil and Cathie appreciate the BBFH's efforts to provide a convenient alternative for consumers who seek sustainable packaging, bulk food, and local produce. As berry producers, they have found the food hub's box model complementary to their other products, providing them with an outlet to sell fresh berries that don't meet the wholesale market's demands. Stressing the significance of building robust connections with their local customers, they also discuss the advantages and drawbacks of selling their produce in the local market, including the challenges of the certification process and price distortions during food crises.

Phil and Cathie believe there has been a significant surge in demand for locally sourced food, with mounting consumer pressure. They express that the Baw Baw Food Hub meets this demand by providing consumers with options while supporting small-scale farmers.

"As organic farmers, we've experienced the challenges of satisfying customer specifications for local, chemical-free organic, and sustainable packaging. Providing a convenient outlet to sell our products that don't meet the wholesale market's demands, we appreciate Baw Baw Food Hubs' efforts to support small-scale farmers while meeting the growing consumer demand for locally sourced food, as well as the connection it has allowed us to make to our community."

Lynn Pemberton

Lynn Pemberton is a long-term BBFH volunteer, drawn to the organisation because of her passion for sustainably produced food and the desire to be a part of a community. Lynn has been involved with the BBFH for about five years and has made friends, learned about new ingredients, and shared recipes with customers. As a volunteer, she has gained new skills, such as using the point of sale system, and has had the opportunity to teach young volunteers about display and customer service. Lynn feels that the BBFH has provided her with a rewarding experience and a sense of purpose within her community.

For Lynn, the most significant outcome of her involvement is the sense of community and connection it has provided her. She enjoys talking to local farmers and producers about their products and learning about their farming practices. Lynn appreciates that the BBFH attracts like-minded people who care about sustainably-produced food, creating a sense of community and purpose. She finds it much more than just working at a shop because it offers a unique opportunity to connect with people who share her values. Lynn is deeply involved in the BBFH as a volunteer and a customer because it offers her a chance to contribute to her community while satisfying her passion for local, sustainable food.

Lynn mentions that volunteering at the BBFH is a great way to access local, sustainable food, especially for those who can't afford it. She shares an example of a young woman who volunteered to receive a vegetable box for her children. Lynn highlights that volunteering at the hub provides access to fresh produce and opportunities to meet new people. She sees volunteering as a mutually beneficial exchange, where people get something in return for their effort.

"Being a part of the Baw Baw Food Hub is a rewarding experience. I have made friends, learned about new ingredients, and shared recipes with customers. I love talking to local farmers and producers about their products and farming practices, and it's great to be around like-minded people who care about sustainably-produced food."

"Volunteering at the hub has provided me with a purpose within my community and access to local, sustainable food. I remember a young woman who volunteered to receive a vegetable box for her children, and it's moments like those that make me appreciate the mutually beneficial exchange that volunteering provides. I am deeply involved in the Baw Baw Food Hub because it satisfies my passion for local food and provides a way to contribute to my community."

Out of the Box Sunraysia:

Brad Fyfe:

Brad and Sandra, owners of The Italian Cafe, have been sourcing their produce through OOTB since they started their business in September 2020. They prioritise using local and organically grown ingredients, and OOTB has been instrumental in connecting them with small-scale producers in their area.

By working with OOTB, Brad and Sandra have been able to plan their menus based on the seasonal availability of ingredients from local growers. They value using ingredients in season and even utilise parts of plants that are typically discarded, such as broccoli leaves and stems. This allows them to create unique and flavourful dishes. The business partners appreciate the convenience and time-saving aspect of working with OOTB. Rather than individually contacting and fostering relationships with multiple growers, they rely on OOTB to act as a conduit, meeting with producers regularly. This partnership allows them to focus on running their business while supporting local farmers.

Brad and Sandra believe that their commitment to using local and fresh ingredients is noticed by their customers, even though they don't heavily market it. They offer dishes that showcase locally sourced ingredients, providing a unique market advantage. Their goal is to leverage this advantage further and highlight the value they bring through their dedication to local produce. One of the significant challenges they face is when certain ingredients are unavailable. Working with OOTB has made them more conscious of where their food comes from. They question the origin and quality of products found in supermarkets and wholesalers. They understand the difference in taste and freshness that comes with using locally harvested produce, and it influences their menu decisions.

Brad and Sandra have a deep-rooted appreciation for high-quality ingredients and seasonality. Brad's culinary background and exposure to various influences shaped his belief in the potential of Australian produce. Their involvement in the slow food movement in their local community further solidified their commitment to supporting local ingredients and traditional food preservation methods.

"Instead of needing to connect to multiple growers individually, Out of the Box serves as our conduit, consistently connecting us with local producers. This partnership saves us time and allows us to focus on what we do best, creating memorable dining experiences while supporting our community's farmers."

"Of course, there are challenges when certain ingredients are unavailable, but that only makes us more aware of where our food comes from. The difference in taste and freshness from using locally harvested produce is undeniable and influences every decision we make for our menu."

"Sandra and I have always appreciated high-quality ingredients and seasonality. My culinary background and exposure to various influences have shown me the incredible potential of Australian produce. Our involvement in the slow food movement within our community has further solidified our commitment to supporting local ingredients and preserving traditional food methods. Using local and seasonal ingredients is a fundamental principle that guides our menus and with Out of the Box by our side, we can continue championing these values and bringing the best of our region to every plate we serve."

Ben Mitchell:

Aspiring farmer Ben Mitchell started his small-scale farming venture a few years ago. His first customer was OOTB, and their consistent weekly orders provided him with a solid foundation and supported him during his transition into full-time farming.

Working with OOTB has brought several benefits to Ben's business. He appreciates having reliable customers who purchase from him every week. While the demand from OOTB remains relatively stable, the wholesale aspect of his business catering to restaurants and cafes can be somewhat unpredictable.

Beyond the business aspect, being associated with OOTB has allowed Ben to become part of a supportive community. OOTB organises events and parties for the growers, which boosts morale and appreciation for their work. Furthermore, OOTB has facilitated connections between Ben and other small-scale farmers. He even had the opportunity to work alongside them on occasions, which served as a valuable learning experience and propelled him forward in his farming journey.

Looking ahead, Ben envisions expanding his operations to serve more areas and plans to acquire additional 20-plus acres of land in the near future.

"Out of the Box believed in me from the beginning, providing consistent support as my first customer. Working with them gave me reliable weekly orders and connected me to a supportive community of farmers. I have met others through Out of the Box, learnt from their expertise and gained invaluable insights that have helped me in my farming journey."

Ashley Moyle:

"Without Out of the Box, selling my entire potato crop within a reasonable timeframe would have been a struggle. Collaborating with them allows me to increase the volume of my produce, which is better than growing multiple crops."

"Out of the Box has strong values in recognising and accepting organic produce. They understand the importance of quality and are willing to pay a fair price."

"Out of the Box understands farmers need to sustain their businesses and work with us collaboratively. Their willingness to accommodate orders of any size is especially beneficial for new farmers who may face inconsistent yields. I appreciate their commitment to the industry and the opportunities they provide for growers like myself."

Rach Kendrigan

Rach, a local food activator, artist and regenerative practitioner, has been involved in the local food movement for several years. They initially joined as the event manager for the Slow Food National Conference, serving as a pivotal experience that introduced them to the world of food and ignited a passion that has become a significant focus in their work. Through their involvement with OOTB, Rach feels a strong sense of community and belonging, considering it a family they are always part of in some way or another.

Rach actively collaborates with OOTB in their community work, highlighting the significance of food in fostering connections to people and place. For example incorporating local food into their workshops and events, with OOTB providing an immersive experience where participants assembled wraps out of fresh produce, learning about the origin of each ingredient and the people who grew them.

In Rach's journey, they discovered their local food movement combines various local movements across different communities within Australia. This network of like-minded individuals and groups willingly shares and supports each other. Rach highlights the sector's uniqueness and the culture where anyone working on a similar project can reach out to another organisation and receive support and knowledge exchange.

Rach emphasises the shared sense of working towards a bigger picture in the local food movement. The desire for change and belief in its impact on a localised level brings together the network of individuals and groups. Although individual efforts may seem small, joining the interconnected web of like-minded people working in their communities creates a collective sense of being part of something bigger.

For Rach, integrating food into their arts & community practice has filled a missing piece, creating an ecology encompassing art, culture, food, nature, and Country. This integration has reinforced their belief that food is a unifying element, allowing them to connect diverse communities on a deeper level.

"Being a part of Out of the Box and the local food movement has been a transformative experience for me. Out of the Box has become like a family, a community I'm always connected to."

"I've come to realise that food is a unifying element that allows me to connect with individuals and communities on a deeper level. What drives me is the shared vision of working towards a bigger picture. Each effort may seem small, but when we join forces with others in our communities, we create a collective sense of being part of something bigger. We believe in the power of change on a localised level, and that belief unites us."

Joselyne

Joselyne, a farmer at the Food Next Door Co-operative, grew up in Burundi, Africa with farming and growing food an important part of her being. Having supplied OOTB since its inception, she has witnessed its remarkable growth and the initiative's unwavering commitment to the Food Next Door Co-op which supports newly arrived migrants and refugee groups to access land to farm and grow food.

Joselyne highlights that OOTB has a role in connecting people to their food, expressing her desire for consumers to visit the farms and witness the daily efforts of growing the vegetables. The initiative also collaborated with cafes, where customers could enjoy meals made with OOTB produce, contributing to the local economy.

The relationship between OOTB and Food Next Door's farmers is mutually beneficial, as OOTB's support in purchasing local produce enables farmers to generate income, fostering community investment.

Joselyne highlights the equality and fairness within OOTB, where each farmer had an equal opportunity to supply their produce. She explained the variety of crops they cultivated, such as sweet potatoes, and their willingness to share any surplus with friends and family.

"Out of the Box is committed to supporting small-scale, local growers. Regardless of size or experience, every farmer has an equal opportunity to supply their produce. It's a supportive environment where we can thrive. Out of the Box customers also get to try different produce that we have grown, like okra and white eggplants, which are some of our traditional foods that we used to grow back home in Burundi."

Merri Food Hub:

Kelly Gillespie:

Kelly, the co-founder and acting president of Fawkner Food Bowls, has been supplying MFH since the beginning. As sister organisations, their collaboration is crucial for Fawkner Food Bowls since they don't have the capacity for a separate outlet to supply their produce consistently. Being part of MFH enables efficient produce distribution and income generation.

The close alignment of values and shared community roots between the organisations have been immensely supportive. They can discuss, workshop, and align their goals, making it easier to achieve their objectives. The relationship is mutually beneficial, enabling Fawkner Food Bowls to supply its produce to the community while receiving valuable feedback on what people want. This information helps them tailor their production to meet the community's needs.

Additionally, the moral support and appreciation they receive from MFH are invaluable. Kelly emphasises the importance of localised relationships and the value of considering and appreciating one another in the community. By fostering respectful relationships, they engage in collaboration and avoid competition. The mutual respect, trust, and appreciation between Fawkner Food Bowls and MFH are fundamental to their successful partnership. They acknowledge and understand the effort that goes into their work, and by expressing their appreciation, they strengthen their bond.

The joint food hub grant they worked on together allowed them to focus on improving their operations, refining details, and working on their respective projects in a coordinated manner. Fawkner Food Bowls specifically focuses on growing culturally specific foods for MFH and collecting data on the community's preferences to best align their production with demand. The collaboration between the two organisations is interconnected and aimed at benefiting the community they serve.

"Merri Food Hub's support is vital for the efficient distribution of our produce and income generation. Our shared values and community roots strengthen our partnership and enhance our goals. We believe in fostering respectful relationships and avoiding competition within our community. Through mutual respect, trust, and appreciation, we strengthen our bond and thrive."

"The joint food hub grant we worked on allowed us to improve our operations and focus on our respective projects. At Fawkner Food Bowls, we focus on growing culturally specific foods for MFH while integrating their valuable contribution of data collection on produce preferences to ensure production and demand alignment. Our collaboration is interconnected and aimed at benefiting the community we serve."

Nicki Johnson and Criag Barrie

Nicki Johnson and Craig Barrie are avid supporters of MFH. Nicki appreciates the hub for its local presence and community projects, highlighting the importance of avoiding large supermarkets and a preference to be part of a small and local initiative.

Craig shares Nicki's sentiments and adds that shopping at MFH aligns with his views on sustainable food production and reducing his carbon footprint. In obtaining groceries directly from the wholesale chain to the customer, he reduces plastic waste and lowers his carbon footprint. Both Nicki and Craig highlight the positive outcomes of their involvement with MFH. They receive regular fruit and veggie boxes, which prompt them to cook more at home and reduce eating out. It has improved their budgeting whilst encouraging them to cook seasonally and utilise all the fresh produce in the box.

As part of MFH, Nicki and Craig feel they make better choices regarding what they eat and where it comes from. Craig also appreciates that MFH represents positive changes in the food system without getting caught up in debates about food purity and industrial production methods.

Another significant aspect of their experience with MFH is the opportunity to connect with the local community. They also express their desire to share and learn knowledge from the network, especially in relation to gardening and sustainable practices.

Nicki and Craig's support for MFH stems from their appreciation for its local presence, community projects, sustainability practices, reduced waste, improved cooking habits, and the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals.

Nicki:

"Merri Food Hub embodies the essence of community and empowers us to take control of our food choices. By shopping here, I know I'm contributing to a positive change right in my neighbourhood."

"Shopping at Merri Food Hub allows us to make informed choices about what we eat and where it comes from, encouraging us to be conscious consumers. The fruit and veggie boxes shape our approach to food. Not only do we cook more at home, but we also learn to cook seasonally and make the most of the fresh produce. It has improved our budgeting and introduced us to an array of delicious meals."

Craig:

"Being part of Merri Food Hub allows me to directly support a sustainable food system while actively reducing waste. By obtaining groceries straight from the source, I minimise plastic waste and lower my carbon footprint. It's a win-win for me and the environment."

"Merri Food Hub provides us with a platform to connect with like-minded individuals who share our values. I'm grateful that Merri Food Hub is actively shaping positive changes in the food system without getting caught up in debates about food purity or industrial production methods. It's refreshing to support an organisation that prioritises what matters."

Rachel

Rachel is a customer and volunteer at Merri Food Hub (MFH) because she values community involvement. She sees volunteering at MFH as a way to support her local community and appreciates the team of dedicated volunteers who ensure the sustainability of the hub and deliver fresh produce to her doorstep.

As a customer, Rachel benefits from the convenience of MFH sourcing local and seasonal produce at affordable prices. She values the expertise of others in selecting high-quality fruits and vegetables. Volunteering at MFH allows Rachel to connect with like-minded community members and deepen her understanding of the food growing cycle. She finds joy in packing produce boxes, particularly the reduced-price journey boxes that support the community.

Rachel's involvement with MFH has brought significant changes to her life. As a customer, she has been inspired to explore new recipes and incorporate a variety of vegetables into her meals. Volunteering at MFH has become a meaningful experience for Rachel, especially during her parental leave, as she has been able to bring her baby daughter along while contributing to the hub. She appreciates the camaraderie among the volunteer team during this transitional period.

Rachel attributes the success of MFH to Charmaine, the driving force behind the hub. Charmaine's passion, commitment, kindness, and ability to foster community connections have contributed to all the positive outcomes and benefits Rachel has experienced.

"Merri Food Hub provides me with a connection to the community. As a customer, I love the convenience of fresh, local produce at affordable prices. Volunteering there deepens my understanding of food and connects me with like-minded individuals. Charmaine, the driving force behind the hub, inspires us all with her passion and kindness. It's been a valuable experience for me, especially during my parental leave, as I contribute while embracing a sense of camaraderie."

Jenny Gibson

Jenny Gibson, a regular volunteer and shopper at the MFH markets in Fawkner, is passionate about food security and supporting an organisation offering quality fresh produce at affordable prices.

Jenny has found joy in the strong sense of community within MFH and appreciates the teamwork and clear goals that drive the team. Together, they efficiently meet the operational deadlines for the weekly market. She loves the community atmosphere and the opportunities for skill sharing that the hub provides.

The most significant outcome for Jenny during her volunteer experience at MFH has been witnessing the growth since establishment over a year ago. The loyal customer base has increased steadily, showcasing the positive impact of MFH in the community.

Jenny attributes this outcome to sustained dedication and exemplary leadership of Charmaine and Sarah, the driving forces behind MFH. Their commitment attracts and retains a supportive team of volunteers and garnered support from the MFH committee, as well as friends and family. By adopting a cooperative ethos, MFH actively collaborates with and promotes other local producers, enhancing its appeal to customers. This inclusive and community-driven approach has facilitated the organisation's success in securing grant funding and attracting more patrons.

Jenny's involvement with MFH as a volunteer and shopper demonstrates her belief in food security and her desire to contribute to a thriving community. Through her experiences at MFH, she has found a welcoming and purposeful environment that enriches her life and empowers her to make a positive impact.

"As a regular Merri Food Hub volunteer and shopper I enjoy the benefits of being part of a thriving and diverse community. This community recognises the power of food security is at its strongest and the social impact is greatest when we come together each week to work in this shared space".

Sean Flannery

Sean Flannery, a student with a disability and limited financial resources, started shopping at MFH based on a friend's recommendation - seeking food options beyond the high-salt, canned goods and frozen items offered at traditional food pantries.

What they found at MFH was not only affordable but also surprisingly friendly. The warm welcome and even a cup of tea made their experience more enjoyable and less lonely.

Sean had previously tried a mixed box service but found it unreliable and lacking transparency in terms of pricing and contents. They appreciated the element of surprise in receiving a box of fresh food from MFH, as it allowed them to get creative in the kitchen without the overwhelming experience of grocery shopping.

Time constraints sometimes hindered their cooking endeavours, but having the ingredients readily available without the hassle of navigating a supermarket made them more inclined to cook.

For Sean, the benefits of shopping at MFH extended beyond affordability and convenience. The sense of community and the relief from feeling overwhelmed created a gentler and happier experience.

Unlike large food chains, which often fail to consider the needs of individuals with disabilities, MFH provided a more inclusive environment. While Sean acknowledged the need for further improvements, such as accommodating deaf customers through visual communication methods, they appreciated the efforts to foster a supportive atmosphere.

As a student focusing on deaf inclusion, Sean expressed the importance of creating spaces that cater to diverse cultural needs and emphasised the value of welcoming everyone, regardless of their background or abilities.

Although Sean wished the hub was closer to their home, they can access it through transportation, highlighting the need for more fresh food options available to people in different areas. Their hope was for increased accessibility to fresh and affordable food to benefit a range of individuals and communities.

"Shopping at Merri Food Hub has gone beyond affordability and convenience for me. The sense of community and the relief from feeling overwhelmed created a gentler and happier experience. Unlike large food chains, the hub provides a more inclusive environment that considers the needs of individuals with disabilities. I appreciate their efforts to foster a supportive atmosphere."

Bendigo Community Farmers Market:

Dr Jen Alden

Dr Jen Alden, is a passionate advocate for local food systems and an active supporter of the BCFM. As the current Deputy Mayor of the City of Greater Bendigo, and with a background in health, Jen has been a long-time advocate for the importance of sourcing food locally, cooking and sharing and its link to social and health inequalities.

Jen's involvement with the BCFM started as a consumer and advocate and she was previously on the board of the Victorian Farmers Market Association. As Chair of the Bendigo Regional Food Alliance she helped organise a food swap at the market with local garden produce and seed swapping with a local prison growing seedlings that were used as a fundraiser by schools each month. The market at that time was a popular vehicle for other community activities such as guest presenters, music, and kid-related health promotion activities, which encouraged diversity and longer stays at the market.

For Jen, supporting the farmers' market is not just about cost and convenience, but a range of other factors that make it a valuable resource. She believes that to change people's shopping behaviours, there needs to be a regular and consistent scale that can be supported by investors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she advocated for the Open Food Network and alternative ways of accessing food when supplies were low in supermarkets. She sees this as an opportunity for change and wonders what it would take for it to stick in the long term.

Jen's involvement in buying food through the farmers' market over the years has aligned with a significant increase growing her own food. She and her husband invested in an 80,000-litre water tank to irrigate their fruit trees and 8 large wicking beds and surrounding vegetable garden. Although she admits to still learning and having varying degrees of success, she finds it satisfying to have more control over what she eats and not be influenced by advertising or other interests.

Jen's commitment to the food system led her to focus on the food system in the health sector professionally. She recognises the importance of everyone's relationship with food and its link to the challenge of climate change, global heating and biodiversity collapse and, ultimately, health. A focus on our local food economy benefits both people and the planet and strengthens local communities.

"As a long-time advocate for local food systems and an active customer of the Bendigo Community Farmers Market, I strongly believe in the importance of sourcing food locally, cooking, and sharing. For me, supporting the farmers' market is not just about cost and convenience, but a range of other factors that make it a valuable resource. I believe that to change people's shopping behaviours, there needs to be a regular and consistent scale that can be supported by investors. I recognise the importance of everyone's relationship with food and the need for localised, sustainable and equitable food systems that benefit both people and the planet."

Ceilidh Meo

Ceilidh Meo (KAY-lee) is an egg and olive farmer and small batch processor at the BCFM. While she used to participate in a Saturday market, the high demand for her processing services during the harvest season meant she had to drop out temporarily.

Despite facing competition from other olive oil producers in the area, Ceilidh finds ways to collaborate with other farmers rather than competing directly. Her approach has allowed her to supply a cafe, participate in the weekly Thursday market, and stand out in a crowded marketplace.

Ceilidh is passionate about the social aspect of farmers markets and the mental health benefits of interacting with people. As a small farm owner with limited social interaction, talking to others and sharing ideas keeps her and her husband sane. She finds the farmers' community supportive, and the market creates opportunities for collaboration and exchanging ideas. This collaborative mindset has led to a barter economy and creative collaborations like combining olive oil and chocolate, and making preserved olives. Ceilidh believes that a collaborative approach benefits everyone and helps lift all boats.

At the farmers' market, Ceilidh enjoys sharing her story and educating people about where their food comes from. She believes that people should be more aware of government policies around food and where their food is sourced. It's essential to teach people to think about where their food comes from and to enjoy it.

"I love participating in farmers markets because of the social aspect and mental health benefits of interacting with people. As a small farm owner, there are limited opportunities for social interaction, but being able to talk and exchange ideas with others keeps my husband and me sane. The farmers' community is incredibly supportive, and the market creates opportunities for collaboration and learning from each other. This collaborative mindset has led to some amazing creative collaborations like combining olive oil and chocolate. I truly believe that this approach benefits everyone and helps lift all boats."

Sue Gerdson

Sue Gerdson has been a proud stallholder of Vintage Kitchen Preserves at the BCFM since 2015, offering locally sourced products that are environmentally friendly. Her products are mostly derived from Bendigo streets, with additional ingredients given to her by locals. Sue takes pride in turning what may look bad into beautiful products, and customers appreciate the fact that she tries to make everything as local as possible.

Sue's business is multi-faceted, with four distinct components: she is committed to reducing food waste, ensuring customer satisfaction, promoting environmental benefits, and saving the world 'one box and one jar at a time.' Rather than viewing her business as a way to make money, Sue sees it as an opportunity to make a positive difference. During the holiday season, she encourages people to support local businesses and decorates hampers with items from local shops.

"I've always been passionate about social sustainability, and being a part of the Bendigo Community Farmers Market with my business Vintage Kitchen Preserves has allowed me to turn that passion into action. I take great pride in sourcing my products locally, and I'm committed to using environmentally friendly ingredients. I see my business as an opportunity to make a positive difference - one box and one jar at a time. For me, it's about supporting the community and building a sustainable future."

Grace Batson

Grace Batson is the Treasurer of the BCFM. With her background in agricultural science, she's fascinated by the farmers who produce the fresh produce available at the market. Grace has gained more than just knowledge about agriculture and market operations through her involvement with the BCFM.

She's expanded her social network and developed relationships with various members of the Bendigo community. Grace loves the social aspect of the market and considers it a unique kind of hobby. As someone who works in public practice, which involves working with small businesses, Grace sees her involvement in the market as a way to merge her core business with her personal interests.

Grace sees her involvement in the market as a way to merge her core business with her personal interests, and is supported by her workplace to be involved in the local Bendigo community.

As Treasurer, Grace is responsible for monitoring the market's budget to ensure its financial sustainability. She's committed to ensuring that the market remains self-sustaining, so funding and volunteers are not heavily relied upon. Grace's goal is for the market to have extra funds to support other people in the community, such as the Country Fire Authority who help us at each Saturday market, flood and drought affected farmers.

"Through my involvement with the market, I have gained an incredible social network and developed meaningful relationships with various members of the Bendigo community. I consider the social aspect of the market to be a unique kind of hobby that I thoroughly enjoy. As Treasurer, I am committed to ensuring the market's financial sustainability so that it remains self-sustaining. My goal is for the market to have extra funds to support other people in the community. Supporting the Bendigo community is an essential aspect of the market's operation, and I am proud to be a part of it."

Hepburn Wholefoods Collective:

Judith

Judith is an 85-year-old paying member who shops once a week as she can buy what she needs in the volume she wants. She finds it more economical and practical and can donate her glass jars instead of having to 'chuck them away all the time'. Judith doesn't need the social connection HWC offers but likes the more personal form of interaction she receives. Judith says, 'there is a general feel of companionship' at the Collective.

"Shopping at HWC not only provides me with the volume of goods I need, but also a sense of companionship that is often lacking in today's shopping experiences."

Donna Livermore

Donna Livermore joined HWC when she moved to town in 2020. Now a dedicated volunteer, Donna appreciates that HWC enables other people less financially resourced to access quality food and that it helped speed up her integration into the community, especially during COVID when opportunities for connection were limited. Volunteering helped Donna settle into the community quicker than she otherwise would have.

"Having access to whole foods is not just a matter of sustenance but a gateway to a community. When we relocated, we needed to find a place that provided both, and HWC provided just that in Hepburn. Volunteering allowed me to connect with like-minded individuals, share the joy of giving back, and feel a sense of belonging. It's about more than just accessing organic produce at reasonable prices, it's about fostering a sense of community."

Bob Galwey

Bob Galwey is a member who shops at HWC because the produce aligns with his values around farming and minimal packaging, and it's cheaper than the supermarket.

Bob says, 'I always spend longer here than I expected, chatting to people', as a nod to the community aspects of the space. Through shopping at HWC, Bob has become a more conscious consumer, stating that 'it's not just about the country we're on, but the country that all things we consume come from'.

"Sustainable living can be a challenging way to exist with how things are structured. Avoiding plastic and buying locally-sourced products can be time-consuming and require effort. Accessing stores like HWC that offer bulk products makes sustainable living more feasible and allows us to make a conscious connection to not just the country we are on, but the country that all things we consume come from."

"Shopping for bulk products enables us to buy produce that aligns with our values and ethical beliefs. It reduces waste, provides the opportunity to get more valuable products, and gives a sense of community. Spending time chatting with others who share like-minded values and beliefs is a pleasant experience. There is a real sense of belonging in the HWC community space, where we can support each other and work towards a common goal."

Sharon Nicholson

Sharon Nicholson is HWC Volunteer Coordinator. During COVID, HWC quickly pivoted to do home deliveries to members, and Sharon took this up as she is immunocompromised. HWC provided Sharon with the opportunity to connect to the community and access healthy food.

Sharon highlights the importance of volunteer organisations in the area, as they provide essential services that are otherwise not accessible. Sharon also mentions her admiration for the younger people volunteers she has met along the way, expressing that it is an excellent way to meet and connect with the community.

"As someone who is immunocompromised, HWC's home deliveries were a lifeline for me during COVID. Through volunteering with HWC, I've come to appreciate the vital role that volunteer organisations play in providing essential services to the community. I've also had the pleasure of working alongside younger volunteers who inspire me with their passion for making a difference."

Lindy Churches

Lindy Churches is HWC's Member's coordinator and a dedicated committee member, having volunteered and served for over ten years. Lindy attributes the committee's success to the informal culture they have established, where members can adjust their involvement as needed. Lindy finds satisfaction in nurturing the organisation, and seeing it grow and change over time. She loves the diverse range of people that come together to achieve collective success. For Lindy, it's not just a place to shop but somewhere the community hums. Lindy says, 'I love seeing how a diverse range of people can come together, it can feel very ad-hoc and cobbled together, but it really works.' Lindy also points out that the collective provides an informal and social outlet for people who may not see many others during the week.

"I've been volunteering with HWC for over ten years, and what keeps me coming back is the sense of community and the joy of seeing the organisation grow and evolve. It's amazing to see how people with such different skill sets and backgrounds can come together and create something long-lasting, that not only provides local food options but also acts as an informal social outlet for those who may not see many others during the week. HWC is not just a place to shop, it's where the community hums."

Bright Food Co-op:

Gil Paulsen:

Gil Paulsen, a dedicated volunteer and Treasurer of BFC, always wanted a food co-op in her town but didn't know how to make it happen. After speaking to like-minded individuals, they came across an opportunity to co-locate with Dumu Cafe. They formed a committee, gathered interested people, and established the co-op.

The committee operates as a shared effort, with everyone being hands-on and assisting one another. Gil is inspired to work alongside people with different interests and contacts, making the committee experience enjoyable and collaborative.

Gil believes the co-op provides the community with an opportunity to buy healthy, chemical-free, and locally sourced products. It fosters a sense of community and offers a sustainable food alternative.

While she envisions the co-op growing bigger, it currently relies on volunteer contributions and available resources. Nevertheless, having the co-op benefits many people in the community by reducing food miles, supporting local producers, and building a strong community bond.

"Our committee embodies a shared effort and camaraderie. We all roll up our sleeves and lend a helping hand, supporting each other every step of the way. It's an inspiring experience to collaborate with individuals who bring different interests and contacts to the table, making our committee dynamic and enjoyable."

"The co-op gives our community the opportunity to access healthy, chemical-free, and locally sourced products. It's a chance to make a positive impact on the environment and foster a strong sense of community. The co-op's presence benefits countless people in our community. It reduces food miles, supports local producers, and strengthens the bond among neighbours, creating a sustainable and thriving community."

Julie Savage:

Julie Savage, a producer from Lomandra Farm, brings her expertise to BFC, where she is passionate about the significance of supporting local growers - understanding that large duopoly food retail outlets often lack local produce, resulting in lengthy transportation times and diminished nutritional value. Julie believes in the power of small enterprises that sustain local growers, as they offer short supply chains, sustainability, and community resilience.

She cites Beechworth as an exciting example, where the availability of diverse local produce has contributed to the town's vibrancy and transformed it into a popular food tourist destination.

For Julie, BFC holds immense value - it serves as a friendly and supportive platform that enables her to enter the market at her own pace. She highlights the benefits of this soft entry, comparing it to a gentle restaurant opening. By engaging with customers who are genuinely interested in her work, she can organically grow her business and gain valuable insights into what crops to grow and how to manage successions in the unique seasonal conditions of Bright.

Julie's commitment to positively impacting the planet drives her involvement with BFC. She advocates for short supply chains, community resilience, and increased nutritional value in local food. BFC shares these values by promoting zero waste, local sourcing, and chemical-free, organic, and biodynamic practices.

Julie sees a stark contrast between such initiatives and the conventional supermarket system, where food is often sprayed with chemicals unknown to the consumer, transported across long distances, and wrapped in plastic. She believes that the current options for selling produce through short supply chains in Bright are limited, making BFC an essential outlet.

Julie's experience with BFC has helped her refine her focus on growing specific vegetables, particularly salad mixes. The co-op's alignment with her values makes it the ideal platform to supply her produce. Her vision extends beyond personal success, aiming to support other local producers having similar experiences by providing them with a comfortable and flexible environment to supply the co-op. Julie believes that expanding BFC will enable the supply of a wide range of locally grown, chemically-free food, fostering relationships between producers and consumers. Her ultimate goal is to bring back a more sustainable approach to food production, nourishing the soil and the people who consume the food.

"I believe in the power of short supply chains, community resilience, and increased nutritional value in local food. Bright Food Co-op shares these values in promoting zero waste, local sourcing, and chemical-free practices. It stands in contrast to the conventional supermarket system, where food is often treated with chemicals unknown to the consumer, transported over long distances, and wrapped in plastic."

"The co-op's alignment with my values makes it the perfect platform to showcase my produce. My vision extends beyond personal success - I aspire to support other local producers in having similar experiences by creating a comfortable and flexible environment for them to supply the co-op. Ultimately, I aim to contribute to a more sustainable approach to food production that nourishes the soil and the people who consume our food."

Claire:

Claire has been a dedicated supporter of BFC since its inception. She values the opportunity to purchase locally sourced food from small-scale growers, particularly because most of the produce available is organic and pesticide free. Beyond the quality of the products, Claire relishes the sense of community that permeates BFC, allowing her to engage with the staff and occasionally meet the growers in person. Claire finds the commitment of BFC to decrease plastic usage appealing. She also appreciates that shopping at BFC enables her to embrace a more seasonal approach to eating, effectively reducing her reliance on long-distance transportation and contributing to a more sustainable food system.

Claire's support for BFC extends to getting her children involved by walking to the co-op and reinforcing eco-friendly habits. She discusses her food-buying tiers with her kids, the preference for fresh produce that could be homegrown, followed by dry goods from the co-op, and then supermarkets. Claire values involving her children in the process, as they see the dirt on the vegetables and understand the effort involved in growing food. She also appreciates the convenience of ordering from BFC and picking up the groceries, as it helps her with meal planning and minimises food waste. While Claire doesn't want to dedicate too much time to gardening, she takes pleasure in growing some vegetables and experimenting in her small garden.

Claire supports BFC because of its focus on local, organic produce, community engagement, reduced plastic usage, seasonal eating, and the positive influence it has on her children.

"Bright Food Co-op offers the opportunity to purchase local, organic produce from small-scale growers, fostering a strong sense of community and promoting sustainability. By shopping there, I actively contribute to the practice of seasonal eating, reducing our reliance on long-distance transportation and nurturing a healthier, more sustainable food system. BFC's values align with those important to my family."

"What I love most is involving my children in this journey. We walk together to the co-op, discussing our food-buying tiers. We prioritise fresh produce that could be grown at home, followed by dry goods from the co-op, and finally, resorting to supermarkets. It's important for my kids to understand the effort that goes into growing food and appreciate the connection between the earth and the nourishment it provides. The convenience of ordering from BFC and picking up the groceries streamlines my meal planning and minimises food waste."