



STEPNEY CITY FARM

Sustainable Urban Growing
September 2023 - November 2024



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

About sustainable growing at Stepney City Farm

03

03

WHAT WE DID

Recruited a syhleti-speaking food grower

Key aims - creating a clear channel of communication

What we successfully achieved

04-06

04

05

06

IMPACT

Engagement

Environmental Impact

07-08

07

08

LEARNING & INSIGHTS

09

CONCLUSION

10

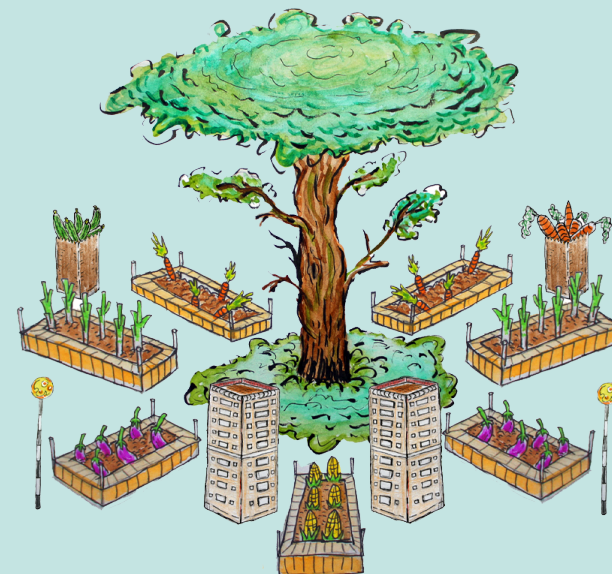
RESOURCES

11



INTRODUCTION

Stepney City Farm is a 4.5-acre mixed agriculture working farm, a unique educational resource, and a rural oasis at the heart of the local community. The site includes over an acre of food growing; grazing for animals; craft studios; a Farmer's Market; and a Café utilising produce raised and grown on the Farm. Entry is free; six days a week, urban children and adults in one of England's most deprived boroughs can meet animals, try out crafts, and connect with food production, through formal learning programmes for schools and youth; therapeutic volunteering; the provision of 64 allotments; and access to affordable local produce grown without chemicals or machinery. Our primary beneficiaries are the inhabitants of Stepney and the wider borough of Tower Hamlets.



ABOUT SUSTAINABLE GROWING

- We have been managing our food growing as a social enterprise since 2017. We wanted to recruit a Sylheti-speaker as our second Food Grower to facilitate two-way learning with our Bangladeshi community, enabling us to be more inclusive and to better meet the specific local demand for produce. Our local Bangladeshi community make up a large proportion of our site users and constitute 95% of our allotment plot holders. Increased capacity would also enable us to meet a demand from community groups for more advanced horticulture workshops and learning opportunities. Many of the first-generation community originate from farming backgrounds.
- We hoped in the process to monitor the impact on productivity and gather valuable data and learning for others embarking on small scale farming projects and urban growing initiatives and help us to understand ways in which we can move our own activities forward to a more financially viable position.

KEY AIMS

- Developing production and sales to the point of financial sustainability
- Deliver advanced horticulture workshops and learning opportunities for community groups
- Be more inclusive and better meet the specific local demand for produce
- Develop channels of communication and build links for our Bangladeshi community to opportunities and programmes on the Farm
- Learn from and include people with their own experience of traditional farming and growing techniques
- Engage more people with using sustainable and ecological principles on site and at home
- Develop inclusive community events centred on growing and cooking

WHAT WE DID

RECRUITED A SYLHETI-SPEAKING FOOD GROWER

Advertised posters in English and Sylheti around the farm and informed our allotment holders of the opportunity. Reached out to the local community groups, allotment holders, businesses and hubs to share flyers for the position. We took this approach to reach the right people, who might not be social media followers or people who would be keeping an eye on our website for opportunities, or who may not even have considered that they could have a job as a grower in an urban area like Stepney.

Many of our local community are first generation Bangladeshi and are from traditional farming communities where growing their own food is a normal way of life. The opportunity to practice food growing was reflected in the number of applications for the Food Grower role.



We shortlisted six interviewees successfully recruited two Sylheti food growers who decided on doing a job share to work around family and household responsibilities. This was an unanticipated but ideal outcome, as the Farm would benefit from not one but two new skill sets, and the post holders would be able to help support each other as they settled into life at the Farm.



“If the workshop had been in English only, I don’t think many people would have come to the session.” - Sajia

Sajia Nessa and Tahmina Aziz started working 2.5 days a week each, crossing over for half a day on Wednesdays from September 2023. Tahmina was available to work on Sundays which meant there was food growing staff available on site 7 days a week. Tahmina was also available to support on Saturdays on the markets.

WHAT WE DID

COUNCIL FUNDING TO REBUILD DILAPIDATED PLOTS

An unexpected development: the council stepped in with some Local Infrastructure funding to rebuild our aging and dilapidated allotment plots in a different part of the Farm.

CREATING A CLEAR CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION WITH EXISTING PLOT HOLDERS

The farm's growers team now has 4 members of staff who all have a set of skills that complement one another. A Growing Team WhatsApp group was set up as a platform for questions, updates, tasks and photos.

Tahmina volunteered to translate at the consultation meeting for the 60% of plot holders who have little-to-no English. Tahmina had a clamour of plot holders around her wanting to speak about their specific plot locations and who they wanted their neighbours to be. Community engagement has turned out to be one of the aspects of their roles that they have both enjoyed the most.

The new allotment plots have been established for a full year and are thriving. Sajia and Tahmina have helped the rest of the staff to become more known to the allotment holders and have also helped us to deal with some situations which would previously have been very difficult.



KEY AIMS

1. Recruitment of a Food Grower – Originally planned for August 2023 but extended to allow for effective hiring.
2. Inclusive Hiring – Ensuring the role was accessible to the local Bangladeshi community, particularly by prioritizing Sylheti language skills.
3. Community Engagement – Strengthening relationships between the farm, Bangladeshi allotment holders, and the wider community.
4. Increasing Food Productivity – Testing whether additional staff would boost food production and sales.
5. Enhancing Local Sales – Expanding market reach, particularly for Bangladeshi vegetables.
6. Infrastructure Improvements – Supporting the council-led rebuilding of allotment plots.

WHAT WE DID

- Successful Recruitment & Job Share – Two candidates, Sajia Nessa and Tahmina Aziz, were hired in a job-share arrangement, strengthening the team.
- Improved Community Communication – Having Sylheti-speaking staff helped bridge language barriers, leading to smoother consultations and better engagement with allotment holders.
- Enhanced Market Sales – Sales increased by £2K, particularly in cash transactions, due to community interest in Bangladeshi produce and Sajia's strong sales skills.
- Infrastructure Support – Tahmina's translation and communication skills played a vital role in the successful transition to new allotment plots
- Crisis Management & Social Support – The team was able to assist in medical emergencies and community bereavements, strengthening trust with allotment holders.
- Successful Events & Workshops – Hosted a well-received Eid celebration and a Sylheti-language composting workshop to further engage the community.
- Increased Productivity (Despite Challenges) – While a wet spring delayed growth, the expanded team helped recover yields by autumn, matching 2023 output.
- Future Funding Challenge – The contracts for Sajia and Tahmina ended in November 2024, but temporary funding has been secured to retain them on a part-time basis while further fundraising is pursued.



"Over the past fifteen months our Food Growing team increased both in size and knowledge. In August of last year, we welcomed Sajia and Tahmina to the team, and they imparted on us a wealth of knowledge about Bengali vegetables and growing techniques. We were introduced to Uri beans - aka hyacinth beans - and chichinga [si-singa] - aka snake gourd, as well as naga chillies and Bangla Kodu - aka bottle green gourd, that we had known of and grown before." - Danielle

IMPACT

One of the main objectives of the project was to test the potential to increase our productivity with additional staff. Unfortunately, we were rather hampered in this respect by the unpredictable British weather. Spring 2024 was abnormally wet, resulting in a late start to the growing season and reducing our total potential output for the year. However, the benefit of additional hands was evident when summer finally kicked off, and despite low yields earlier in the season, by Autumn we had caught up and broken even with the total productivity for 2023.

Market sales were £2K higher, which reflects the popularity with the local community of the wider range of Bangladeshi produce introduced by Sajia and Tahmina, and also Sajia's wonderful sales ability; on the occasions that she helped out on the Saturday market stall, produce would consistently sell out, and we would also see a marked increase in cash sales against card sales - cash often being the preferred currency for the Bangladeshi community who were keen to buy from Sajia.

In June 2024, we were really pleased to be able to bring together a few threads of our community activity with a large Eid party on the Farm for around 100 of our diverse community group participants, supported partly by the Ocean Women's Association. Our Communities Programme Manager worked with Sajia and Tahmina to help organise stalls and activities that would appeal to the Bangladeshi community, and Tahmina was really happy to be roped in on the day to help with serving some delicious curries prepared by the Allotment Kitchen.

ENGAGEMENT

In July, Sajia and Tahmina were very happy to be able to deliver a Sylheti-language composting workshop, developed with Danielle and attended by 12 of our allotment holders. Allotment holders feedback on whether they've found it valuable to have Sylheti-speaking staff on site.

ENGAGEMENT

- **10,000 including all beneficiaries and volunteers took part in growing and learning activities**
- **4000 including corporate volunteers have taken part in our project**
- **A minimum of 2,500 people via our newsletter distribution and up to 8,000 via our social media following heard about our project**



IMPACT

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

One of the main objectives of the project was to test the potential to increase our productivity with additional staff. Unfortunately, we were rather hampered in this respect by the unpredictable British weather. Spring 2024 was abnormally wet, resulting in a late start to the growing season and reducing our total potential output for the year. However, the benefit of additional hands was evident when summer finally kicked off, and despite low yields earlier in the season, by Autumn we had caught up and broken even with the total productivity for 2023.

Increasing sustainable processing of food waste (e.g. composting, wormery)

Following the composting workshops, allotment holders are now more consistently and efficiently composting their food waste on their own plots.

Reducing local food miles (i.e. distance travelled in fossil fuel powered transport for deliveries e.g. car, van, moped)

Increase in onsite sales means that we have been shipping less produce to external customers. This year we solely focused on local and on-site sales meaning all the crops on the farm have zero food miles.

Increasing growing and/or production of local and/or sustainable food. Increasing the biodiversity of crops grown on the farm – increased variety of crops.

Increasing access to local and/or sustainable food

We have been able to begin to service the previously untapped demand for Bangladeshi produce.

Our Bangladeshi community feel more heard and catered to

“You being there meant I was able to express what I wanted to say.”

“I can communicate a little bit but it's great to have somebody Bengali, and if they're not there then we have to continue struggling. When you guys weren't there, I used small words and managed. If you're there it's better.”

Working alongside the Sylheti-speaking Food Growers and also attending events such our Eid celebration have given volunteers and beneficiaries from other communities a better understanding of Bangladeshi culture and food

“For our Eid party in June, we invited all our community groups, our horticultural trainees, and our Greencare members. Over one hundred people attended! The Farm was filled with people from so many different communities, all adding to and enjoying the celebratory atmosphere.” - Susy, Communities Programme Manager.

Staff feels she knows a lot more of the allotment holders by name and face and has a great rapport with them.

“It has been amazing to witness how much more often plot holders come to staff to express worry, issues, or to show us what amazing crops they've been growing.”



LEARNINGS & INSIGHTS

- Meaningful change happens when people work collaboratively and with clarity on what the goal is that we're working towards.
- Being clear about the offer – duality to the role - growing Bengali crops and helping current staff integrate our Bengali service users into our programmes and culture on the Farm.
- Communication - regular check-ins with our new staff members to ensure we were still working towards our goal, fairly distributing the workload and creating a safe space to discuss any issues for staff
- Being brave enough to try, we wouldn't have achieved all of the amazing outcomes that we will continue to build upon.



CONCLUSION

The project exceeded expectations, strengthening the farm's connection with the Bangladeshi community, improving engagement, increasing market sales, and enhancing team dynamics. The main challenge moving forward is securing long-term funding to continue the positive impact.

"Early on, I helped with translating for the allotment consultation meeting. This was my first time meeting all the plot holders together. I had to translate what the council was saying to them and then translate their questions to the council. People were panicking and unhappy with the move, they were really unhappy because they had spent a lot of time and money on building up their original plots. By the end of the meeting, they understood what was happening and why. They were happy with the apology that they received from the Farm for the inconvenience. Since then, I've worked a lot with all of them, and they always come to me if they have an issue. I'm proud that they trust me, and it's helped them to trust the Farm as well." - Tahmina

"Overall, it has been a fantastic year and a half, and we couldn't be more grateful for our newfound knowledge of growing techniques." - Danielle



"Throughout the year we have made excellent communications and connections with the various communities that come to the Farm and our sales have increased to reflect that." - Sajia

"Overall, it has been a fantastic year and a half, and we couldn't be more grateful for our newfound knowledge of growing techniques." - Tahmina

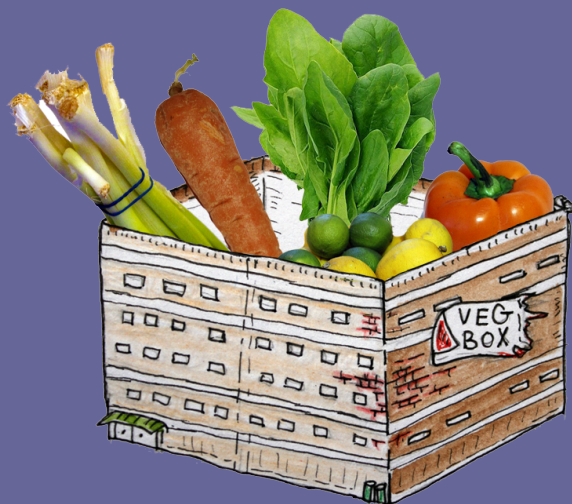
RESOURCES

- Meet Stepney city Farm's new food growers: Sajia and Tahmina - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/meet-our-new-food-growers/>
- Ten questions with Tahmina - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/10-questions-with-tahmina/>
- Ten questions with Sajia - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/10-questions-with-sajia/>
- Stepney City Farm's new allotment field - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/our-new-allotment-field/>
- Effects of weather on preparing plants with Danielle - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/about-the-weather/>
- Stepney City Farm Shop - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/our-farm-shop/>
- Bangladeshi vegetables - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/this-years-bangladeshi-veg/>
- Eid at Stepney City Farm - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/eid-at-the-farm/>
- Bottle gourd recipes - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/bottle-gourd-recipes/>
- Growing together - <https://stepneycityfarm.org/growing-together/>



STEPNEY CITY FARM

Sustainable
Urban Growing



POWERED BY
Wen.

