

• **The scale and impact of the pandemic on your work and/or sector**

The [Open Food Network](#) (OFN) is a not-for-profit, co-operative open source platform enabling new, ethical food and drink supply chains. Food producers can sell online, wholesalers can manage buying groups and supply produce through networks of food hubs and shops. Communities can bring together producers to create a virtual farmers' market, building a resilient local food economy.

Since the COVID outbreak we have seen an 850% increase in the turnover through OFN shopfronts across Wales.

Small-scale producers, community food enterprises and resilient local economies all face threats from the COVID crisis situation. This has also been a time when there are massive opportunities to support and strengthen them as they are playing a vital role in ensuring food supplies in communities worldwide.

Since lockdown began in Wales, the local food networks we support have expanded dramatically. These networks are supporting many vulnerable families and individuals who found supermarket delivery slots are booked out for weeks.

Many food producers who were supplying the hospitality sector had to rapidly restructure their supply chains to find new routes to market – in many cases this meant finding local markets with households who were very keen to buy from local producers.

The growth in OFN turnover covered 4 main areas:

- **Farmers' Markets online:** although farmers' markets are still classified as essential services, the risks of potential COVID transmission has driven significant behaviour and process change, including many Councils closing them down. Many farmers' markets responded by rapidly developing an online option so that people can buy from farmers and farmers markets, either instead of or as a new 'socially distanced' option. Open Food Network [supports at least four different models](#) of doing this and have been rapidly on-boarding farmers markets over the last 3 weeks
- **Producer Shops:** Open Food Network is uniquely suited to farmers selling and managing their own distribution. They can do this independently, or

alongside their sales through farmers markets and hubs - all from the same interface and account

- Food Collectives and Hubs: There has been exponential growth in demand for local food from existing collectives and hubs, as well the establishment of new ones. We are working with [our existing users](#) as they expand rapidly, as well as holding the hands of many new regional groups working out how to get their food to people
- Wholesale: the collapse of the hospitality industry has meant large amounts of food are being produced and no longer have a market - they are getting turned away from the wholesale markets and dumped. We are working on a pilot to use Open Food Network to coordinate information about this produce availability and streamline it into larger wholesale markets.

#### • How Welsh Government action to date has helped to combat the impact of the pandemic

Welsh government advice has been much clearer and more rigorous than the advice from Westminster. This has helped the Open Food Network to provide clear guidance to the food producers and community food enterprises who came to us for [advice on food handling and distribution](#)

#### • What further steps the Welsh Government should take

Please promote the example being set by these community food enterprises which have been set up from scratch during the COVID crisis and are now each supporting 300+ households and trading over £5,000 every week:

- [Aberystwyth Farmers' Market](#)
- [Haverfordwest Food Hub](#)
- [Food Hub by FEAST Aberaeron](#)

We would like to roll out more of these enterprises across Wales. We need help reaching the communities who need this service and supporting those communities to mobilise their local producers and build local enterprises that will be resilient in the face of this and future crises.

#### • Any other areas within our remit you wish to draw to our attention

Now more than ever we need to address the issues surrounding Wales' vulnerability with its food supply chain and food values. We need to give support to food growing systems that work with nature and in balance with our environment. Many of the OFN producers, groups and hubs source their fresh products from small scale agroecological growers in Wales. Wales has a small but productive network of a little over 200 growers that are operating on 5 hectares or less, but which produce huge environmental gains, yet these fall outside of current and future plans for any CAP

reform policy and framework, we would urge the [Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee](#) to push for a review of this.

There is plethora of evidence-based research showing that diverse, small-scale, agroecological farming can significantly enhance the landscape and bring environmental gains on many levels; habitat, biodiversity, soil health and water quality. In addition the hubs that we support bring about these far wider social gains:

**Benefits for producers:**

- Secure markets for produce at fair prices
- Addressing cash flow issues
- Integrating into local communities and combating loneliness and isolation, an increasing problem in farming communities

**Benefits for communities they serve include:**

- Access to high quality, sustainably produced food and flowers
- Improved diets through increase in fruit and vegetable consumption
- Increased community cohesion: meeting more people from a more diverse backgrounds as a result of being involved in a CSA/ community project
- Increased opportunities for skills education and learning through volunteering and participation in events and courses

The COVID 19 Pandemic has, on one hand exposed weakness in our centralised, industrialised food system. On the other, it has also highlighted the vital role that locally-focussed, small scale producers can play in developing a resilient, secure and sustainable system that must underpin society's long-term future. Recent research, notably the ['A Matter of Scale'](#) report, has highlighted the viability and importance of low-impact, ecological farming; not only for that farming business but also for the wider society. This includes: adding value to primary products; keeping the money circulating within the local economy; and rural job creation (small scale organic horticulture supports more jobs per hectare than any other enterprise).

We know that Wales has some hugely progressive and forward-thinking policy and legislation, especially around environmental principles. We need to make sure vital funding for the environmental sector is not totally diminished by COVID-19 relief funding, we know the economic recovery is going to be a long, slow process but we feel using the principles of 'circular economy' (which our members do as a matter of routine) will help speed up the recovery here in Wales and perhaps help to make it a 'greener recovery'.

We are a small, fast-growing social enterprise with [global connections](#), should you require any further information or updates during your consultation process please do not hesitate to contact us.