

London Assembly Environment Committee Call for Evidence:

Supporting Local Food Growing in London

Response developed in collaboration with: Women's Environmental Network, CFGN, Limbrough Growing Hub, Stepney City Farm, Providence Row, Mad Leap, Boil & Bubble Bowden, Seeds for Growth charity.

Context to this submission: This submission is based on a range of insights and recommendations submitted from community representatives involved in food growing in Tower Hamlets. It also draws directly on recommendations from "[Seeds for a Revolution](#)" and "[Recipes for Revolution](#)". These reports were written by the [Blueprint Architect group](#), an evolving group of 20-30 people representing community leaders, organisations, activists and residents engaged in the food system of Tower Hamlets. Blueprint Architects developed the recommendations based on their collective experiential knowledge, and learning from the [Just FACT programme](#). The Just FACT programme consists of a partnership of 26 community gardens, collectives, food co-ops and social enterprises coming together to create the building blocks for an alternative food system that is democratic, environmentally sustainable, and people-driven.

1. Main Barriers to Local Food Growing in London

a. How do these barriers differ across various demographics, including age, income, and ethnicity, and what are the underlying causes of these disparities?

Barriers for young people

- **Lack of opportunity to build relationships with people who could teach them to grow:** Boil and Bubble Bowden reflect that the SEN children they work with can be isolated from the relationships they need to learn growing skills.

"Kids will learn from being around other people. That's a barrier for B&B kids, just being in a relationship, trusting, listening, spending time with the other person. Having not had access to these things is huge."

- Boil and Bubble Bowden

- **Limitations of schools to support skill development:** Food growing skills are not required to be taught as part of the curriculum, so the offer schools have around food growing will vary in scope and quality. As a result, schools often need to spend time applying to grant makers, or partnering with community organisations to apply for funding for growing projects, which can lead to a variable, limited or short term offer to students.

Barriers for older people

- **Toilets:** Research from Toynbee Hall has shown that older people in Tower Hamlets plan their day to day activities according to whether they can access a toilet. For

some older people, whether a growing site has access to a toilet may decide whether or not they participate in the project. Community gardens in Tower Hamlets have raised funds to build compost toilets on site such as Mile End Community Garden (MECG) and R-Urban, while other community gardens like Cranbrook Community Garden are in the process of looking for funds to meet this need. MECG and Bethnal Green Nature Reserve have worked with Compost Mentis to co-design the toilet with residents, ensuring the design meets the needs of different groups within the local community.

- **Accessibility of sites:** See barriers for disabled people.
- **Digital exclusion:** Stepney City Farm have pointed out that digital exclusion can stop Londoners with limited skills or devices from finding their local growing sites. Research from London AgeUK (2021) shows that Londoners over 75 still face significant struggles with using the internet. Just FACT projects have succeeded in including older Londoners by getting out into the community and inviting them to join through door knocking, local people inviting older friends from the community, or targeting invitations to older people's services like Linkage Plus.

Barriers to growing for people on low incomes

- **Access to land:** See below
- **Sufficient time and funding for community engagement:** Over the course of the Just FACT programme, there are key learnings about how growing projects involve local working class communities. R-Urban Poplar is now a thriving closed loop system growing site, but workers spent hundreds of hours door knocking and repeated engagement with residents over time to build trust and a relationship with the site and team based there. Seeds for Growth charity faced difficulties in getting residents involved in food growing on the Isle of Dogs until they linked with local partners:

“Although the project found it challenging to encourage individuals to join sessions at the growing area selected, there was more success when sessions were delivered in familiar surroundings...The collaboration with the local clinic, church, and social health practitioners has motivated these organisations to enhance their existing spaces for gardening and cultivation programs benefiting their users or patients.”

- Seeds for Growth charity

‘There is a lot of extra work and time that has to go into good community work, and you have to be really flexible in a space that is open to the public. You have to be able to pivot and unknown things come up, but this isn't always accounted for or covered by funders. A lot of time working on an estate is spent relationship building, and chatting about what's going on in people's lives. It doesn't always have a direct 'outcome' but it's still important and part of community building. Perhaps it doesn't feel valued in the same way as other types of work. The value and impact of it is difficult to measure and quantify. These parts of a project need to be acknowledged and valued more, not as an extra but more central part.’

- Limborough Hub

As communities have become involved in growing projects, they have been

supported to run their own activities, take part in decision-making or become paid members of staff. However, there also needs to be more support for working class residents who want to start their own growing initiatives to receive funding, training and support. Youth Collective, Somos Semillas, for example, have received funding from Just FACT to resource a facilitator within the group to support their work to develop and include more young people in indigenous growing practices. As a non-charitable entity, it can be harder for them to access funding (see barriers for people experiencing racism below).

Barriers to growing for groups who experience racism

- **Extensive research has already been done by BIPOC organisations and researchers examining these issues in depth:** We encourage the committee to refer to two Rootz into Food Growing (Calliste, Sivapragasam, McDonald, Land In Our Names, 2021) and Jumping Fences (Terry, 2023)
- **Lack of sustainable funding for BIPOC-led food initiatives:** For misery, a mental health community creating QTIBPOC-specific spaces for nature-based healing activities, funding is 'one of the biggest obstacles' for the continuation of their work. *"A more robust approach would need to be well resourced, consistently - Most likely it needs to be from governmental level"*. As misery is not a legally constituted entity, a larger charitable organisation agreed to act as a host to hold funds from the Just FACT programme. However, many funders do not offer this flexibility, making it more difficult for collectives outside of charitable structures to be funded.
- **Inaccessible information about projects:** According to Stepney City Farm, it is important for local residents to access information in languages that reflect local demographics. Older people from ethnic minorities are also more likely to be digitally excluded than white older people (Poole, Lydia et al., 2021). There needs to be support for growing projects to find non-digital ways for people to find out about local growing sites and sign up for them.

Barriers to growing for disabled people

- **Toilet provision:** A lack of toilets on growing sites can also impact the inclusion of disabled people in growing projects. See Bichard & Knight, 2012 for how disabled people are impacted by the increasing scarcity of public toilets. At Limborough, a 'grow, cook and eat' food and action hub, the team have flagged that the inside toilets of this adapted council flat are not suitable for people with extra mobility needs. They are also only available during working hours though the site itself is open at any time for key holders.
- **Accessibility of sites:** Growing sites often are not fully accessible to disabled people. Limborough Hub is a community growing site very close to lots of schools including SEN providers, but unfortunately as the garden is not fully accessible there have been barriers to engaging with them. Often the people managing growing sites are aware of the problems such as unsuitable pathways, but lack the funds to be able to rectify the issue.

Barriers to growing for homeless people

- **Insecure housing and lack of access to resources:** According to Providence Row, there are specific challenges to accessing growing spaces for homeless

people, who have no fixed abode and are therefore often transient. If they do get given accommodation it often comes without access to a green space. Little to no access to growing spaces means they also don't have access to gardening tools and resources such as seeds/compost that accompanies these projects.

- **Lack of gardening opportunities:** Providence Row's 10-week Gardening Trainee scheme provides a horticulture accreditation; it's proven to have a great impact on participant's mental wellbeing, confidence and motivation, but there aren't necessarily opportunities available to continue exercising their skills once the programme is over.
- **Wellbeing factors:** Substance misuse and mental health may contribute to lack of engagement in gardening. If someone has been rough sleeping, their energy and ability to be focus/be punctual can be difficult.

"As our clients don't have homes, land or resources of their own to buy tools, compost and seeds etc., they are much less likely to be able to grow food and enjoy the benefits that come with gardening/growing and having a tranquil outdoor space to use by themselves or with a local community that they may eventually be a part of."

- Providence Row

b. How easy and affordable is it to access land for food growing?

Redistributing land ownership is essential to democratise access to food. Yet accessing land for food growing in London presents significant challenges:

- **There are not enough sites to meet demand for growing spaces:** Stepney City Farm has shared that they cannot meet the local demand for growing spaces. There is a big Bangladeshi community in Stepney that come from a growing background who are keen to have allotments. They have the growing skills but not the land.

"Access to growing space is limited or non-existent, including outside of the school, at home, for the kids to continue learning and growing"

- Boil and Bubble Bowden

"Those with no access to gardens have less opportunities unless they are lucky enough to have an allotment or access to green space (unlikely)... [Accessing land for food growing is] not affordable unless there is access to allotments."

- MadLEAP

- **Regeneration and access to space:** Many growing sites in Tower Hamlets are dependent on permission from housing associations and the local council. This is a fantastic opportunity but can be precarious, especially where sites are in 'meanwhile' spaces during regeneration efforts.

"If housing associations and Councils are able to offer spaces like this for free, that is amazing – it has been key for a model like Limborough, and is what makes the project possible."

- Limborough Hub

'In order to continue what we do at R-Urban we need to secure future space from the developer and Poplar HARCA'

-R Urban Poplar

Seeds for Growth charity have observed increased awareness by landowners of the health and well-being benefits for their tenants and residents of gardening outdoors, and that the new plants and trees mitigate the negative impact of climate change. In their experience funding more readily obtained from the registered social landlords, than from local authorities.

- **Access to land and issues of ownership and management by residents:** A number of Just FACT projects have found challenges related to issues of community ownership of growing sites. Limborough Hub in Poplar has tried various approaches to organising ownership over beds. They trialled a year of shared beds and experienced a huge drop off in interest, and found that in general people want to take responsibility for their own patch. Eastend Homes offers residents access to growing spaces, and though the intention is always to create community gardens, their experience has been that residents prefer to have their own plots. There is always an issue of there not being enough beds for every resident who wants them, leading to people feeling allocation is unfair. In answer to this Eastend Homes tends to build more beds rather than over-manage existing beds. They also advocate for the council to conduct a space audit, creating opportunities for residents to be able to challenge or suggest growing spaces either to landlords or the council itself.
- **The financialisation of land and the concept of 'land ownership' in London:** Redistributing land ownership is key to democratise access to food. Society is becoming more widely aware that access to land is one of the biggest barriers to accessible, healthy, nutritious food, whether this be a raised bed in communal flats, a community garden or a small farm holding. The concept of land ownership is both theoretically and practically a hindrance to food justice as it relies upon restricted access to resources that could and should be used as spaces for collective use, including food growing (Platform London, 2023).

"We talk about using the framework of reparations to rebuild our relationship with the earth, and central to this framework is healing. As a community we need to rebuild a relationship with the land that we live with now in Britain but that's hard because we are told so often this isn't our land. As soon as we make a mistake we are told to go back to where you came from because this isn't our home, but that isn't viable for me. I was born here and the land of my ancestral heritage in Bangladesh is drowning because of capitalism and colonialism. I need to build a relationship with the land that is here, and to connect the struggle here with struggles happening across borders."

- Sumayyah Zannath, Blueprint Architect

c. What training and skills are required for local food growing to expand?

Recognise, resource and connect local sources of knowledge of food and food growing: There is a wealth of knowledge that exists within communities, but there is no

infrastructure in place to properly compensate and connect community members who hold such knowledge. The Blueprint Architects ask that local councils recognise the value of local knowledge of the land, of food growing, and of community needs by properly resourcing people with the relevant expertise to advise and provide support to new and ongoing projects.

Support local food growing networks: The Architects also ask for local authorities to support the development of an accessible network of local food growers and of other local individuals and organisations working within the food system, so that people in need are aware of where to look for support. One example of this being done is through the Tower Hamlets Food Growing Network, currently run by WEN. The network runs seasonal gatherings and provides direct practical support and training to local groups wanting to set up gardens. Another example is how the team running R-Urban Poplar community garden has collaborated with local community members on workshops, where they have shared food growing and cooking knowledge with others within the community. Another great example is misery - a mental health collective for queer, trans and non-binary people of colour to come together and exchange knowledge about the land and growing. Community Food Growers Network (CFGN) provides this support for food projects at London-wide level. Existing growers networks are part of the infrastructure needed for connecting and supporting growers, but they can be difficult to resource. Ideally councils would fund support networks and organisers in localities who are doing this work.

Training to support conflict resolution: Residents using shared growing sites can experience multiple types of conflict that can make or break participation, such as treatment of the space, use of materials, or theft.

“There can be a lot of conflict in shared spaces. Support or training on how to residents and organisers can communicate well would help, as well as having suitable forums to communicate grievances as well.

- Limborough

Other training needs raised by contributors to this evidence raised the need for organisational and administrative skills for residents to more independently run garden and support with approaches to collective decision making. Succession planning support is another need for many growing spaces that rely on one of two residents to run successfully.

2. Recognition and Valuation of Local Food Growing in Current Policies

a. Are there any examples of good practice from local authorities supporting local food growing?

Southwark Council: There are a number of promising initiatives being taken by Southwark Council, including a community food growing officer to liaise with community groups and clear ways that residents can search for [local food growing sites](#). The [Southwark Land Commission](#) report also seeks to find ways ways “spaces in Southwark have the potential to work harder for people in the borough”.

Hull council has passed a motion granting '[right to grow](#)' which shifts 'which shifts access to public land from a permission-based approach, to a rights-based system with an emphasis on meaningful and trusting engagement between community and authority.'

b. What opportunities are there for the Mayor to support local food growing in the renewal of the London Plan?

MadLEAP shared the following advice on how the London Plan could make land and resources available:

“Supporting access to training, repurposing unused green space as well as brown spaces. Temporary use could be granted for land earmarked for development, support with mobile infrastructure would be helpful for those with limited resources”

- MadLEAP

c. Is there anything else that can be done to support local food growing in London?

Support for community facilities including compost toilets: Tower Hamlets council have been quite supportive of compost toilets being developed in Tower Hamlets, which is to be celebrated. We recommend other councils follow their example, and not require community groups to apply for planning permission for community facilities in community spaces.

Improvements are needed for how Londoners find out about their local growing sites: According to Stepney City Farm, people who are digitally excluded or have limited English need information in languages that reflect local demographics, and non-digital ways for people to find out about local growing sites and sign up for them.

Creating a supportive economic environment for local growers and producers to cross-subsidise community growing: MadLEAP advocates for a push towards more local procurement and coordination on the sales and marketing front to ensure local produce (where grown as part of a community enterprise model) is sold locally to minimise food miles.

Better use of underused land: Support for initiatives that seek to increase access to spare or underused land would be helpful. Seeds for Growth take an approach to identifying social housing estates and with the support and funding from the landowner, then entuses, trains, and supports the tenants and residents to create their own new community gardens, for example. The Environment Committee could also engage with '[Land Match](#)', a consortium who are developing a new land matching service for England, that will open up more space for community-led, diverse and sustainable farming landscapes.

d. Are there any co-benefits in meeting other environmental or strategic targets that can be achieved by increasing food growing?

Health and Wellbeing: There has been feedback across Just FACT projects about the positive impact of activities on people's health and wellbeing:

'We have really enjoyed coming to these workshops and gardening is good for my mental health because it gets me out of the house'.

- Limbrough workshop participant

Seeds for Growth charity have also conducted a literature review detailing the physical and mental health benefits of growing, which can be found in the reference section of this document.

Employment: Getting involved in local growing projects can increase residents' confidence to get into work, whether that's through practising English or taking up leadership roles.

Recognising that community hubs allow cross over of mutually reinforcing activities:

Where many activities are taking place on the same site, it can be easier to engage with residents to try something new.

'Having the coffee morning at the hub space where lots of families locally meet has meant more crossover between the different groups of people coming to the activities. For instance, the gardening participants come to the coffee morning and the Maydwell gardeners run the coffee morning at Limbrough Hub who also attend our workshops. The community using the space has grown significantly in the past year.'

- Limbrough Hub'

Biodiversity net gain policy This could be promoted to developers as a reason to support development of growing sites. However, it should be recognised land needs to be taken care of for those targets to be met and there should be more engagement with developers for them to understand what that means.

"More food growing for local consumption will help reduce food miles; ensure higher nutrient levels by removing the need for early harvesting, chilling and transport; provide green training and employment opportunities; increase local biodiversity; offer therapeutic activities; help people reconnect with nature and where food comes from; encouraging healthier eating, particularly when food growing is integrated with school curriculums and menus."

- MadLEAP

Conclusion

It is encouraging that the Environment Committee has instigated this call for evidence. It is also important to recognise that there is vital research and existing work out there in response to these questions. As well as the BIPOC-led research referenced in 'Barriers for groups who experience racism, Solidarity Across Land Trades (SALT) has a Workers' Enquiry coming out soon, about the state of workers' rights in the food growing sector. We urge the London Assembly to engage in an ongoing way with research produced by community food growers and organisers, and create capacity and connections through which to do this.

Reference list

Richard J., Knight G. (2012), 'Improving public services through open data: public toilets' Available at: <https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/1119/1/Bichard%20%26%20Knight.pdf>.

London AgeUK (2021), 'Mind the digital gap'. Available at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/london/projects-campaigns/mind-the-digital-gap/>

Platform London (2023), 'Seeds for a Revolution'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/seeds-for-a-revolution.pdf>

Platform London (2023)
'Recipes for Revolution (2023)'. Available from: https://justfact.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Recipes-for-Revolutions_FINAL_web_Spreads.pdf

Poole L., Ramasawmy M., Banerjee A. (2021), 'Digital first during the COVID-19 pandemic: does ethnicity matter?', The Lancet Public Health, Volume 6, Issue 9, e628 - e630. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(21\)00186-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(21)00186-9/fulltext)

Seeds for Growth, COMMUNITY GARDENS HEALTH, SOCIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS. Available at: https://www.seedsforgrowth.org.uk/files/ugd/f53af1_6e000ebffa9b4252adacab3d919ae06c.pdf

Seeds for Growth, 'Greening Communities Programme'. Available at: https://www.seedsforgrowth.org.uk/files/ugd/f53af1_ec55c5418fd74e54889484b765017714.pdf

Sivapragasam S., McDonald M., Calliste J. of Land In Our Names (2021), 'Rootz into Food Growing'. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eece00ee6780d38b9fb012f/t/60ace24b8b87b828f51ec72e/1621942864883/FINAL+Rootz+into+Food+Growing+report+25.05.21.pdf>

Terry N. (2023), 'Jumping Fences'. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eece00ee6780d38b9fb012f/t/63b599ddb28c5936edc62cff/1672845804758/Jumping+Fences+2023+Web.pdf>

Toynbee Hall (2018), 'You don't really know people 'til you talk to them' Available at: <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/You-dont-really-know-people-till-you-talk-to-them-Older-Peoples-Participatory-Action-Research-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>