

fruit and vegetable co-ops

- **Foodtogether** – a local community creating solutions for a local problem.
- **Toha Kai** – focusing on enabling equitable access to healthy, locally grown and climate appropriate kai while aiming to develop personal skills, build empowerment and strengthen rangatiratanga, kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga.
- **Wesley Community Action** – working together for the people of Porirua.



background

Kotahitanga, cooperation, cooperatives. Co-ops, of any kind, are about people coming together and joining forces because we are stronger together.

In this piece we dive-deeper into ‘fruit and vege co-ops’ across Aotearoa to understand how and why they have come to be, how they exist now, what makes them great, and what are the challenges and opportunities that they bring to food distribution within our communities?

Formally a cooperative is defined as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”¹

Within the food systems there are a range of different cooperatives operating at a range of scales, for example Foodstuffs NZ is a co-operative of grocer owner-operators who work collectively out of two co-operatives - [Foodstuffs North Island](#) and [Foodstuffs South Island](#). There are also co-ops of local growers which collectively sell produce to their communities such as [Nāti Kai in Te Tairāwhiti](#).

¹ <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/what-is-a-cooperative>

Grocer and produce co-ops have been around since the 19th Century. People on limited incomes, many of whom could no longer grow their own food having moved from rural areas to cities, were dissatisfied with the little control they had over their food and stores generating all the profits – so they came together to buy in bulk and operate like their own store.

Today, fruit and vege co-ops are becoming increasingly more common across Aotearoa, as communities look for better ways to access affordable, fresh kai. Operating in a variety of ways, generally produce is purchased in bulk from growers or wholesalers and then distributed after being purchased – paid forward, sponsored or funded through donation into low-income communities.

There are a number of benefits to the co-op model. Research by Prapavessis & Vogliano on the impact of the Wellington Fruit and Vege Co-op² identified four main themes that influenced food choice and member participation. These were: financial; health and wellbeing; social connection and environmental impacts.

They conducted focus groups and asked participants to rank which had the biggest influence on their participation in the co-op. Financial was the most influential as first and foremost. The co-op was a cost-effective way to feed their families quality fruit and vege. Second highest was health and wellbeing, as the co-op increased fruit and vegetable consumption.

Next was social connection, with the co-op creating opportunity to build social connection and socialisation for members as they shared time, recipes, and space during collection and volunteering. This impact extended into homes as whānau connected through preparing and enjoying kai together.

Environmental impacts were the final ranking and an important aspect of the co-op, as it reduced waste and food miles, and increased connections to local and regional growers.

² Prapavessis D, Vogliano C. Impact evaluation of Wellington Fruit & Vege Co-op programmes using a mixed-methods and value-based approach.

Research from overseas demonstrates how increasing access to fruit and veggies through co-ops positively impacts diet. Mhrshahi et al in Australia identified that those who belonged to a fruit and vege co-op have higher fruit and vegetable intakes than those who don't³. Brighter Bites in the USA is a school-based nutrition intervention adopting a co-op model where parents help to pack and distribute fresh produce to participating families. A study on this intervention found that those in the initiative improved diet related behaviours such as more exposure to fruit and vegetables, children asking for fruit and vegies, and families eating together.

Our diets play an important role in our health and therefore models which increase accessibility and affordability of fresh produce will contribute to a happier, healthier Aotearoa.

Co-op models create opportunity to increase the accessibility and affordability of fresh kai as well as support a more sustainable localised food system. Some co-ops sell boxes starting from just \$12 and are around \$5 less than the estimated retail value. A recent cost comparison analysis in Christchurch found that purchasing from a local organic co-op provided more value for money than purchasing from the local mainstream supermarket⁴. Models purchasing produce from local growers and farmer support strengthening local circular economies.

Purchasing produce straight from wholesale markets then selling to community means there is no middleman, reducing the cost to the end user – *but are these costs absorbed by others?*

One of the challenges with community food co-ops is the reliance on volunteers. In some circumstances volunteering is a rewarding opportunity that offers connection to people and place, however *when people dedicate their livelihoods to creating*

³ Mhrshahi S, Partridge SR, Zheng X, Ramachandran D, Chia D, Boylan S, Chau JY. Food co-operatives: A potential community-based strategy to improve fruit and vegetable intake in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2020 Jun;17(11):4154.

⁴ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/kai/07-02-2023/are-organic-vegetable-boxes-better-value-than-the-supermarket>

accessible healthy kai to communities, how is their time, expertise, and commitment valued?

Another challenge is, due to fruit and vege co-ops selling seasonal produce and purchasing in bulk, variety and choice is limited compared to shopping in supermarkets. Some co-ops provide an element of choice through offering a range of boxes or offering the ability to purchase extras alongside a standard box. Normalising and having the skills to eat seasonally is a vital behavioural change needed to move towards a more sustainable food system.

Many groups are working to support eating seasonally through providing recipes, cooking classes, and using platforms to share ideas. For example, [Wonky Box](#) has a recipe page on their website which you can filter by product and season to find recipes suited to your produce. Community gardens often have Facebook pages where members share ideas for using produce that is in bounty or ask for tips from others. This creates a community of practice where people can easily learn and share with each other.

Kore Hiakai aims to share the value in this model and support organisations who may be looking to adopt something similar. We spoke with Foodtogether, Wesley Community Action and Toha Kai to explore their models and share some of the wisdom they hold.

foodtogether

Foodtogether is one of the oldest and most widespread produce (fruit & veggie) cooperative models operating in Aotearoa. We connected with Foodtogether to learn from them, share their journey and build an understanding of their practice.

What lead you to operating this model?

Foodtogether started 28 years ago when a Christchurch based Anglican priest saw a need to access more affordable fresh food in his local community. By identifying how the local community could create solutions to this problem, he helped set up the first fruit and veggie co-op hub in Christchurch.

How does the model work?

The model has been refined and tested over the last 28 years.

Foodtogether operates by purchasing wholesale produce nationally under one structure to ensure access to bulk seasonal produce, at the best price. This is then distributed to over 15 locally coordinated hubs across the motu. The local hubs are based at community organisations such as community houses, churches, schools and marae.

At each hub volunteers come together and pack the produce boxes before distributing them to their community. The Foodtogether central team provides all the logistical support to get affordable fresh produce to the right location while the local hubs pack the kai and interact with their community.

Role of the Foodtogether team

The Foodtogether team provides the logistic support, sourcing kai, ensuring health and safety standards, and helping with promotion. During the process of building up the local hub Foodtogether visits the site to check that the hub meets health and safety requirements and familiarises the organisation with the Foodtogether food safety plan to ensure they are operating safely and legally. During this visit they also work with them to create and customise a co-op box together, so that the boxes suit the preferences of their community in variety, quality and price.

Role of community organisations as local hubs

Foodtogether partner with a diverse range of organisations such as kura, community houses, churches and marae supporting a diverse range of communities to access fresh, affordable kai. There are around 15 hubs across the country which each have a network of pick-up points.

Local community members purchase their food box in advance through the local packing hub or through a [online portal](#) which indicates where their local hub is.

The local hubs receive orders in advance. They then come together as a team of volunteers once a week to pack. Foodtogether encourages groups to relax and have a cup of tea together while they wait for the truck to arrive. This is a special time where volunteers can strengthen relationships and socialise.

What values underpin your model and how does this impact how you operate?

Empowerment – providing the core services of procurement, logistics, and compliance so local communities are empowered to meet the food needs of their community.

Inclusion and intergenerational connection – we intentionally aim to partner with organisations where all walks of life can interact and connect. We exist to address isolation and believe strongly that communities are better when people are connected and know the people they live around.

What is unique about your model?

“Operating for 28 years is unique as many co-ops I know of come and go as people move onto another stage of life.”

Foodtogether attributes their longevity to being organisationally structured not dependant on specific people. This helps ensure they can be a sustainable business. Foodtogether are purposeful about who they partner with and ensure that each organisation is one that is deeply embeded within their community. At times, Foodtogether build into their contracts regular opportunities for engagement to build-up structure.

What's one of your biggest learnings since working with Foodtogether?

Purposefully partnering with others brings sustainability and enables them to work towards addressing complex issues such as social isolation and food security. Local community organisations know community and we can support them with our strengths and knowledge in industry. “Nothing beats word of mouth promotion and empowering locals to care for locals.”

“Because the produce is perishable, it can be difficult to learn and understand what and how to order to ensure it's at a good price, people will want it and it won't go to waste. From my experience it's best to reach out and learn from others. The work is highly dynamic and we are always learning.”

Insights for others looking to start a fruit and vege co-op:

Reach out and connect with others. Many people have years of experience and knowledge, connecting and learning from them will help you to access the required produce and understand what is needed in terms of logistics and compliance – we are better together.

What do you like, wish and wonder about fruit and vege co-ops?

“I like the fact that it's grass roots and community helping community. I wish that with the limited resources available that the word would get out and more local neighbourhoods could gather to start a local co-op. I wonder how many other social issues, and general quality of life improvements we could see, just through simply gathering together once a week with people that live in your neighbourhood to get a great deal in fresh produce?”



toha kai

Located in Woolston, Christchurch is Roimata Food Commons, a thriving organic community garden that has been operating for 6 years. Running alongside this initiative is the organic co-op Toha Kai – toha meaning to share.

Toha Kai focuses on enabling equitable access to healthy, locally grown and climate appropriate kai while aiming to develop personal skills, build empowerment and strengthen rangatiratanga, kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga.

What lead you to operating this model?

There is inadequate access to fresh, affordable kai in Woolston Christchurch as many food outlets sell fast, poor-quality foods. Toha Kai aims to strengthen food sovereignty in Woolston by increasing access to quality kai, strengthening food skills and knowledge, reducing waste, and ultimately benefiting the health and wellbeing of whānau in their rohe.

How does the model work?

Toha Kai purchases wholesale organic produce from local Canterbury growers with some extras purchased from growers within Aotearoa. The produce is then packed in the warehouse in Woolston before it's delivered throughout the community.

Toha Kai offers a range of fresh produce boxes to suit different whānau sizes and preferences. Toha kai is available right across Christchurch and depending on your location you can choose whether to pick up from your local collection point or have your box delivered straight to your door. Boxes can be purchased as a one off or subscription.

The model makes organic produce affordable by adding a small margin to the wholesale price to cover costs rather than make profit. "Organic growers were keen to work with us as this was opening opportunities to reach a new market."

What values underpin your model? How does this impact how you operate?

Toha kai is driven by values rather than profit, aiming to earn enough to meet costs and support social and physical wellbeing. The values embedded within the organisation are *inclusion* and *collectiveness*.

Inclusion – because everyone is welcome and there are no barriers to being involved with Roimata Food Commons or Toha Kai.

Collectiveness – because they work side by side with others to grow and sell quality food for everyone.

What's one of your biggest learnings since you started operating this model?

Relationships take time, be patient and people will come round.

“Two years after starting the community garden, someone came and cut down 20 trees. This was a direct message of hate and I was absolutely devastated. I was angry and upset before I realised that I could choose how to react to this. I chose to see this as a call for help – this person needed support. We were able to learn from this experience and we made extra effort to communicate our purpose throughout the community to help form a collective understanding and create a space where the community felt welcome and a part of commons. Since then we haven't had any vandalism.”

Making people feel welcome to participate in a community garden can be tricky. Participation can take many forms and doesn't have to be reciprocal or transactional at all times. Energy ebbs and flows eventually give balance – some people may have plenty of time and energy to give to a garden while others don't. “Perhaps that produce is used to provide a nutritious meal creating healthier people and a healthier community to live in, giving energy back to those who gave their time to help grow that?”

What's next for Toha kai?

Toha Kai looks at their whole system and continuously explores how they can improve their operations and create more sustainable solutions to growing and distributing kai. They are researching and demonstrating solutions to realising a carbon negative operation in partnership with UC. In a step towards this they have

recently imported a trike to deliver kai, an asset that uses zero emissions to run and supports active lifestyles.

They have also purchased their first plot of land in a move towards growing all their own organic produce, with a vision of growing on around six farms across Christchurch. Rather than continuing to expand Toha Kai is exploring how they can do better with deep relational intentions woven into the structure.

What do you like wish and wonder about Toha Kai?

“I wish that people were more aware of the problems and opportunities that exist within our food systems. I love the relationships that are in this! Putting energy into relationships brings opportunity and cultivates healthy, mutually supportive relationships. I wonder how this is going to change? I wonder what the role private sector has to play in making effective change? We need their expertise and resources to make positive outcomes.”



wesley community action

Wesley Community Action coordinates the Wellington region fruit and vege co-op in partnership with Te Whatu Ora. Wesley Community Action is passionate about working together to support the people of Porirua to live the lives they value. We spoke with them to understand how this led to operating a fruit and vege co-op model.

What led you to operating the Co-op ?

Wesley Community Action (WCA) has always operated a foodbank, and in 2008 they were giving around 300 parcels each week, and *were curious whether they were perpetuating the problem and what else they could do?*

This was when they started growing a community garden at Wesley house, bringing people into the space. They noticed how people started to look after the property feeling a sense of ownership and pride in the garden. This created a conscious awareness of believing that their community has a lot to offer.

They then started pulling together information on the Porirua food environment, looking at the number of fast food outlets and lack of healthy options, comparing this to the abundant food environment in the neighbouring town just 6 km away. Te Whatu ora also conducted research in Porirua, describing Porirua as a food swamp. The social injustice was clear and led WCA to question - *how can we provide fresh fruit and veges to the community together?*

Upon hearing of Foodtogether they visited Christchurch to understand more about fruit and vege co-ops. Foodtogether showed them their model and were generous with sharing their resources to help WCA pilot a co-op of their own. Word spread quick and other communities in Wellington were eager to join, leading WCA to take on the position as regional coordinator for the Wellington region fruit and vege co-ops.

“Growing up in Porirua there used to be a veggie gardens in every second house and now there’s hardly any.”

The model

The Wellington Fruit and Vege Co-op is a collaborative initiative weaving community, public health and industry. Produce is brought from wholesale at MG Gardens. Within MG there is a coordinator, who coordinates purchasing and provides a list of the best value, seasonal produce available. The WCA coordinator shares this to the 10 hubs who each pick the produce they want for the week. This order is then processed and put together by MG.

A local trucking company, ME transport, delivers the produce to the 10 hubs where volunteers come together to pack the boxes. The boxes are then delivered to the hubs network of distribution sites such as kura and community houses where locals collect their produce box.

Te Whatu Ora supports them with resources including communications, marketing and website administration. The WCA coordinator holds things together and does logistics such as setting up the hubs and ensuring food safety standards are met. There are 10 hubs which each have a network of distribution hubs in the community.

What values are central to the co-op and how do we weave these into your mahi?

“People should live the life they value. This is what underpins all of the mahi at WCA. It’s not up to anyone else to decide what others should value – we support others to live that.”

Leadership – supporting the community and WCA team to be confident leaders so that they can bring out the best in others. They are cautious of not bringing preconceived ideas of what is good for people, but instead invite people to share and ask questions to help them recognise their own strengths.

Curiosity and innovation – encouraging others to be imaginative and try new things.

Community connection – the initiatives create space for connection. Many of the volunteers were living isolated lives. Volunteering at the co-op gives them something to fill their boots and to feel a sense of pride having contributed to their community.

What's next for the co-op?

Momentum is building and WCA want to continue to adapt and improve. In May 2022 they were doing 1300 boxes and as at May 2023 ar up to 1600 boxes and still climbing.

WCA is diversifying to include meat in their co-op. With increased demands Prestons Master Butchers is expanding to open a warehouse in Porirua. This will enable WCA to order through Prestons, and they will have storage freezers at WCA house where they can store the meat. This way, the only extra food safety element is paying an inspector to check storage temperatures.

They are also looking at how they can utilise the chicken that is in excess after specific orders at Tegal.

What insights would you like to share with others looking to do something similar?

Get local buy-in right at the beginning. Involving community at the start will create a sense of ownership and ensure longevity.

“As soon as you have the question, start talking! Work collaboratively with others. Ask the question - *what can we do together that we can't do alone?*“

What do you like wish and wonder about produce co-ops?

“I like that we are now articulating new alternatives to the current supermarket system. We are getting better at creating alternatives that provide choice. Covid highlighted how wrong the current food systems is. This alternative way supports local growers, local businesses and provides healthy kai. I love that it's a system with many – there's alot of skin in the game. I wonder how big it will get in terms of diversity of food and hub numbers throughout the country? I wonder if other regions will look to do something similar, and if so, how it will look in other communities?”

