

# COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN FOOD AND CLIMATE ACTION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?



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# Introduction

This report shares our collective learning about community participation and leadership in the [Just Food and Climate Transition Programme \(Just FACT\)](#) programme. We hope it can be a useful resource for people who are interested in building community power and participation, and exploring different models of leadership.

In this report we explore why it's important for communities to lead action for a fairer food system, and what this looks like in practice. We share our learnings on what makes effective community outreach, and what enables people to stay involved in projects. Different partners had different perspectives and approaches to community leadership within the Just FACT programme, so we share a range of examples, reflecting on the pros and cons of different approaches. We also explore the impact of having local people employed on projects.

Learnings are drawn from a range of sources including: interviews, workshop quotes, partner reports, reflective blogs, podcasts and meeting discussions. It builds on a foundation of research and recommendations from "[Seeds for a Revolution](#)" and "[Recipes for Revolution](#)", reports written by the [Blueprint Architect group](#) - an evolving group representing community leaders, activists and residents engaged in the food system of Tower Hamlets.

**This is the second and final edition of this report.**

# Summary

## How to reach communities and overcome barriers:

- **Meet people in places they already go** like schools, community spaces, health centres.
- **Understand what would make a project accessible**, by talking with communities
- **Offer activities that resonate with people's interests**
- **Be willing to try different approaches** - no one size fits all.
- **Ring fence budget** to overcome financial barriers to participation
- **Create spaces specifically for marginalised communities** to come together

## How to sustain participation and build community power:

- **Plan in time and resource for relationship building** and value care and solidarity
- **Shape project design with community members** and make decisions together
- **Support local people into paid organising and leadership roles**
- **Encourage the sharing of the existing knowledge and expertise**
- **Share power and responsibility** through providing funding and resources

## Models of community leadership that have been tested in Just FACT:

- **Initiator models:** Staff collaborate with community members and gradually hand over stewardship of space and resources.
- **Community organising models:** Members collaborate as a non-hierarchical group to take collective action on an issue.
- **Employment models:** People from the local community are employed on projects
- **Resource delegation models:** Community representatives make decisions about where funding goes

## Context

Tower Hamlets has a rich food culture and heritage of activism.<sup>1</sup> There is an abundance of community organisations and collectives, though many struggle financially and operate with little resources. Most feel a sense of community; in 2024, 90% of residents agreed that people from different backgrounds in the area get on well together.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these strengths, many residents face unfairness and exclusion in accessing affordable nutritious food because of their income, age, race, gender, class, sexuality or disability. This unfairness is part of entangled systemic injustices in housing, employment, and community life.

### **Tower Hamlets communities at a glance<sup>3</sup>**

34.6% of the population is Bangladeshi and 39.9% are Muslim. We have the third highest Chinese population nationally. 46.8% of residents were born outside of the UK. Almost 1 in 6 households have no one in the household that has English as their first language.

7.2% of the population identified as lesbian, gay or other sexualities compared to 3.13% nationally.

A quarter of households have at least one disabled person living in them. It has the highest population density of England and Wales.

Tower Hamlets has a higher proportion of managerial residents than the national average (20.9% vs 13.1%) but also a higher percentage of adults who have never worked or are long term unemployed (13.7% vs 8.5%), speaking to the drastic wealth inequality in the borough.

The proportion of Tower Hamlets women in employment is significantly below the levels for London and Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Psarikidou, K., Swan, E (2023) "Working women demand peace and food": Gender and class in the East London Federation of Suffragettes' food politics. Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.13000>; Wen (2023) 'Food Lives Podcast – Food History Tour of Tower Hamlets'. Available at <https://www.wen.org.uk/2024/03/13/food-lives-podcast/>,

<sup>2</sup> London Borough of Tower Hamlets (2024) 'Tower Hamlets residents survey 2024'. Available at: [https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough\\_statistics/Annual-Resident-Survey-2024-summary-briefing.pdf](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Annual-Resident-Survey-2024-summary-briefing.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> London Borough of Tower Hamlets (2024) 'Tower Hamlets Borough profile May 2024'. Available at: [https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough\\_statistics/Tower-Hamlets-Borough-Profile-2024.pdf](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Tower-Hamlets-Borough-Profile-2024.pdf)

## **Why communities need to lead action for a fairer food system**

Just FACT was designed on the basis that a fair and sustainable food system can only be developed when communities are in the lead. We have deepened our understanding of what this means and why it is important.

### **1. Racialised, low-income, disabled and LGBT communities often experience the same exclusion from food and climate projects that they do in wider society and this needs to be addressed**

Many food and climate projects continue to be accessed mostly by white, able-bodied, middle-class communities. There are barriers that need to be addressed. We have learnt that

- Low-income residents struggle to be involved in climate action without payment to cover time lost to other work.
- Projects being led in English as default mean it's harder for people with English as a second language to be equally involved in delivery, decision-making and leadership.
- Growing spaces can be inaccessible for disabled people, with sites not designed for wheelchair users or lacking accessible toilets.

*"I'd love to have an allotment in an ideal world, but I've got work every day because my rent's expensive, and I've got kids and all of these things. So supermarkets and shops provide convenience for us [...] Then you are inadvertently contributing to problems like climate problems because you are purchasing this food." - Keke, Blueprint Architect<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Wen (2023), 'In conversation with Keke'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/in-conversation/in-conversation-with-keke/>

**2. There is an abundance of wisdom and practices that already exist within communities that can be learned from**

A culture of not being wasteful already exists and people on low-incomes are resourceful because they have to be.

Particularly within diaspora and working-class communities, people already grow, purchase and preserve food in low carbon ways that everyone from their neighbours to policymakers can learn from.

*“We learnt quite quickly that connecting workshops to attendees’ personal experiences allowed us to have much more effective conversations about climate and the planet. **This often revolved around diasporic cooking techniques and approaches to resourceful cooking, preserving and sharing.**”*  
- Cameron, R-Urban Poplar

*‘Overall I found that people are using less plastic than I imagined. **People are resourceful – people buy bulk, cook from scratch, people do gardening.** There’s a culture of not being wasteful.’* - Maud, Sunny Jar Eco Hub

*“For us, it was important to learn about how climate action is being practiced in the territories in South America in the indigenous communities. That would be the ideal blueprint for us.”* - Somos Semillas



### 3. Those most impacted by climate breakdown are most excluded from decision-making, but with support and resources could be a powerful force for change

The climate crisis and its impact on global and local food systems will most affect women, low-income, disabled, older, younger and racialised communities.<sup>5</sup>

According to the [Blueprint Architects](#), the power structures used in political spaces limit the influence of community-developed ideas in shaping a just food system. **They call for the council to drop jargon and bureaucracy and instead create accessible and inclusive spaces for conversations with residents**, allowing them to participate fully in democratic processes<sup>6</sup>.

*“We continue to feel excluded from resourcing and decisions impacting the food system. Lots of Tower Hamlets community feel very out of the loop about council decision making. There’s perhaps some disillusionment about how far away the current food system is from what we want to see. There’s a lot that needs to be changed. But by being part of the Blueprint Architect group, we can feed back things that feel relevant.” - Maymana, misery medicine*

Partners have modelled new ways that parts of the food system could work, yet many have struggled to know how to build influence within local policy influencing spaces. The [Tower Hamlets Food Partnership](#) has opened up opportunities for groups to work together on issues with local policy makers. Bursaries help unpaid organisers to join working groups.

Some partners have focused instead on building public support for campaigns. [Sunny Jar Eco Hub](#) generated **a community action plan to cut plastic with local people**, signed by 100 residents and business owners. The Blueprint Architects toured **a trailer of dreams to build support for a community-owned piece of land**. However, campaigning to make lasting change often needs a lot of time, energy and resources.

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<sup>5</sup> London City Hall (2022) ‘BAME Londoners more likely to be affected by climate emergency’. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/bame-londoners-bear-brunt-of-climate-emergency>. Civic Square and Dark Matter Labs (2024) ‘3°C Neighbourhood’. Available at: <https://medium.com/neighbourhood-public-square/3%C2%BAc-neighbourhood-582903b050b2>. Climate Just, ‘Socially vulnerable groups sensitive to climate impacts’. Available at: <https://www.climatejust.org.uk/socially-vulnerable-groups-sensitive-climate-impacts>. Wen, ‘Why Women and Climate Change’. Available at: <https://www.wen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Why-women-and-climate-change-briefing-2.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Blueprint Architect group and Platform London (2023) ‘Recipes for a Revolution’. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

# How to build community power and participation

Over 21,000 participants and 4,500 volunteers took part in Just FACT projects over the course of the programme.

Here are some of the things we have learned about what stops people's participation in food and climate initiatives:

- Not knowing or trusting anyone involved in the project
- Not feeling safe or a sense of belonging because of their background
- Language barriers meaning they can't fully communicate with organisers
- Not being able to physically access the site because it is not designed for people who are disabled or have long term conditions
- Opening times not fitting in with schedules
- Needing to choose between paid work and/or caring responsibilities
- Not knowing about the project or how to access it

Here's some of our learning about **how to get people involved and support them to stay involved**.

## Community outreach and making first connections

### 1. Meet people in places they already go

After difficulties generating interest from residents in developing a new growing site, [Seeds for Growth](#) began to deliver sessions in existing community spaces such as a school, clinic and church. They have now established a well-used rooftop garden in a local health centre.

Parents were introduced to the [Limehouse Food Coop](#) by organisers promoting at local children's centres and organising a 'walking train' to the coop during its opening times.

[Sunny Jar Eco Hub](#) offered free workshops and activities to community groups, such as scouts, knitting groups, walking groups, because "they are often very keen but don't often have the budget to pay for extra activities." They also delivered plastic free workshops at the Ideas store, in schools and as part of ESOL (English as a second language) classes.

Organisers at Swedenborg Orchard ran workshops for refugees and migrants at a local church, and some of the group went on to join them at the orchard.

## 2. Consider accessibility in the choice or design of a site

When choosing, designing or adapting a site, it's essential to think about access. **Find ways to listen to community members about what they need and where possible design site access together.** This consideration can make or break whether people can get involved in projects. For example, lack of wheelchair access stopped a local school getting involved at [Limborough Community Food Hub](#). [misery medicine](#) listened to members of their community and changed where they held gatherings increasing involvement of disabled and chronically ill people of colour.

*"The sessions being based at one site, Bethnal Green Nature Reserve, rather than moving across green spaces also helped significantly with accessibility needs, as hot water for tea and a toilet was provided. **We shortened the sessions in bad weather and colder months and decided to take a month-long break in January to respect the lower capacity in our team and facilitators.**"*

-Maymana, misery medicine

*"How can communities get some ownership in designing and creating infrastructure? It's lovely how much people enjoyed talking about [compost] toilets. **People enjoyed creating together, and designing solutions that are really unique and not something someone has just popped in somewhere, but really responding to a place and need.**" - Hari, Compost Mentis*

## 3. Try to choose a site that's visible to the public and that's easy to get to

Some partners found **the visibility of their site** to local people helpful in generating interest in their projects. [Cranbrook Community Food Garden](#) established berry lane, a row of fruit bushes outside of their locked site, which helped start conversations with neighbours on the estate. **Proximity is also important.** [St Hilda's Food Coop](#) found that 70% of their customers live or work within a 20-minute walk of the centre.

*"Teviot Food Coop is located literally opposite a primary school, which most kids go to here. **The location is key, because you literally pop out your house and the community centre is just there.**" - Marissa, Teviot Food Coop*

#### 4. Offer activities that resonate with people's interests

Limborough Community Food Hub developed engagement activities based on what's important to people. This included **family-friendly events, community festivals such as Eid parties and coffee mornings**. These have been vital for building trust and relationships.

[Platform London](#) delivered an outreach event that had a **greater focus on arts and culture**, which included the screening of locally made films. This attracted a different cohort of people, with a higher majority of people of colour than at previous events.

Cranbrook Community Food Garden found **there was more interest in activities that were tangible**. Their irrigation project was quite technical, and got far less interest than their fruit growing project.

#### 5. Think carefully about how to reach people and speak their language

According to [Stepney City Farm](#), people who are digitally excluded or have limited English **need information in their own language, and non-digital ways for people to find out about local growing sites** and sign up for them. When working on local estates, many partners found putting up posters and getting information directly through people's doors was helpful. Encouraging people to invite their friends, families and neighbours to a session was also effective.

#### 6. No one size fits all with getting people involved

Trying, failing and trying different approaches has helped projects find what works for their unique project, setting and community. Taking opportunities to listen to communities about the best way to make a project meaningful and accessible is invaluable.

*"[I would] start quite small and local if I wanted to set up a project. **Be very responsive to feedback and be able to shift according to what the needs are in the communities you're working with.**" - Maymana, misery medicine*



## Responding to the exclusions people face in getting involved

### 1. Ringfence budget support to overcome financial barriers

Platform London developed a system for reimbursing Blueprint Architects researching the food system in Tower Hamlets, recognising some were losing income when gatherings clashed with work. [Leaders in Community](#) found offering a bursary improved access to the Be.Green young leaders programme.

*“Offering bursaries has significantly enhanced our ability to recruit and retain participants, demonstrating the importance of financial accessibility in fostering engagement.”* - Leaders in Community, Be.Green project

### 2. Create spaces specifically for marginalised communities to come together

Certain communities are particularly impacted by climate grief and face prejudice in organising spaces. misery medicine intentionally **creates spaces of collective care, responding to the complex emotions related to the climate crisis** for these groups. Every misery medicine gathering was sold out, with between 25-45 queer and trans people of colour attending each gathering.

### **3. Support people from marginalised communities into organising and leadership roles to create inclusive spaces**

Several partners have successfully supported local people into organising and leadership roles, improving participation, communication and trust with local communities.

[R-Urban Poplar](#) observed that some of **their most popular workshops were led by 'local legends'** who drew in their friends, family and neighbours, and were culturally relevant to local people, like Aleya's Bangla feasts. Stepney City Farm noted that communities connected more deeply with staff teams and vice versa when they employed two growers who spoke Sylheti.

### **4. Talk to communities about what would make a programme accessible for them**

Find out when and where works for the people you're looking to get involved. St Hilda's Food Coop is open between 11am – 3pm every Thursday, which makes it easy for residents using their Crèche and Women's Creative Collective to shop. misery medicine and [Oitij-jo Collective](#) found that consistency was important in recruiting participants. Regular monthly gatherings in the same location helped to build up trust and built strong community bonds.

Offering family-friendly activities can help people with childcare responsibilities to get involved. R-Urban Poplar learned that if you keep young kids busy parents will often be happy to join in with the workshop.

### **5. Make sure training is available for workers to create inclusive spaces**

Providing training for workers helps build the skills and understanding needed to create inclusive spaces and address social exclusion faced by different groups. CFGN delivered *Rooting Disability Justice* training via a learning circle where 37 participants shared knowledge and developed practical ways to embed disability justice in their food growing projects. Feedback showed increased confidence among growers to apply what they learned in their work.

## Building relationships

### 1. Plan in time and resource for relationship building

The projects with strong community involvement tended to have put many hours into building relationships with local people over years.

Partners have talked about participation needing to **move at 'the speed of trust'**. The R-Urban Poplar team spent hundreds of hours knocking doors, making friends and repeatedly connecting with residents over time, and is now a thriving hub.

*"The first year was mainly about understanding how the project could bring people together, testing workshop formats and building rapport with local community organisers. In the second year, we had many more attendees, with strong relationships being built with local partner organisations such as Leaders in Community. [...] **This last year has been great - we now have a big group of attendees who enjoy coming to site, a fantastic network of workshop hosts, and some much-improved site infrastructure**" - Cameron, R-Urban Poplar*

Projects that struggled with involvement tended to be short term, with teams working with communities where they didn't already have a connection. Organisations that are well established, especially those led by the local community, got people involved more quickly.

Within the first year of the establishing Maydwell Gardens, 50 residents joined the project, primarily local Bangladeshi women, bringing their gardening knowledge and energy to workshops, events, and volunteer opportunities. Led by residents from neighbouring estates, the [Burdett Foundation](#) has long been embedded in the community, successfully running local football teams, a women's organisation, a food pantry and other grassroots initiatives.

*"Our community is intergenerational and tightly connected, families who have lived, worked, and grown together for decades. These relationships form the foundation of meaningful and lasting change [...] **We know that change is not imposed, it's cultivated. That's why time and resources for relationship-building must be intentionally planned in.** Because in the end, it's the residents who lead, shape, and sustain the future of their community". - Masoom, Burdett Foundation*

*"**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." - Limborough Community Food Hub*

## 2. Value care and solidarity

Some partners talk about the importance of building spaces of collective care as central to their work, particularly those creating spaces for more marginalised communities. **People stay involved when they feel projects bring them meaningful relationships**, often through small things like their name being remembered, being shown care and being encouraged.

Children from [Boil & Bowden](#) often experience marginalisation because of their social, emotional, and mental health needs. A considered, phased, caring approach to introducing visitors to their community cafe helped build the children's confidence and sense of safety.

[Somos Semillas](#) have shared the need to build reflection spaces for attendees, to put care and emotional support at the core and to be patient in collective processes.

"Beyond practical work, the sessions became moments of community building and joy—transforming the day into a family-like gathering enriched by music, conversation, and a shared sense of belonging" - Somos Semillas

*"I've learnt so much about my own community and history through this project, and feel like I'm part of a deeper, stronger network than I've ever felt before".* - Anonymous, Blueprint Architect

## Making decisions together and building power

### 1. Find ways to shape project design with community members

How community members participated in decision making varied from project to project.

Every year, Leaders in Community sought input from young people on the structure of the Be.Green programme through a survey and a focus group. This led to significant changes with each iteration, **including introducing a bursary system.**

Sunny Jar Eco Hub used participatory approaches to create a community action plan to cut plastic. **They ran 33 workshops where residents shared ideas that were voted on at Chrisp Street Market.** Residents voted for a 'Bring Your Own Bag' campaign, asking for more reusable bags available for shoppers and to encourage shoppers to reuse their shopping bags.

St Hilda's food co-op actively consulted local communities both through annual customer surveys and interviews, as well as informally through day-to-day conversations and social events. **They also delivered a series of codesign workshops to enable the ideas of local people to be factored into the design and delivery of the service.**

[Compost Mentis](#) co-designed and constructed an accessible compost toilet in Mile End Community Garden in collaboration with garden-users, local residents and community gardeners from around the city. **By designing and building the toilet together, they hope to co-create a well-used and cared for facility that enables local people and groups to stay in the garden for longer periods of time.**

## **2. Encourage communities to share knowledge and expertise**

There is so much knowledge and skill within communities about how to live sustainably. Creating places where communities can gather, feel belonging, build confidence, take up opportunities and access resources is critical to supporting them to share these skills.

[House of Annetta](#) ran regular food waste processing sessions with volunteers to set up a compost and rainwater watering system and food preservation/fermentation systems for perishable food. **Participants brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise, such as culturally specific and family recipes, relationships with local food waste producers, or techniques for compost layering.**

R-Urban Poplar supported local people to host their own learning exchange sessions, **drawing on knowledge from their cultural heritage and everyday lives.** They put together a programme of free meals and workshops with their regular group of community member hosts, including pickling workshops with Noore, Bangla feasts with Aleya, and many wonderful gardening sessions with Katrina.

Platform London brought together activists and residents involved in local food projects to create participatory research about what needs to change in the food system.

*"You've got the collective knowledge of what everybody's been learning or taught, and a lot of information sharing that you wouldn't normally get in like a bog-standard allotment." - Katrina, R-Urban Poplar*

### **3. Consider how to delegate funding, resources and roles to communities**

Finding supportive ways to put power, responsibility and resources into the hands of local people has been key to making projects meaningful to communities. Examples of this include participatory grant making, community research and policy development, employment of local people, finding ways to fund un-constituted groups, or handing over workshop leadership to local people.

This is discussed more in the 'models of leadership' section below.

### **4. Create a culture that responds well to challenge and conflict**

Challenge and conflict are normal within a project but can lead to serious consequences if unresolved. There have been **conflicts within and between project teams, between community members attending projects, between organisers and community members**. Many projects have felt under-resourced or unsure of how to resolve conflicts. Partners have suggested training on conflict resolution and mediation have a role to play and clear processes to raise grievances.

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

- Limborough Community Food Hub



# Employing people from local communities in food and climate projects

Stepney City Farm, R Urban Poplar (via Teviot People's Kitchen), Limborough Community Food Hub and Platform have employed local people in efforts to increase community leadership and representation.

Here's some of our learning about what changes when people are employed from local communities in food and climate projects.

## 1. There has been improved participation, communication and trust with local communities

The most popular workshops at R Urban Poplar were led by 'local legends' who drew in their friends, family and neighbours, and were culturally relevant to local people, like Aleya's Bangla feasts.

Stepney City Farm noted that communities were able to connect more deeply with staff teams and vice versa. Having recruited growers from a Bangladeshi background, they reflected "it's 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.**"

*"Language differences and cultural nuances can make it difficult to have more complicated in-person interactions. **Misunderstandings can alienate people and discourage them from getting more involved or expressing ideas**". - Stepney City Farm*



## 2. Employment has created space for marginalised communities to move into leadership roles

Employing people from marginalised communities creates space for their voice, perspective and leadership in shaping projects. Their presence also normalises people from marginalised communities working in the food and climate space, where they are currently underrepresented.

*“I was keen to have a diverse group of delivery staff for the young people to see the power in minority communities as well as exposure to people who had the knowledge, passion and means to work in this space. Speaking about the problem of fast fashion and the Rana Plaza incident, delivered by a Bangladeshi women allowed for unique discussions and also resonated with a lot of our cohort who were of Bangladeshi heritage.” - Leaders in Community, Be.Green project*



### 3. Employment of local communities has the potential to help address economic inequalities in the borough

Investing in local jobs could lead to wide ranging benefits, including increased physical and mental health, stronger communities and increased food security. It also supports the local economy, as residents tend to buy locally, keeping money flowing within the borough.

The proportion of women residents in employment is significantly below the levels for both London and Great Britain<sup>7</sup>. There are many women with gardening and community development skills who could play a vital role in food growing efforts in an employed capacity, if supported and paid appropriately.

The Blueprint Architects have also identified that many community members have expressed interest in working within the food system, particularly in food growing, but have felt they lacked the necessary knowledge to do so. They ask that local councils commit to developing paid training opportunities to increase access into a sustainable food sector, particularly young people and those employed in environmentally harmful industries.<sup>8</sup>

*"I am proud to share that my key volunteer and one of Leaders in Communities' top community champions is now a full-time employee at Leaders in Community. She worked on the original food co-op pilot in 2022 and then stepped back in to support me in the set up and establishment of the co-op we have today. She worked hard by my side for a year until encouraging her that **she was right for the role of the fantastic front of house that we all know and love!**"*  
- Melanie, Teviot Food Coop

*"This course through Providence Row and my time around the people here has been eye opening, **it's opened up a doorway for me and these are skills that I'll keep forever.**"* - Kevin, now a qualified horticulturist and gardener, Providence Row end of project report

*"Part of the Just FACT architect group, started from the beginning, strange to watch it happen, no longer just talking about it. It's now happening, **I got a job out of it, career, it's quite empowering**"* - Anonymous, Blueprint Architect

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<sup>7</sup> London Borough of Tower Hamlets (2024) 'Tower Hamlets Borough profile May 2024'. Available at: [https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough\\_statistics/Tower-Hamlets-Borough-Profile-2024.pdf](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Tower-Hamlets-Borough-Profile-2024.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Blueprint Architect group and Platform London (2023) 'Recipes for a Revolution'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

#### **4. Precarity, low pay and workers rights need to be addressed in the sector**

The charity sector is **heavily reliant on short term grant funding, and this can create precarity for workers**. Residents from marginalised communities need flexible, supportive and culturally-informed work environments or may struggle to thrive in roles. The Architects also ask that all food industry workers - from delivery drivers to **food distributors and from food shops service workers to warehouse workers - also be recognised as key workers** due to their contribution to the food system and to be waged accordingly, with a salary equal or superior to a London Living Wage for all those working in the capital.

The Blueprint Architects also ask that local authorities **commit to ensuring that more long-term and sustainable funding is available for community-led food projects wherever possible**, to address issues such as long-term staffing and training costs, so that skills do not constantly leave organisations because of an overreliance on volunteer labour<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>Blueprint Architect group and Platform London (2023) 'Recipes for a Revolution'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

# Our learning about models of community leadership

Different partners have different perspectives and approaches to community leadership within the Just FACT programme. This has been a key point of discussion for the partnership.

*"I wonder how often, when charities are 'working with' affected communities, are we genuinely stepping back and allowing communities to shape or lead the work? How often are communities 'engaged' once the parameters of a project have already been defined? **This speaks of the way in which knowledge has been hierarchised through colonialism: valorising academic, 'professional' knowledge over community wisdom.**"*  
- Summayah, Blueprint Architect

*"Giving the group freedom to choose their campaign is good for autonomy and in line with the shared values, however can lead to a difficulty in knowing where to focus. Which issues are the most important? Where should we begin? **The feeling that so many things need to change might have been debilitating and led to some analysis paralysis. How can we provide some structured freedom for future cohorts?**"* - Leaders in Community, Be.Green project

Here are some of the models we have observed and the rationale behind them.

## 1. Initiator models of leadership

Staff with **specific expertise who are not necessarily from the community** set up a project. They collaborate with community members to develop the project, gradually handing over stewardship of space and resources until all or parts of the projects are controlled by the community.

**Case Study:** R-Urban Poplar is an eco-civic hub. The hub itself is a collection of prototype infrastructures which demonstrate the potential for localised circular waste systems. At the heart of the project are the kitchen and classroom, which offer a welcoming space for events and bring people together.

Over time R-Urban Poplar and their onsite partners **gradually supported local people to run their own workshops with some hosts moving into work on a more permanent basis.** Local volunteers have also learned how to look after the composting and water technology, and opportunities for local people to shape the programme were built into everyday work. Teviot People's Kitchen, a

community-led cooperative, has emerged from a joint proposal from workshop hosts.

*“To be truly community-led means “losing control but keeping desire” ... acknowledging that the role of the project initiator must adapt over the duration of the project, sharing responsibilities and resources with local communities, but retaining the original motivation and purpose.” - Cameron, R-Urban Poplar*

This process takes time and community members may need support to feel ready. Oitij-jo Collective’s Bottling Futures project had envisioned engaging local people as facilitators who were already involved in this type of endeavour. They had a lot of interest when initially speaking to people. *“However when actually asked to run a workshop, with a fee for their time and expertise, a lot of people did not want to do it”.*

Initiator models can naturally move into other models of leadership.

## 2. Community organising models

These models are organised around communities of shared identities or interests. Members collaborate as a non-hierarchical group to take collective action.

**Case Study:** The Blueprint Architects group was initiated by Platform to create Participatory Action Research providing a blueprint for changes to the food system. Over time, **Platform staff stepped back and the group made a decision to set up a steering group with close proximity to food injustice** (six people out of the wider thirty) to make decisions about the campaigning actions of the group and direction of the work. The group were self-elected when asked ‘are you most impacted by food injustice in Tower Hamlets’.

*“Through the work, we quickly realised that we don’t need to come up with a new blueprint; it already exists in our work, our bodies, and our relationships with each other and relationships to our land. But that isn’t recognised as a valid source of knowledge in the NGO and funding space so a lot of the work we do is to resource communities to explore and rebuild.” - Sumayyah, Blueprint Architect<sup>10</sup>*

**Case study:** The Teviot Food Coop was supported by a Just FACT development worker to explore different financially sustainable models over time. Ultimately, the cooperative organisers decided to pursue a Cooperation Town approach, where local people self-organise to bulk buy food and access

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<sup>10</sup>Wen (2024) ‘Human Rights Iftar’. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/uncategorised/human-rights-iftar-celebrating-the-power-of-community/>

food waste. According to Romana, the period where a staff member was funded to try out the coop had 'a big impact on people wanting to take it on themselves'.

*"They all have different roles in the Co-op because again, there's no external managers, there's no bosses, it's not a charity. There's not an NGO. **They are entirely responsible for running their own food co-op on their terms.** What to buy, when to meet, how to organise, how to relate to each other with support and advice from us."* - Shiri, Cooperation Town<sup>11</sup>

**Case study:** 'misery medicine' is an in-person, immersive herb, mushroom & plant medicine program that supports queer and trans people of the global majority. There is not one project lead or co-ordinator, instead misery medicine consists of a group of freelance facilitators who organise the gatherings. Every gathering was sold out and attended by between 25 and 45 QTIBPOC.

Often non-hierarchical groups that organise in the above ways are more likely not to be legally constituted, which can mean accessing funding can be difficult. Women's Environmental Network supported hosting arrangements for some partners, with a charity holding funds on behalf of a group.

### **3. Employment models of leadership**

In this model, people with experiences representative of local communities are employed to encourage the participation and knowledge sharing of underrepresented communities or to hold identity-specific spaces.

**Case study:** Stepney City Farm sought to assess how increased staffing could enhance the productivity and sustainability of its food growing activities, and whether a Sylheti-speaking recruit could strengthen engagement with the local Bangladeshi community and facilitate an exchange of cultural learning that supported culturally appropriate food growing. Market stall sales increased by £2,000 in the course of a year, affordable Bangladeshi veg was produced and Bangladeshi allotment holders could better communicate with staff and were also able to take part in a local council consultation with their support.

*"You being there meant I was able to express what I wanted to say."* - Allotment holder, Stepney City Farm

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<sup>11</sup> Wen (2024) 'Cooperation Town - a network of community food co-ops podcast'. Available at <https://justfact.co.uk/just-fact-podcast/>

Stepney City Farm put care into trying to avoid the new staff members 'shouldering the weight' of a whole community, providing lots of support and check-ins.

#### **4. Resource delegation models of leadership**

In this model, community representatives make decisions about what food and climate projects are funded.

**Case study:** Wen organised a [participatory grant making process](#) as part of the Just FACT programme<sup>12</sup>. Funds from the Lottery's Climate Action Fund were allocated to local projects through community-led panel or a collective voting decision making process.

Community members involved said they genuinely felt this shifted power from institutions to local people.

## **Thanks for reading.**

**To continue the conversation, get in touch with [info@wen.org.uk](mailto:info@wen.org.uk)**

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<sup>12</sup> Wen (2025) 'Participatory Grant Making'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/resources/>

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