

Project: Culturally Relevant Food for Fawkner - A collaboration between an urban farm and a food hub

Background

[Merri Food Hub](#) is a community food initiative, based at the Fawkner Senior Citizens Centre. The Hub offers an affordable, safe and consistent supply of culturally relevant fruits and vegetables to Merri-bek residents sourced from local growers and suppliers who prioritise environmentally sustainable practices. The purpose of this project was to partner with the Fawkner Food Bowls to scale up access to culturally relevant foods to the Fawkner population who are among the most diverse and have among the highest reported rates of food insecurity in Merri-bek, while also building logistics partnerships to improve supply chains for locally and sustainably produced food.

Merri Food Hub (MFH) identified that building a strong local food producer collaboration with Fawkner Food Bowls (FFB) to facilitate distributing culturally-relevant, sustainable and affordable fruits and vegetables for the local community of Fawkner and surrounds could achieve an increase in availability and an increase in uptake of culturally-relevant produce by the target audience

The project aimed to test this by gathering data on community requirements and preferences to determine culturally-relevant foods, and facilitate growing these foods in collaboration with Fawkner Food Bowls, for distribution by MFH via the online store and physical Friday Market.

The project ran from July to December 2022, encompassing project planning, engagement and customer research, crop and product planning, crop production and promotion, logistics collaborations, and the aggregation and distribution of culturally-relevant and locally-grown produce.



Project Purpose / Objective(s)

Objectives:

1. Increased awareness in varieties and quantities of culturally-relevant fresh produce
2. Increased capacity of a hyperlocal food supply chain to deliver culturally relevant produce.
3. Reduced administrative and aggregation burden: the logistics and coordination involved in localizing the food supply using existing infrastructure.

Project plan

The project focussed on resourcing key positions to facilitate engagement, co-ordination, and partnerships.

The project funded an operations manager at Merri Food Hub to co-ordinate production and distribution with Fawkner Food Bowls, assess community needs through consumer surveys and on-site conversations with customers, and promote the availability of culturally-relevant foods.

The project also resourced an Urban Farm Manager to support scaling up of production at Fawkner Food Bowls and coordination of production with the identified needs of MFH's customer base.

This partnership also worked to co-ordinate distribution infrastructure such as transport and cold storage to facilitate a local supply chain from Merri-bek producers through to MFH.

Resourcing

Operations Manager (Wages)	\$6,240
Volunteer/ Community Engagement Coordinator (Wages)	\$3,120
Urban Farm Manager (Wages)	\$6,240
Stationery/office supplies	\$110
Promotional materials and printing	\$2,300
Farm Materials (Compost & Seedlings)	\$2,100
Translation services for engagement materials	\$720

Project outcomes

Objective 1: Increased awareness in varieties and quantities of culturally-relevant fresh produce

Merri Food Hub collaborated with local Merri-bek growers to produce culturally-relevant food as identified by customers as well as sourcing culturally-relevant produce from other Melbourne and Victorian producers, resulting in a range of 24 culturally relevant foods available to CALD customers.

The project saw Merri Food Hub's customer base increase from 90 in June 2022 to 158 in March 2023, demonstrating that there is demand for the range of culturally-relevant foods they supply as well as for their engagement with the community.

The Merri Food Hub co-ordinator has indicated that while the customer base has decreased again since the project, due to changes at their physical market location that reduce convenience and accessibility, and less community engagement due to the lack of continued funding for a community engagement role, 6 customers have expressed that they continue to return because of access to culturally relevant foods that MFH have been able to continue to source.

Objective 2: The capacity of a hyperlocal food supply chain to deliver culturally relevant produce.

Paid employment for a Merri Food Hub co-ordinator provided the time, skills, and coordination to increase collaboration with local organisations and engagement to assess community needs, while the farm manager role allowed the co-ordination of production to increase in the range of culturally appropriate food available to residents.

The two funded roles were mutually supportive, allowing MFH to meet requests for culturally relevant produce, while also providing a clear sales channel for FFB crops and supporting their production. The two roles worked together to identify availability of relevant produce, what was selling well or in demand, and plan what would be planted and harvested. This coordination supported both enterprises by providing certainty on both ends of the supply chain.

"With the correct people being resourced, Fawkner and north Merri-bek has a need for an urban farm and a hub that can coordinate and distribute produce. There are people here who want to buy the locally grown culturally relevant product and people who need that resource and otherwise have to travel long distances to get it."

Customer feedback to MFH also highlighted that the project offered food with dignity to people facing food insecurity. MFH provides a subsidised fresh produce box for customers facing food affordability issues - these customers were able to receive produce of equal quality to paying customers rather than 'wholesaler's leftovers', and which they can identify as relevant to their diet, not just 'what can we do with this'.

Objective 3: Reduced administrative and aggregation burden: the logistics and coordination involved in localizing the food supply using existing infrastructure.

The funded roles working together co-ordinated supply chain logistics to transport and store produce, using cold storage organised via the FFB farm manager, and transport organised through MFH volunteers, while enabling well-forecast schedules for produce due to effective crop planning on the production end. The workload of administration and aggregation was

reduced by having a dedicated farm manager who could efficiently plan, forecast, and organise production in co-ordination with MFH, while the funded MFH co-ordinator role allowed sufficient administration and community engagement time to increase relevance of produce and overall sales through more consistent engagement with customers.

“What she did was farm management which was more than planting and harvesting, she was doing a crop planning and communications with MFH and discussing what was available and I was able to plan boxes and not have to rely on wholesalers. I could know we had stuff grown here and grown regeneratively, because of the time spent planning and collating the information. Without [the farm manager] it is proving difficult - the farmers’ aren’t as skilled as she was in the forecasting harvest timings and yields and that’s really important to me for planning boxes and markets.”



Learnings: What worked well and what didn't?

Resourcing co-ordination and management roles enables CFEs to scale up impact from existing models that are informed by community experience

Both Merri Food Hub and Fawkner Food Bowls were existing community food enterprise models developed out of identified community needs, with experience and understanding of how to meet these.

Resourcing paid roles for experienced staff embedded within the community enabled a significant improvement to operations, production, and customer base by providing the time and skills to commit to co-ordination, community engagement, administration, and supply management.

However, these roles do need to have longer-term support to build on initial collaborations and organisational development. It was difficult to crop plan with short projects and to take harvest inventory for sales with limited capacity.

It was identified that FFB would need a 1.5-2 FTE farm manager role approximately 2 years to effectively maintain reliable production, allowing for seasonal and succession planting.

Physical infrastructure is an ongoing key need which CFEs struggle to resource

Despite having grown a customer base and demonstrated a demand for their produce as well as the ability to co-ordinate local and relevant supply, Merri Food Hub still faces challenges in transport and space for aggregation and storage.

Temporary and part-time premises increase the time burden of setting up and packing down an enterprise, and limit accessibility to one day a week, while customers have expressed that if there were more trading days, they would come more often for culturally relevant and affordable produce, and not need to go further afield.

The urban farm model needs more development to effectively supply distributors focused on food security

There is potential for Fawkner Food Bowls to scale up production with existing infrastructure to supply Merri Food Hub and other programs addressing food security, however there is a need to clarify their production costs and pricing models to ensure their costs accurately reflect operations, while also being accessible for CFEs, which requires further administration resourcing.