HOW TO CREATE MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITY-LED LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

JUST FOOD & CLIMATE TRANSITION.

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Contents

Introduction

In this report we explore how partners in the Just Food and Climate Transition Programme (Just FACT) are experimenting with alternative, not-for-profit models that are less reliant on charitable grants and tackle key issues in the local food system, from improving access to affordable, nutritious, sustainable food to reducing waste.

We share learning from food cooperatives, urban farms, regenerative producers and circular food waste systems, highlighting what supports their sustainability, and the barriers they face. The report also outlines the policy and structural changes needed to help these models thrive.

We hope it can be a useful resource for people who are interested in exploring how to create resilient, socially just, sustainable alternatives to the dominant food systems that shape how most growers and retailers operate in the UK.

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 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

Key findings:

Rethinking community and business partnerships within supply chains

- **Local buying groups are an effective way for people to access affordable food.** Savings are significant at around £2080 per household each year
- **When it's affordable, people on low incomes will often choose organic**
- **Community-focused suppliers keep the price of organic produce down,** with businesses like Folx Farm and Better Food Shed having positive social change as their top priority rather than profit
- **Building connections between residents, workers and farmers helps residents** overcome wariness about organic food and confusion over labelling
- **Delivering 'not for profit' food production can be made possible by established commercial relationships.** For example, donations from restaurants and food businesses at Folx Farm are used to subsidise costs.

Centring marginalised groups in production and sale of fruit and vegetables

- **Hiring food growers from local communities builds trust and boosts sales**. Flexible jobs also meant successful recruitment from underrepresented communities
- **There is high demand for culturally appropriate food,** with supply of Bangladeshi vegetables increasing market sales by £2,000 for Stepney City Farm
- **Having a diversity of income streams can create stability**

Technological innovation around closed loop systems

- **Micro anaerobic digestion and composting infrastructure needs to scale up** in order to play a more significant role in processing local food waste and growing food
- **Scaling up closed loop systems in dense urban areas is a challenge.** For example, flat rooftops are good candidate sites but require more planning, design, and structural engineering input
- **There is a need for more robust economic models to support technological innovation around food waste**

Key recommendations:

- **Local authorities and housing associations need to offer long leases and affordable rates** to organisations pioneering alternative, not-for-profit food system models.
- **There needs to be a more supportive economic environment** for local growers and producers, to cross-subsidise community growing
- **Local and national policies need to be adapted** to support local food enterprises
- **Charitable and local authority funding remains essential for piloting projects** until they reach a point of sustainability

Context

People on low incomes are dependent on a highly centralised food supply dominated by a few major supermarkets. **Tesco and Sainsbury's control 43% of the UK grocery market[1] and their decisions are driven largely by profit.** During the height of the cost of living crisis, Tesco paid £859 million and Sainsbury's £319 million in dividends.[2] Tesco CEO Ken Murphy's pay doubled in the year 2023/24 to £9.9 million, 430 times the average Tesco employee's pay.[3]

In contrast, in 2024, **11% of the population lived in a food insecure household,** with 4.2% of people living in a household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months.[4]

UK supermarkets depend heavily on a global supply chain that is **increasingly vulnerable to climate change.** In the UK, 47% of vegetables and 84% of fruit are imported.[5] DEFRA has assessed that the UK food supply chain is increasingly vulnerable to climate events and geo-political shocks.[6] This will disproportionately impact people on low incomes who are most affected by inflated prices. Imported food also tends to have higher transport emissions and may be less nutritious due to industrial farming practices.[7]

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[1]DEFRA (2025) 'Food statistics in your pocket'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hyyds976
[2] Unite (2023) 'Food Profiteering Update'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/56aj4c4f
[3]The Food Foundation (2024).Profiteering during the cost-of-living crisis: food, formula and fuel. An update'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y6u9fz9b
[4] DWP (2025) 'Households Below Average Income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2024' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2j4urhrs
[5]The Food Foundation (2023) 'Fruit and veg shortages – what do they tell us about the state of UK food security?' Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2554zz43
[6] Defra (2024) 'UK Food Security Report 2024'. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yc68tvyv
[7] Bhardwaj RL, Parashar A, Parewa HP, Vyas L. (2024) 'An Alarming Decline in the Nutritional Quality of Foods: The Biggest Challenge for Future Generations' Health. Foods. Available at: .https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10969708/

In the UK, farmers often receive less than 1% of the profit from supermarkets. According to Sustain, this impacts on their ability to "protect nature and soils and tackle climate change whilst growing food, making a living and looking after workers".[8]

More broadly, the UK food system and its **challenges are intrinsically linked to unsustainable, exploitative and insecure global food systems.** For an in-depth look at how its present state developed through colonialism and neo-colonialism read 'Recipes for Revolutions' by the Blueprint Architect group.

Many organisations and innovators are attempting to tackle the economic status quo. Yet many alternatives to mainstream food growing and selling are rooted in charitable or 'not for profit' models.

A number of Just FACT partners are experimenting with alternative models that are not-for-profit whilst also thinking about how not to be wholly reliant on grants. Each project also aims to tackle a problem within our current food system in Tower Hamlets, from increasing access to affordable, nutritious, eco-friendly food, to productively dealing with food waste.

[8]Sustain (2022) 'Unpicking Food Prices'. Available at https://www.sustainweb.org/news/nov22-unpicking-food-prices-new

Learning from alternative models

1. Neighbourhood Food Cooperatives

A network of Tower Hamlets Food Coops was set up in an effort to support residents to access fresh, affordable, sustainable food while connecting people to their community. The aim was to explore whether the positive impacts of the long-established St Hilda's East's Food Cooperative **could be replicated and developed across the borough.**

Two new year-long pilot Food Coops were set up at Limehouse Town Hall and the Teviot Centre, with St Hilda's East providing training and mentorship.

The Food Co-ops were visited over 11,000 times over the course of the programme, and distributed more than 25 tonnes of fresh produce.

Pop-up shop model: Food Coops are food outlets run on a not-for-profit basis to give people access to good food at affordable prices, and this can follow different models. The Food Coops in Just FACT were set up as 'pop-up shops'. Produce was bought from wholesalers and sold in a weekly 'shop', open once a week in a community centre. Each project had a paid co-ordinator, and then volunteers helped keep the shop staffed each week. The Food Coops were open to everyone and became central spaces within the community, where people could access healthy affordable food in a welcoming space. A key challenge is with the ongoing operational costs this model is reliant on grant funding to keep going. Read more on the benefits and challenges in this report.

Trialing new income generation approaches: A Just FACT development worker supported the project coordinators to explore different ways to increase the financial sustainability of the original model. The hope was that over time and with experimentation the cooperatives could become less reliant on charitable grant funding.

A number of income streams were explored, for example delivering seasonal fruit baskets to local offices, but limited staff capacity stopped this being piloted. A 'Pay it Forward' scheme was piloted where customers could opt into a paid membership that raised money for project costs and subsidised shopping for those struggling. Again, lack of staff capacity to launch this properly meant there was not the necessary uptake.

Moving to a Cooperation Town model: The organisers at Limehouse Town Hall decided to transition to a Cooperation Town model, where local people self-organise to bulk buy food and access food from supermarkets that would otherwise go to

waste. At the Teviot Centre, 'Cooperation Teviot' now runs alongside a social supermarket and purchases from the same wholesaler.

Cooperation members pay a small amount every week and contribute up to one hour a week to run the co-op.

People across Tower Hamlets have been inspired by the Cooperation Town approach and in 2025, 9 further buying groups were set up with the support of a local Cooperation Town organiser. Overall, £457,600 of savings have been made for households in Cooperation Town coops in the borough.

"Cooperation Town is not an NGO or a charity, but a solidarity network. ***Members own their local co-ops and all have different roles in running the group, with no external managers or bosses.*** *They are entirely responsible for organising the co-op on their terms, including what to buy with their collective pot of money, when to meet, how to make decisions together and how to relate to each other. Cooperation Town supports and advises neighbours on how to get started, where to get food from and how to promote their co-op locally - but the members lead the effort!"*

- Shiri, Cooperation Town[9]

"This was the first time I didn't feel embarrassed to ask for help. I knew the food was halal, and it felt like it came from my own community."

- Cooperation Town member

Experiments to increase access to organic: The Teviot Food Coop extended their project as they became a 9-month pilot for the Bridging the Gap programme with the Alexandra Rose Charity and Sustain. The aim was to investigate whether there would be uptake amongst low income families on local, seasonal organic food if price barriers were eliminated. The scheme resulted in a 45% discount on organic food prices for Alexandra Rose voucher customers, enabling people on low incomes to try organic food for the first time.

Residents replaced an average of £8 of non-organic produce with organic alternatives each week, and the initiative also supported local organic farmers, with 84% of sales revenue going directly to farmers via the Better Food Shed. Many of their UK farms are within 70 miles of East London and Tower Hamlets, meaning transport emissions are minimised. Read the report here.

Partnership to increase access to locally grown, culturally appropriate vegetables: Having met at a Just FACT networking event, Teviot Coop are now supplied by another Just FACT partner, Folx Farm, a farm based in Hastings and Rye. Folx Farm

[9] Wen (2024), 'Cooperation Town - a network of community food co-ops'. Available at https://justfact.co.uk/just-fact-podcast/

is experimenting with growing vegetables that are staples for Bangladeshi customers, such as uri beans, khodu squash and okra. The cooperative team took a trip with customers to visit the farm and worked the land, building trust in suppliers and the produce.[10]

Key learnings from Neighbourhood Food Cooperatives:

Pop-up shops have wide ranging benefits including making healthy sustainable food accessible to the community, but are harder to make financially sustainable: Pop up shops are open to everyone, and membership is not required. Paid co-ordinators can add value in training and supporting community volunteers to run the coop.

Local buying groups are an effective way of people accessing affordable food: The Cooperation Town model lets residents self-organise to bulk buy food or access surplus food. These are closed membership groups, and every member must be willing to commit time to organising. Savings are significant, assessed to be £2080 per household each year.

Partnership working with local councils has potential to increase residents' power to self-organise food coops: The Tower Hamlets Food Hub has opened an extra day per week to facilitate the delivery of food to new co-ops. This has provided great logistical and infrastructure support to the new co-ops.

Finding community-focused suppliers keeps the price of organic produce down: Folx Farm and Better Food Shed have positive social change as their top priority rather than profit, and there is no 'middle man' taking a cut. This keeps the cost of produce low for customers.

There are benefits to building trust between residents, workers and farmers: Researchers from Bridging the Gap found many residents only buy organic produce from the food coops. Good relationships with workers have helped overcome residents' wariness about whether food in supermarkets is really organic and confusion over labelling.[11] Visiting Folx Farm and OrganicLea have given residents insights into the value of farms and farmers with attendees saying it helped them feel more connected to their food and where it comes from.

[10] Green, M (2024), 'Appetite for Organic: How Rose Vouchers and Discounts Are Bridging the Gap to Affordable Organic Fruit and Veg in Tower Hamlets'. Available at: https://www.alexandrarose.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ARC-Bridging-the-Gap-report-LR.pdf
[11] Ibid

When it's affordable, people on low incomes will often choose organic: The Bridging the Gap research found that by providing Rose Vouchers and discounted produce, low income shoppers increased the amount of organic produce they bought.[12]

2. Sustainable Urban Food Growing at Stepney City Farm

Stepney City Farm is a 4.5 acre mixed-agriculture working farm in Tower Hamlets. The site includes over an acre of food growing, 64 allotments, grazing for animals, craft studios, a Farmer's Market and a café utilising produce raised and grown on the farm. It is a registered charity, with food growing classed as generated funds from charitable activity.

The farm has been managing their food growing as a social enterprise since 2017, with the aim of developing production and sales to the point of financial sustainability.

Stepney City Farm applied for a Just FACT grant to explore **whether additional staffing capacity would increase the amount of fruit and veg grown** for the local community to the point of financial viability. The farm also wanted to try **to meet the local need for vegetables commonly eaten in the Bangladeshi community.**

The farm team felt it was important to recruit Sylheti-speaking growers, as the Bangladeshi community make up a large proportion of site users and constitute 95% of allotment plot holders. They hoped this would reduce barriers to engaging with their site users and customers. Many first generation Bangladeshi residents come from farming backgrounds, providing an opportunity to exchange learning around traditional farming and growing techniques. The farm employed two local women on a job share arrangement.

Increasing productivity through recruitment of additional staff: Unfortunately, spring 2024 was abnormally wet, resulting in a late start to the growing season and reducing total 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 the farm had caught up and broken even with total productivity for 2023.

Increasing access to locally grown Bangladeshi food: One very notable difference in sales was that the total yield across the year was similar to 2023, but the balance of restaurant sales to market sales varied significantly from the previous year. Market sales were £2,000 higher, reflecting the local community's enthusiasm for the wider range of Bangladeshi produce on offer. On occasions when one of the food growers assisted at the Saturday market stall, produce would consistently sell out, with a

[12] Ibid

noticeable increase in cash sales, often the preferred method of payment within the Bangladeshi community.

"People were fighting over khodu - whoever came first wanted to have most of them. They were so popular we had to make a rule of one per person; but because I could talk to them in Bangla I would encourage them to try some of the other vegetables we grow on the farm as well, which they may not have tried before."

- Sajia, grower at Stepney City Farm

Key learnings from Stepney City Farm

Hiring food growers from a Bangladeshi background built trust and boosted sales: By employing Sylheti-speaking growers, there was more connection between the farm team and local people, more interest in the produce, and better sales. When a grower who spoke Sylheti was on the stall, produce often sold out.

There is high demand for culturally appropriate food: Selling Bangladeshi vegetables helped increase market sales by £2,000, proving that meeting community demand can help market enterprises to grow.

Flexible jobs meant successful recruitment from the Bangladeshi community: Many local people had family responsibilities. By offering job shares, the roles became accessible. This led to more help from food growers on site on Saturdays and Sundays when there was usually less staff availability.

Keep cash as a payment option: Many customers prefer to pay with cash. Adults on low incomes are more likely to be heavier cash users.[13] Markets aiming to sell to lower income communities will be more successful if they accept cash.

Having a diversity of income streams can create stability: The farm lost some sales to restaurants when the café tenants left and stopped buying produce. Luckily, market sales were strong, which shows that having different ways to sell can help keep enterprises stable. All produce sales income goes back into funding the food growing activities. The activities are further subsidised through other unrestricted income, including our corporate volunteering fees.

For more information on Stepney City Farms learning, read their report here.

[13] FCA (2022), 'Financial Lives 2022 survey'. Available at: https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/financial-lives/fls-2022-retail-banking-savings-payments.pdf

3. Folx Farm's Food Access Fund

Folx Farm is a five acre farm located between Hastings and Rye, around a two hour drive to Tower Hamlets. A team of dedicated women and non-binary growers organically raise salad, herbs and vegetables.

Folx Farm was awarded a Just FACT grant to explore how a commercial, small scale, regenerative farm could **concentrate a percentage of its growing activity on foods that are predominantly imported in a way that is sustainable and affordable**. Imported foods are often staples in the diets of many marginalised communities in the UK, but have reduced nutritional value and a higher environmental impact. Growing culturally appropriate foods in regenerative ways and with short supply chains helps keep nutritional value high and environmental impact low for Tower Hamlets communities.

Folx Farm proposed to:

- Adapt a model used in the USA by Rock Steady Farm, that grows fresh organic vegetables alongside raising money from corporate partners, which subsidises the wholesale cost of producing for community partners. In Folx Farm's proposed model, the money raised would pay for a grower so that the cost of food wouldn't include labour costs, making produce affordable.

- Set up a Food Access Fund (FAF) charity, using money that corporate restaurant partners donate through corporate responsibility budgets and tax free charity donations, to pay for the grower.

- Establish a dedicated growing space on the farm, growing produce for Tower Hamlets Community partners to sell at their weekly markets.

Setting up the dedicated growing space: As well as a grower, the Just Fact grant paid for a polytunnel that was established as the site for growing for Tower Hamlets communities.

Deciding organisational structure: Before Folx Farm could receive the grant, they needed to meet the constitutional requirements of the National Lottery. Originally Folx Farm looked into becoming a charity, but decided this could be risky if ultimately the model didn't work. The commitments necessary to operate as a charity were time consuming if the model wasn't a good fit long term, requiring trustees and a unique set of governance requirements. Instead, they transitioned from a company limited by guarantee to a not for profit company limited by guarantee.

Building relationships with Tower Hamlets Food Coops: The team developed a relationship with Teviot and Limehouse Food Coops over the course of the year. At the Teviot Food Coop event, the Folx Farm team delivered fresh produce for the first time and interviewed customers about their needs. The Food Cooperative teams and customers later visited the farm, worked the land and were welcomed with lunch from their freshly harvested produce.

Folx Farm also began to deliver veg boxes to the Cooperation Town Cooperatives alongside the pop up cooperatives at Teviot Centre and Limehouse Town Hall.

Generating donations from corporate restaurant partners:
Folx Farm originally hoped that by setting up a charity, future corporate partners would fund the programme once the charitable funding period has come to an end. Folx Farm found there were challenges with not becoming a charity, with partners not wanting to donate to another business. Folx Farm arranged a partnership with Leaders in the Community who coordinate the Teviot Food Cooperative, whereby they would become the charity partner on the project.

Securing partnerships with corporate restaurant partners: In June 2025, Brawn, a Tower Hamlets restaurant, partnered with Folx Farm, donating £1 from every bill to the Food Access Fund. Folx Farm also has support from their wholesaler SHRUB London who donate £1 for every kg of Folx Farm salad sold to them through the commercial arm of the farm.

Learning from Folx Farm:

Veg boxes and Food Cooperatives help to reduce food waste at source and ensure the produce gets into the hands of people: Throughout the project there have been two main methods for distributing Folx Farm produce. Firstly, through weekly pop up shop style cooperatives at the Teviot Centre, and secondly, through Cooperation Town groups who organise veg box style distribution.

The approach of working in a standard "purchase for market distribution" method at times meant that not all the produce available was ordered. The need for markets to provide a variety of produce and ensure they don't over order for demand has meant that the farm was often left with produce that has had to be distributed in other ways. Working with a veg box style distribution has meant that Folx Farm can equally split the produce available between a set number of boxes, ensuring all the produce is distributed without the additional labour of finding alternative places for it to go. This is helpful for growing plans and ensuring the space and growers time is used efficiently.

Removing food as a commodity allows for better accessibility and variety: Using the funding (which will be replaced by restaurant donations) to pay a growers wage rather than to subsidise the cost of the produce has allowed for greater variety and experimentation. This has been necessary for growing new and unfamiliar varieties of vegetables. Folx Farm have been able to prioritise growing more culturally relevant foods such as gourds, okra, ginger, chilis, mustards, mooli, which can be more temperamental to grow in a UK climate and outside of typical seasons. They take up more space and generally do not guarantee the returns needed for growing commercially, but are essentials for Tower Hamlets communities.

Nevertheless, one grower working between 1-2 days a week over the course of 1.5 seasons still managed to produce 745kg of vegetables of 21 different varieties. This produce reached 50 households through veg box sales and many more through food coops.

Delivering 'not for profit' food production was made possible by established commercial relationships: Strong relationships with wholesaler SHRUB London and other direct restaurant customers have been essential for the success of the project.

Delivery can often add additional cost to the price of produce, making the final cost more expensive. Incorporating F.A.F delivery into delivery runs Folx Farm already make for their restaurant clients has meant they could supply their community partners at no additional cost, keeping produce prices low.

Wholesaler SHRUB London also introduced Folx Farm to restaurants who they have been able to approach them for support with the F.A.F project. SHRUB have also gotten involved in Folx Farm's '£1 to a bill campaign', donating £1 for every kg of Folx Farm salad they purchase. In addition, when Folx Farm has surplus produce, they have a ready made route to market, selling produce at a standard market value, which then gets put back into the F.A.F.

Established relationships with restaurants Folx Farm already worked with in Tower Hamlets have been vital for launching their £1 to the bill campaign which raises donations for the F.A.F project.

Through produce sales, donations and a campaign run in a partner restaurant, Folx Farm have raised £9000, enough money to continue the project into a third season.

Governance of not for profits needs consideration: Folx Farm are a not for profit company but receive donations for the F.A.F scheme. In the interest of having robust accountability processes, their plan is to form a steering group of people from different sectors to support decision making.

4. Piloting scalable closed loop systems with R-Urban Poplar and MAD LEAP

R-Urban Poplar is an eco-civic hub run by critical design practice public works. The project is based on a disused car park on the Teviot Estate, an area undergoing regeneration. The project aims to develop civic resilience in the face of climate change through a public programme of events, workshops and infrastructures, with a focus on circular food waste systems. Mad LEAP supports technological innovation on the site.

Creating self sustaining resources through closed loop systems: MAD LEAP are developing innovative technological approaches to food waste on the R-Urban site. They are trialling a variety of micro-scale anaerobic digestion (AD) and composting systems, hydroponic growing systems and running a mushroom farm using agricultural waste.

AD is a key part of the closed loop system. A mini 800-litre digester (10 kg p/w capacity) was installed alongside an in-vessel composter (100 kg p/w capacity). Several households brought their food waste to the site, some incentivised by the offer of free raised bed growing space. The AD and composter turns local food waste into bioenergy, biofertiliser and compost, which can be used to support food growing and provide fuel for cooking in the community kitchen.

At a hyper local level, this reduces fossil gas use, replaces carbon-intensive fertilisers and lowers carbon emissions from transportation of food and food waste. This approach reduces costs in the long term of buying materials for growing, cooking and disposing of food and offers potential green employment, training and educational opportunities for local people, helping shift behaviour towards wasting less and recycling more.

Diversifying income streams: MAD LEAP are exploring multiple avenues for supporting salary costs and other outgoings. At R-Urban they plan to install a larger digester processing 700 kg p/w and a rooftop hydroponic polytunnel at Manorfield Primary School, less than 5 minutes away, which will use the AD biofertiliser in place of synthetic nutrient solutions. They are running a variety of accredited traineeships in sustainable gardening, mushroom growing and hydroponics that generate income and provide valuable work experience. This will expand soon to include training in AD and composting. They are also exploring selling the produce grown and the compost to local customers. Unfortunately, there are regulatory restrictions which mean the biofertiliser can't be sold at this point.

Exploring cooperative models of employment: R-Urban Poplar applied for grant funding to pilot a community-led co-operative called The Teviot People's Kitchen, to formally bring together a group of local people to share growing and cooking skills, and get training and business advice. Alongside this, they are exploring income generation opportunities including the development of marketable products like ferments, foraged juices, and nut cheeses and a trial café operation. Once the hydroponic system is operational, MAD LEAP will look at opportunities to process any surplus produce using the biogas into higher-value products.

Learning from MAD LEAP and R-Urban Poplar:

To play a more significant role in processing local food waste and growing food, the infrastructure will need to scale up: The max food waste processing capacity of current systems is 100kg p/w in a Ridan composter and 10kg in the AD system. That would serve about 28 families, so to meet the needs of the whole estate the infrastructure would need to scale up. The planned installation of a larger AD system and rooftop hydroponic system later in 2025 will take capacity up to 800 kg food waste p/w - serving 200 households or up to 37% of the Teviot Estate's 535 households, and 160 m2 growing space. Testing the circular approach at this pilot scale will help validate business model assumptions, environmental and social impacts. Capacity could be expanded later with the addition of another digester module.

There is a surplus of some products that need to be directed to growing sites that need it: R-Urban had a conversation with Patch plants, who stock products like miracle grow who were interested in compost and digestate. However the regulatory framework around selling these products can be restrictive. For example, there needs to be consistency in the compost you produce so you get the same thing every time.

There is a need for more robust economic models: MAD LEAP have modelled larger systems and anticipate a more robust economic model will be achieved processing between 1000-1800kg p/d, serving 1,750-3,150 households, or several food waste generating businesses/schools etc., which is possible within a 50m2 footprint, similar to the pilot scale system, through process optimisation and some additional technology.

In terms of making small scale urban food growing economically sustainable, they found that while business models based on average productivity (kg p/m2) worked in theory, real life required more input in sales and marketing (incurring more cost) and more hands-on resources for practical tasks during peak season. New enterprises go through at least a year's worth of learning to optimise production. A blended approach seems to be the way forward with revenue from produce augmented by income from the sales of training, growing kits and CSR team days/volunteering.

MAD LEAP managed to generate additional revenue from offering accredited training with some online-only options and a hybrid online/ on-site work experience option. The former generates more revenue, while the latter has the advantage of bringing more people onto site to help with the growing tasks. However, operating at schools

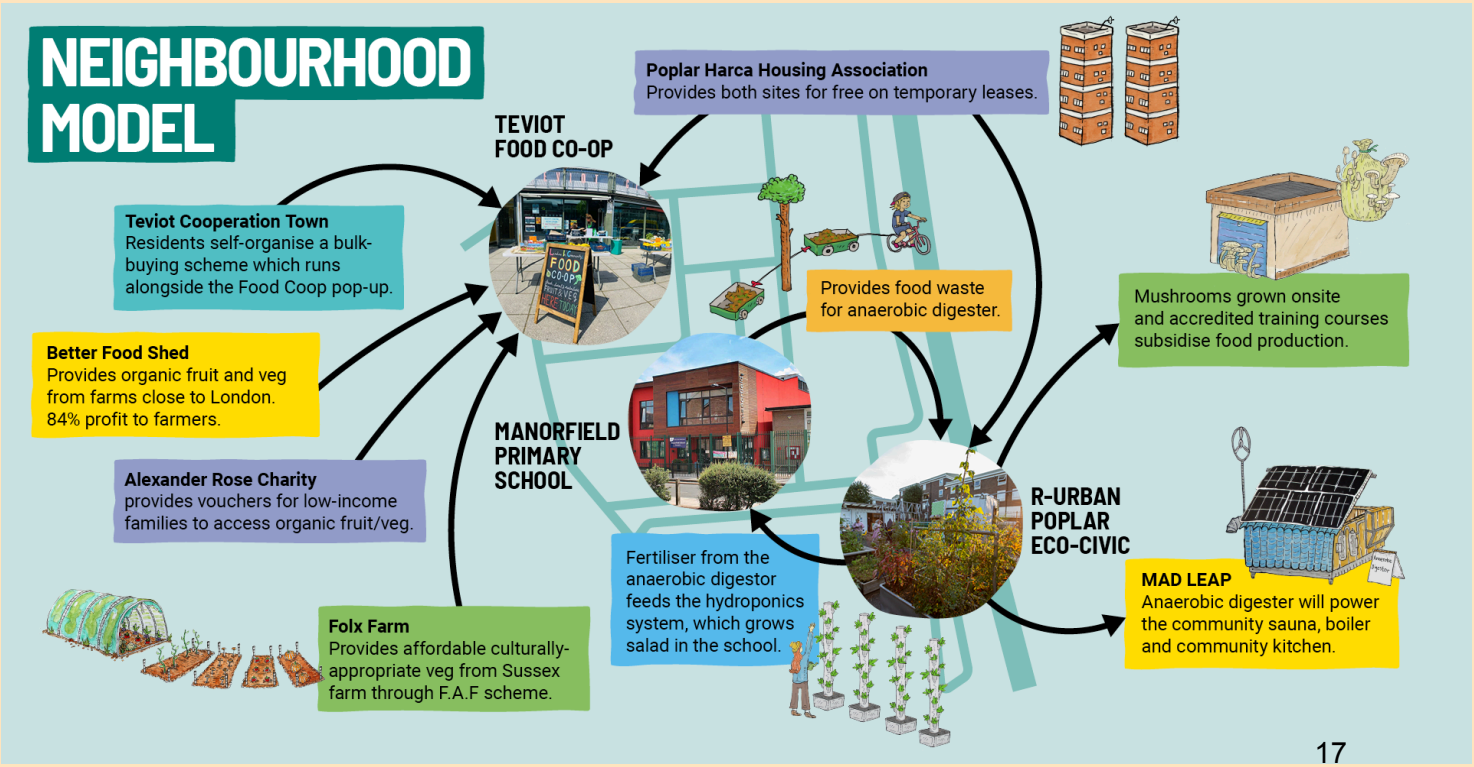
means the cost of DBS checks for trainees can take a significant percentage of the income generated.

Learning from another site has indicated that a cooperative model may be the most effective way forward. A community cafe was set up to run on biogas with a small cooperative of 7-8 people who self managed the care, buying ingredients and organising the finances and payments. The cost of ingredients was deducted from the total monthly revenue, which was then divided by the number of hours worked, with everyone on the same hourly rate. While the hourly rate varied and was never very high, members were only remunerated with what was available so a deficit could not be incurred. In addition, a strong sense of shared ownership was developed and members brought their individual talents into the mix, such as accounting, recipe generation, admin etc.

Scaling up food growing space in dense urban areas is a challenge. Flat rooftops are good candidate sites but require more planning, design, and structural engineering input. Access is also an important consideration and cannot always be easily retrofitted. However, synergies include the potential to insulate buildings below, air exchange bringing CO2-rich air from the building into the polytunnel to boost cop production, and O2-rich air from polytunnel improving indoor air quality and wellbeing.

Birds eye view of an alternative neighbourhood food economy

The Teviot Estate in Poplar, Tower Hamlets, provides an example of how the food systems could be more sustainable, equitable and community-led.



What needs to change to support these models

Local authorities and housing associations need to offer long leases and affordable rates

Many of the above projects rely on social housing providers or the council offering land free of charge (or cheaply) for a set period. However, these providers can choose to repurpose the land or raise the rent at any time, putting projects at risk.

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

- Andy, R-Urban Poplar

Some growing sites that have the council as their landlord are suddenly being charged rent on their leases.

"Bit of a problem at the moment with the council implementing a policy that all community buildings and sites are going to have to pay rents on their next leases."

- Anonymous partner

We support calls from local organisations for Tower Hamlets council to commit to a process for granting free or peppercorn leases of 25 years minimum for land and buildings.[14]

There needs to be a more supportive economic environment for local growers and producers to cross-subsidise community growing

MAD LEAP advocates a push towards siting food growing where it can be used and making agreements with customers before starting out where possible. Promoting local procurement by coordinating sales and marketing across multiple small urban farms, aggregating produce for larger customers where necessary may work for growers of a certain minimum scale but additional costs may not be affordable for smaller growers. Charities like Alexandra Rose subsidising the sales of produce from small growers help bridge the gap, making local/organic food more affordable to disadvantaged communities, while supporting the growers to receive a fair price.

Local and national policies need to be adapted to support local food enterprises: Regulatory frameworks and permissions can create barriers for those trying to meet the challenges of the broader food system. For example, national regulatory frameworks can make it difficult to sell community-generated products such as

[14] THCVS, 'Collective statement on council VCS premises' (2025). Available at: https://thcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Collective-statement-3.pdf

compost. Inflexible permissions processes can hold up or prevent projects. Decision-makers should meet food system innovators to understand how their policies can be adapted while upholding safety.

The Environment Agency do have several Exemptions, which support the operation of community-scale food waste processing but the issue is with end of waste criteria. Composting under the T23 Exemption using PAS100 protocols is relatively straightforward and will enable compost to be sold as a non-waste produce. However, community scale AD operating under a T25 Exemption and complying with the Animal By-Product Regulations will not produce sellable biofertiliser without compliance with PAS110, an onerous, expensive process that adds significant admin time to operations and expensive, regular lab analyses. Moreover, optimising the AD/composting process falls outside of Exemption criterias and restricts innovation in the field as communities develop local expertise. Therefore, new enabling regulations are needed for small-scale processing and use of circular bioeconomy by-products.

Charitable and local authority funding remains essential for piloting projects until they reach a point of sustainability

Projects often need start-up costs for infrastructure and initial staffing costs while they test out their model. Funding flexibility is also needed for projects attempting to innovate, recognising the likelihood of unexpected challenges. For example, delays while permissions are granted for land can lead to increased costs for materials.

Many projects also recognise they will likely always be dependent on some amount of charitable funding. Cooperation Town are dependent on fundraising for their community organiser, but the organiser in this position increased self-organising food cooperatives in the borough by 450% in one year.

MAD LEAP are now looking into how alignment with Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds could support the capital costs of circular food infrastructure, once the model has been proven, as it delivers on several key objectives common to both funds (summarised in the tables below). Operational costs would likely need to be covered through revenue generation

Table 1. Circular food model alignment with Section 106 targets

Section 106 objectives	Alignment	Details
Affordable Housing		
Infrastructure Contributions		
Environmental and Ecological Mitigation	yes	Net-negative carbon circular food model
Community Facilities	yes	Community-led circular food hubs with community cafe's workshop and incubation space
Local Employment and Training	yes	Accredited training and work experience
Carbon offset / environmental protection		
Waste and Recycling	yes	Circular food infrastructure prrocessing local food waste
Public Open Space and Recreation		SOURCE food infrastructure improving biodiversity
Other Site-Specific Mitigation		

Table 2. Circular food model alignment with CIL areas

CIL objectives	Alignment	Details
Affordable housing		
Education	maybe	Inclusion of circular food infrastructure in schools, colleges and universities support accredited green skills training and practical, curriculum-linked programmes around circular food, waste climate themes
Health	maybe	Including green infrastructure in hospitals and care homes to support therapeutic

		horticulture and community food growing opportunities, connecting food growing and gardening with better health outcomes
Highways		
Transport and travel		
Open space and leisure		
Community facilities	maybe	Community circular food hubs with community cafe's workshop and incubation space
Digital infrastructure		
Green infrastructure	yes	SOURCE circular bioresource management infrastructure improving biodiversity and environmental impacts
Flood/water management		
Economic development	yes	Infrastructure to support green work placements, green employment creation and local supply chain development e.g. zero waste food-waste hubs incubating sustainable enterprises and selling affordable, high quality food
Community gardens	yes	SOURCE circular bioresource management infrastructure improving biodiversity and food access

Thanks for reading.

To continue the conversation, get in touch with info@wen.org.uk

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