

THE POTENTIAL OF LOCAL GROWING IN CREATING JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS



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Introduction

This report shares our collective learning about community food growing from the [Just Food and Climate Transition Programme \(Just FACT\)](#) programme. We hope it can be a useful resource for people who are interested in how food grown by residents can support just, sustainable and secure food systems within UK boroughs.

In this report we explore the wide-ranging benefits of local food growing, and how it is key for local food security and community resilience. We look at the different types of food growing projects in Just FACT, including urban farms, community gardens, and roof-top growing. We show how underused land can be brought into growing use with the right support, harnessing the knowledge, skills and love of growing held by local people.

The report also looks at the role of technological innovations, with hydroponics and anaerobic digestion being trialled in the borough. It summarises the key challenges faced by groups and organisations and shares their recommendations for action.

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

Key learnings

Local food growing has extensive social, environmental and health benefits

- **It improves local food security** by increasing the accessibility of fresh produce
- **It reduces isolation and improves wellbeing**
- **Carbon savings are made** through sustainable food growing practices and avoiding transport emissions
- **Community gardens boost local biodiversity and save water** through rainwater harvesting
- **Food growing connects well with other forms of climate action** and/or projects that meet other community needs

There is an abundance of knowledge and skills within the local community

- **Specialist knowledge of diaspora growers** can contribute to adapting local food production to a changing climate. The Bangladeshi community have adapted their cultivation of crops like khodu, coriander and uri, so they can be grown locally instead of being imported
- **Many local women have gardening and community development skills** and could play a vital role in local food growing efforts

There is untapped potential for local food growing

- **Underused land and space can be unlocked for food growing;** from playgrounds, disused car parks, alleyways, garages, rooftops and more
- **Local food growing efforts could be bolstered by technological innovation,** such as the use of hydroponics

Challenges that need to be overcome

- **It is hard for residents to get long term access to land and space**
- **Short-term grants** for food growing projects create instability and job insecurity
- **Reliance on volunteers** can pose challenges where roles require consistent or long term commitment
- **Community gardens aren't always accessible or inclusive**

Our calls to action

- **Unlock more land through a Right to Grow**
- **Unlock funding** to support local growing initiatives and for organisations and to employ local people from diaspora communities as growers
- **Support food growing networks**
- **Provide opportunities for school children to learn about growing**
- **Provide opportunities for communities to meaningfully input into decisions** about food, growing and land in the borough
- **Support local growing projects by procuring their produce**
- **Address barriers to involvement** that are faced by underrepresented groups



Context

The UK food supply chain is increasingly vulnerable to climate disruptions¹. In May 2025, senior industry professionals warned that:

“Yield, quality, and predictability of supply from key sourcing regions can no longer be taken for granted. Degrading soil, water scarcity, global heating, and extreme weather point to an interconnected crisis.”²

In Tower Hamlets, 40% live in poverty.³ Many residents already struggle to access affordable, nutritious food. **Food shortages and price hikes will hit low-income communities hardest, as they manage other impacts like overheated and flood-vulnerable housing.**⁴

For many in the borough, these vulnerabilities are not new. Tower Hamlets is home to communities with **deep-rooted experiences of displacement, colonialism, and environmental devastation.**

The Bangladeshi community, for example, carries memories of land dispossession under British rule and the catastrophic 1970 Bhola cyclone, which destroyed crops and fisheries. Today, Bangladeshi families are witnessing the ongoing loss of ancestral homes to rising seas and extreme weather, driven by emissions largely from the global north.⁵

Food growing offers a powerful response, through reconnection with the land, centring diaspora and working class knowledge, and helping to make sure there's enough food for everyone.

Communities are eager to unlock land for growing, drawing on sustainable practices passed through generations or developed through necessity and resourcefulness. Technology innovators are also working locally to **scale closed-loop systems and regenerative models** in partnership with communities.

The newly released UK government food strategy points to the need for positive changes to the food system to be **grounded in place.**⁶

¹ DEFRA (2024), 'UK Food Security Report'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc68tvvy>

² Inside Track (2025), 'Investor Memo'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/486pre6x>

³ Trust for London (2025), 'London Poverty Profile'. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/5n8xteby>

⁴ London Climate Change Partnership, 'Built Environment'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/36jekmbj>

⁵ For more on how local colonialism has shaped our modern food systems, read 'Recipes for a Revolution', by Platform and The Blueprint Architect Group. Available here: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

⁶ DEFRA (2025), 'A UK government food strategy for England, considering the wider UK food system'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/522x3fv7>

We have learned that **local food growing** has the potential to strengthen food security, lower emissions, and bring people together in a collective effort to confront the climate crisis.



"I was born here, and the land of my ancestral heritage in Bangladesh is drowning because of capitalism and colonialism. I need to build a relationship with the land that is here, and to connect the struggle here with struggles happening across borders."

— Sumayyah, Blueprint Architect

Local growing can boost food security while cutting 'food mile' emissions

Boosting food security

Local food growing projects play a vital role in enhancing food security by increasing the availability and accessibility of fresh produce within communities.

Food growing projects in Just FACT have included urban farms, community gardens, and roof-top growing, and they can help reduce dependence on long and often fragile global supply chains.

This becomes particularly important during times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, geo-political situations such as the Russia-Ukraine war or climate-related disruptions to food crop production, when food imports can be delayed or limited.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, local food systems can **strengthen resilience by ensuring that food is grown closer to where it is consumed**, making communities less vulnerable to external shocks.⁷

There is evidence that **if local community food growing reached its full potential, it could meaningfully contribute to residents' food security**. A study of growing based on a variety of English towns and cities found "current production was sufficient to supply the urban population with fruit and vegetables for about 30 days per year, while more optimistic modelling suggests that **existing land cultivated for food could supply over half of annual demand**."⁸

Reducing food miles

Increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables that residents grow locally not only creates more food security, it also has the potential to **reduce carbon emissions from 'food miles' spent transporting the food from farm to plate**. Transporting fresh fruit and vegetables also often requires refrigeration, and packaging, to keep them fresh, which are other sources of emissions.

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization, ' Available at: <https://www.fao.org/home/en/>

⁸ Grafius, D.R., Edmondson, J.L., Norton, B.A. et al (2020), 'Estimating food production in an urban landscape'. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-62126-4>

One example of where this has been done to great effect is with the [Stepney City Farm project](#), where they have begun to grow Bangladeshi vegetables locally and sell them at a market.

Estimated carbon savings from community growing spaces can be complex to calculate.⁹ A project in Manchester who achieved this estimated that the average emissions savings for a community allotment is around 0.5 tonnes CO₂e.¹⁰



Local food growing projects also often use sustainable growing practices, such as composting, rainwater harvesting, and organic fertiliser and compost systems.

This is in contrast to industrial production techniques and monocultures which can deplete soils and wildlife, use unsustainable amounts of water, and use fertilisers that contribute greatly to global emissions. Fertilisers alone are estimated to contribute around 2% of global emissions.¹¹

[Providence Row](#), a Just FACT project which has run a roof top garden above their charity where they support homeless people, has used homemade compost on their beds and collected around 20,000L of water through their water butts. They estimate

⁹ Capital Growth (2025), 'The Harvest-Ometer'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8jrvds>

¹⁰ McGregor, F. (2022), 'How to Shop for Sustainable Food'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2pcv35dh>

¹¹ Manthiram, K., Gribkof, E. (2025), 'Fertilizer and Climate Change'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5bvcmrvb>

that they have saved 85kg of emissions (CO2e) last year from harvesting rainwater. They also note they have seen an increase in biodiversity in their rooftop since beginning the garden in Spitalfields, with insects and birds visiting.

[Cranbrook Community Food Garden](#) has 18 raised beds, a mini food forest, a shed, greenhouse, compost bays, wormeries, a frog pond, bird spa and bee mound. They used Just FACT funding to plant some berry bushes that can be harvested by local residents. And it has also funded 'Project raindrop', which has added 3.6 metres squared of roof area for rainwater harvesting, which **has increased the garden's rainwater storage capacity from 767 litres to 2284 litres**. It can also help with plant health, as rainwater is better for plants than tap water and reducing localised flooding.

Diaspora knowledge is key to a fair food system

There is an abundance of food growing knowledge in Tower Hamlets. **Residents from diaspora communities bring particularly useful knowledge of growing fruit and vegetables in warmer or wetter climates.** The Bangladeshi community have adapted their cultivation of crops like khodu, coriander and uri to their plots, diversifying the range of vegetables grown in the borough's gardens while reducing carbon from these foods being imported.

Their seed saving practices have adapted plants to the London climate. Residents have even donated saved seeds to [Tozer Seeds](#) to trial larger scale production of Bangladeshi seeds via the Food Lives project.¹² **Bangladeshi residents have played an advisory role** to [Stepney City Farm](#) on growing techniques needed to successfully scale production of culturally appropriate vegetables to a market supply level.

Stepney City Farm team employed two Bangladeshi growers to help their food growing enterprise to better meet local needs, and to learn from and include people with experience of traditional farming and growing techniques.

The team learned how to grow Bangladeshi vegetables for optimum taste. Their growers shared that the flavour and texture of Kodu is best when it's young and small, and that uri beans are more delicious when mature, and so the pods are left on the plants to ripen for much longer than you would let a French bean.

¹² Wen (2024), 'Developing Climate-resilient seeds for Bangladeshi Cultural Vegetables'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/p6r6m9e5>

“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

The specialist knowledge of diaspora growers can contribute to adapting local food production to a changing climate, and inform aspects of the wider food production system in the UK. It can also reduce transport emissions from importing fruit and vegetables from abroad.

“These crops are not only nutritious but carry deep emotional and ancestral value, allowing residents to keep traditions alive and share stories across generations.”

-Limborough Food Hub Lead

It is possible to unlock underused land and space

Tower Hamlets is the most densely populated and fastest growing borough in England and Wales. On average, 112 people live on a football pitch sized area compared to the national average of three people¹³. The percentage of residents in Tower Hamlets who have access to garden space is lower than the UK and London averages.¹⁴

Residents cultivate fruit and vegetables across a vast patchwork of land, **from community gardens, to rooftops, car parks, allotments, balconies, pavement planters, and canal side beds.**

Within Just FACT, there are a number of creative and resourceful ways communities are accessing and caring for land through food growing:

Closed loop system on a disused car park: [R-Urban Poplar](#) is an eco-civic hub based in a disused car park. The site hosts 13 allotment beds used by local residents and communal food growing beds. From learning to put food waste in the Ridan composter to using saved water from the butt, local people steward this infrastructure that serves the wider estate. 870 individuals used the site over 4 years

¹³ONS (2023), 'How life has changed in Tower Hamlets: Census 2021'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E09000030>

¹⁴ CPRE (2023). Available at: <https://www.cprelondon.org.uk/news/tower-hamlets-fails-on-green-space-say-campaigners/>

for learning, growing and eating. The site was leased for free to architecture practice Public Works on a temporary basis, in agreement with social housing provider Poplar Harca who own the site.

Mushroom growing in a garage: [Mad LEAP](#) are experimenting with fungi growing in a disused garage on the R-Urban Poplar site, producing fresh mushrooms for local people. Mushrooms are a space efficient crop and can be grown vertically in small spaces. They can grow on waste materials from agriculture and use less water. Growing 1lb of mushrooms only requires 1.8 gallons of water, compared to hundreds of gallons needed for other crops like tomatoes.¹⁵

Rooftop gardens: [Providence Row](#) is a homelessness charity that developed a rooftop garden on top of their building. A garden manager supports homeless clients to learn to look after the site through their garden trainee scheme. The fruit, vegetables and herbs grown are used in around 3,000 meals in the kitchen to help feed hundreds of people affected by homelessness, while reducing food miles, waste and packaging. Providence Row owns the building, and the garden manager has gradually expanded the community garden across the roof to increase the growing capacity, helping to feed their growing numbers of clients.

Alley transformation: [Cranbrook Community Food Garden](#) installed raised beds along an underused alleyway outside their community garden, providing free fruit to the estate residents and significantly improving the look and feel of the area. The garden was established in 2009 by local residents who transformed a disused children's play area.

Community care of a private garden: [Somos Semillas](#) is a youth-led collective. The group adopt organising practices from indigenous American cultures to promote culturally attuned, sustainable, and equitable food production and consumption patterns within the South American diaspora. Their growing and learning site is the private garden of a friend of the group who agreed for the group to create a garden there. No formal agreement is in place. 10 members of the group tend to the site at weekly sessions.

Raised beds in a school playground: [Boil and Bubble CiC](#) have worked with a local school to build a community garden in a disused patch of playground. A Special Educational Needs class has been involved in building up and planting a bed, and five children and their families have been involved in cooking sessions where ingredients are supplemented from the new garden.

¹⁵ Sure Harvest (2017), 'Mushroom sustainability story'. Available at: <https://www.mushroomcouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-Mushroom-Sustainability-Story.pdf>

These sites offer a glimpse into how much underused land could be brought into growing use with the right support, harnessing the skills and love of growing held by local people.

Technological innovation can help us scale circular food systems

Tower Hamlets community food growing efforts are bolstered by mechanical and energy engineering innovation. Based at R-Urban Poplar, [Mad LEAP](#) is using new technologies to pioneer circular, zero waste approaches to managing food, waste and energy. They combine 'advanced waste management with smart urban farming'.¹⁶

Mad LEAP's **anaerobic digester¹⁷ will be fuelled by waste from local people's kitchens, providing biogas to power the boiler, hot water, and community kitchen and sauna.** This reduces the sites' water and gas-use from mains supply, and carbon emissions from transportation of food and food waste. Compost and fertiliser will be produced that feeds the community garden and local hydroponics systems.

Mad LEAP are also developing **hydroponic technology to grow salad in small spaces**, without the need for soil. Their project will install hydroponic towers in Manorfield Primary school to supplement school meals. There are more than one hundred schools in Tower Hamlets who could benefit from hydroponic technology in supplying food to canteens, with universities, hospitals and businesses also able to benefit.

The skills, knowledge and stewardship of local people can combine with technological innovation to scale the circular food systems in the borough, allowing more resources like compost, water, fertiliser and biogas for community use.

¹⁶ Wen, 'Source Tower Hamlets'. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/project/source-tower-hamlets/>

¹⁷ Biogen, 'What is Anaerobic Digestion'. Available at: <https://www.biogen.co.uk/anaerobic-digestion/what-is-anaerobic-digestion/>

Investment in growing jobs can tackle employment inequality

A number of partners **have employed local people in efforts to increase community leadership and representation** in food growing initiatives.

This has led to **improved participation, communication and trust with local communities**. [Stepney City Farm](#) noted that allotment holders could better communicate with staff and vice versa when they employed two growers who spoke Sylheti, the language spoken by the majority of plot holders.

[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**. This led to Teviot People's Kitchen being set up to test out whether a workers' cooperative model would be viable, supporting the employment of local cooks, gardeners and composters.

We have observed that employing people from local, marginalised communities can help residents from the same communities to feel a greater sense of belonging and understanding.

*"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.**"*

- Allotment holder, Stepney City Farm

The '[Rootz into Food Growing](#)' report also points to **the importance of representation in making it feel possible for people of colour to work in food growing**, where they are currently underrepresented.¹⁸

The proportion of women residents in employment is significantly below the levels for both London and Great Britain.¹⁹ Across Just FACT projects, we have seen 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.

¹⁸Sivapragasam S., McDonald M., Calliste J. of Land In Our Names (2021), 'Rootz into Food Growing'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdeuhvak>

¹⁹ Tower Hamlets Council (2024), 'Tower Hamlets Borough Profile, May 2024'. Available at: https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Tower-Hamlets-Borough-Profile-2024.pdf

[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.²⁰



“I started out at R Urban as a volunteer. I now regularly manage the volunteer sessions, provide training as well. And it’s meant that I can apply for further funding for the horticultural level 2 course I’m now doing. You can only do that if you’re employed in a role where you are doing gardening / horticultural work.”

- Food coordinator and local resident at R-Urban Poplar

“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, Providence Row, now a qualified horticulturist and gardener

²⁰ Platform London (2023), ‘Recipes for Revolution (2023)’. Available from: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

Food growing can bring communities together on climate change

Food growing initiatives are a great way to bring people together to share ideas from their cultures and exchange skills about sustainable living. Food growing knowledge has flowed between growing specialists and communities, and between community members themselves.

[R-Urban Poplar](#) hosted specialists to run sessions on a huge range of topics, from urban foraging, mushroom growing, green roof propagation and repair cafes. They worked with community members **to centre the food growing expertise and practices they already use** that are good for the planet.

Workshops celebrated the possibilities of cooking with homegrown food, using experimental techniques and thinking resourcefully about waste, including Bangla Feasts, ferment and pickle making workshops, and cooking sessions in their community-made tandoor oven.

R-Urban Poplar also employs a highly knowledgeable local resident who previously volunteered on the site. Her growing sessions blend teaching and learning exchange on skills like composting and herb growing.

*“Today I have learnt the advantages of compiling your own compost. **We can reduce our waste from the landfills, we can then create compost that we can use to then produce vegetables and fruits.** Also about how beneficial a wormery would be at home; I didn't know that you could do one at home to get rid of your own waste.”*

- Compost workshop participant, R-Urban Poplar

Food growing helps build community around sustainable practices and collective habits. We have learned that there are many other considerations and motivators that can be weaved in to support climate action, such as faith, diaspora solidarity, storytelling, community research, and cooking and eating together. Read more on our learnings of how these things weave together in our report on [‘How to have climate conversations’](#).

Food growing leads to healthier and more connected communities

Community growing has helped to reduce the isolation and improve wellbeing of local people.

[Burdett Foundation](#) has supported women who were house-bound to become involved in Maydwell Community Garden, which has improved their confidence and mental health.

The [Providence Row](#) team have observed that **for homeless people, the benefits of community gardens can be hugely valuable for mental health**, as clients are working towards positive goals in a safe environment with likeminded people.

[Boil and Bubble](#) have also found their garden in a local primary school is having positive health effects:

*“We have learned so far that: **children love to grow things; that growing plants supports resilience and self worth; that plants provide children a great way to practice care giving; that it can help when having difficult conversations with children if you are in a kitchen or garden**”*

- Boil and Bubble

Swedenborg Orchard, supported by Society Links, found their programme of community composting, growing and pickling reduced the isolation of local residents, from young people who moved to the city for work, to refugees and migrants and women fleeing domestic violence.

“I don't grow plants or vegetables, I grow relationships.”

- Jim Ford, lead volunteer gardener at St George's Estate

Co-locating growing spaces within community hubs can be particularly beneficial for communities' health and sense of connection. [Limborough Community Food Hub](#) offers communal growing beds, and a programme of workshops on growing and cooking, alongside coffee mornings and a food pantry. The location, permanence and variety of offerings from hubs means attendance becomes part of local people's routine. They might attend a coffee morning with neighbours at Limborough Hub as part of their social life and tend to the garden multiple times a week. Often communities criss-cross between food growing and projects that meet other needs.

For more information about how to support community participation in food growing initiatives, see our briefing [“Community participation and leadership in food and climate action”](#).

The challenges we need to overcome

We have learned that there are deep-rooted challenges holding back the full potential of food growing. These include issues like the financialisation and unequal distribution of land, economic injustice, racism, and other forms of structural discrimination. Tackling these systemic problems requires action at a national and local level, and even in how growing spaces are managed by organisers day to day.

Issues accessing land and space

Over 80% of households live in flats in Tower Hamlets, so access to personal gardens is limited.²¹ More growing space is consistently sought after by residents. Stepney City Farm has shared that they cannot meet the local demand for allotments. R-Urban Poplar have a constant waiting list for use of their raised beds. Social housing providers struggle to provide enough plots for their tenants.

*“I live on the 3rd floor with no garden but grow on the balcony, even to the point the council has asked to move it as a fire hazard. **There’s always a reason why we can’t grow.**”*

- Rita, Seeds for Growth

*“**There simply aren’t enough garden beds to go around, and when the plots are rationed, some growers are tempted to take more than their fair share, leaving others without**”*

- Paul Wilson, East End Homes

*“**There is a big Bangladeshi community in Stepney that come from a growing background who are keen to have allotments. They have the growing skills but not the land.**”*

- Stepney City Farm

Within the first year of Maydwell Gardens setting up, 50 residents contributed to the garden, mostly local Bangladeshi women bringing their growing skills to the site.

²¹ Tower Hamlets Council, ‘Don’t let our future go to waste’ (2018). Available at https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/WasteStrategy_final.pdf

Tower Hamlets Council has calculated that their 37 gardens alone are regularly used by as many as 4,000 residents.²² These unmet requests for plots, and enthusiasm when new gardens open, indicate that the food growing potential of residents is currently unmet.

Temporary ownership of growing sites

It is hard for residents to get long term access to land and space. Ownership of growing sites is often permitted on a temporary basis with little community ownership. **Many growing sites in Just FACT are made possible by social housing providers agreeing to share the land for free for a period on temporary leases.** However, housing providers can decide to prioritise the land for other use at their own discretion.

'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

Even garden sharing models are precarious. Somos Semillas is accessing a private garden to grow food, *"but we know this can change any moment"*.

Insecure funding models and job insecurity

According to partners, particularly those with paid staff, funding is a major issue. Short-term grants dominate, creating instability and job insecurity. Often grassroots, non-hierarchical groups are more likely not to be legally constituted as charities, which can mean accessing funding can be difficult.

Wen has **supported hosting arrangements for some partners, with a charity partner holding funds on behalf of unconstituted groups.**

Community garden and charity sector jobs continue to be paid poorly despite the value of the work.

²² Tower Hamlets Council, 'Growing Stronger: £230,000 investment to upgrade 14 community food gardens' (2025). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mvx9hkms>

Some projects are exploring ways to become more financially self-sustaining. Read more in our briefing [‘How to create more resilient community-led local food systems’](#).

Limitations of schools to support children and young people to develop growing skills

Food growing skills are not required to be taught as part of the curriculum, so the offer schools have around food growing varies in scope and quality. Schools often need to spend time applying to grant makers, or partnering with community organisations to apply for funding for growing projects, which can lead to a variable, limited or short term offer to students.

“Without teaching children and young people about food - how to grow it and why it’s important - there can be no future for local and sustainable food systems.”

- Rae, educator, farmer and Blueprint Architect²³

Community gardens aren’t accessible to everyone

Here are some of the things we have learned about what stops people getting involved:

- Not knowing or trusting anyone involved in the garden
- Not feeling safe or a sense of belonging
- Language barriers
- 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 prioritise paid work and/or caring responsibilities
- Not knowing about the project or how to access it

“Growing up here, I didn’t realise there were spaces to grow. I didn’t know about the R Urban project. But when you do find a bit of green space there is no one to ask about using it.”

- Katrina, Mad LEAP

More detail about the barriers marginalised groups face getting involved in community gardens can be found in our response to the [Greater London Authority’s Call for Evidence on food growing in the capital](#).

²³ Platform London (2023), ‘Seeds for a Revolution’. Available here: <https://justfact.co.uk/the-blueprint-architects/>

Reliance on volunteers

Many growing projects rely on volunteers or are entirely volunteer-run. For example, 40 of the beds on the St George's Estate are administered by two of the registered resident volunteers.

Volunteers are valuable, but reliance on them can pose challenges where roles require consistent or long term commitment or where volunteer interests do not match with garden needs. R-Urban Poplar have a dedicated volunteer who delivers food waste from a local school for their Anaerobic Digester, but their circumstances could change and this important part of the system would stop working. Another volunteer-run community garden found that volunteers really wanted to garden, and were much less interested in administration, outreach and evaluation.



Our calls to action

- **We need to unlock land through a Right to Grow**
- We need to **support community leadership** in food growing
- We need to **skill up residents** to manage projects and support food growing networks
- **We need to educate the next generation of growers in schools**
- We need to **build community power over decisions** about food, growing and land in the borough
- We need to **fund Community Food Hubs**
- We need to build **a supportive economic environment** for local growers and producers
- Community organisers need to keep getting better at **making gardens for everyone**

We need to unlock land through a Right to Grow

Right to Grow is a national movement focused on unlocking access to land for community food growing, turning underused spaces into hubs of wellbeing, resilience, and local action.

In 2025 a group of residents, organisations and activists have come together to propose a 'Right to Grow' in Tower Hamlets. They want to:

- Identify and use public land for growing
- Secure space with fair terms and long-term options
- Build stronger, healthier communities through shared growing, cooking, and learning
- Respond to climate and social challenges with local solutions
- Protect and sustain spaces like community gardens for future generations

At its heart, it's about making it easier for communities to green their neighbourhoods, grow together, and shape the future of their local environment.

The group ask that the council:

- Identify and map public land and space that could be used for community growing
- Maintain a free, accessible version of this map
- Name a clear council contact to liaise with groups
- Create a straight-forward process for groups to secure free leases
- Guarantee minimum terms and future options for space

- Provide a right for groups to bid or buy land for long-term security, should the council decide to sell it

“Why isn’t more land being used for gardening? The council has already done a play space audit, so why not do something similar for green spaces? The real pinch point seems to be the availability of land, but I believe there are pockets of underutilised space that could be transformed into community gardens.”

- Paul Wilson, East End Homes²⁴

This aligns with calls from local organisations, including farms and gardens, for Tower Hamlets council to commit to a process for granting free or peppercorn leases of 25 years minimum for land and buildings.²⁵



²⁴Wen (2024), ‘Community Gardens: The Joy, Challenges and Future Potential’. Available at: <https://justfact.co.uk/uncategorised/community-gardens-the-joy-challenges-and-future-potential/>

²⁵ THCVS, ‘Collective statement on council VCS premises’ (2025). Available at: <https://thcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Collective-statement-3.pdf>

We need to support community leadership in food growing

We need to unlock funding for community organisations and enterprises to **employ local people from marginalised communities as growers**.

Local councils need to develop paid training opportunities to increase access into a sustainable food sector, particularly for young people.

There also needs to be more support for marginalised residents **who want to start their own growing initiatives**. Funding and access to growing sites need to go hand in hand.

Any organisation seeking to fund or employ growers must commit to fair pay and secure employment to overcome precarity in the sector. Read more in CFGN's [manifesto](#).

Partners are interested to see how funds could be unlocked from:

- Corporate responsibility commitments from businesses in Tower Hamlets
- Funds and land from anchor institutions like hospitals and universities
- Section 106 commitments
- Local authority funding
- Some sort of local tax like a tourist or restaurant tax

These efforts need to align with national strategies to increase growing jobs and apprenticeships as part of transitioning to net zero and increasing national food security. The government should also consider subsidies for urban and peri-urban growers to make salaries comparable to other sectors.

We need to skill up residents to manage projects and support food growing networks

Supporting residents with project management is a key part of delegating spaces to communities to self-organise. There is a need for volunteer training in organisational and administrative skills for residents to independently run gardens, and support to learn approaches to collective decision making.

“Receiving first aid and food hygiene training was very helpful, and allowed each group member to have the necessary qualifications to be on site alone, as well as to ensure safe use of the kitchen. These skills were also helpful in securing additional pieces of work.”

- Teviot People's Kitchen

Conflict resolution is another area where support is needed. Some projects have experienced conflicts that have left residents isolated or brought work to a standstill. Whether these conflicts get resolved can make or break the success of the project.

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

- Limborough Community Food Hub

"Some residential growers I have observed are natural leaders, but that does not mean that they are fair or impartial to everyone. There is quite a lot of skill building required, with facilitation, but where is the funding for that coming from?"

- Anonymous volunteer garden administrator

The Blueprint Architects ask that local authorities support a network of local food growers so that people know where to look for support with their projects.

CFGN organise training in partnership with specialists who have experience in directly supporting food growers in a variety of social justice areas and could be a key partner in this work. This has included disability justice and workers' rights training. A key finding from their project was a desire for workers to 'collectivise' for policy change.

We need to educate the next generation of growers in schools

The Blueprint Architects ask that just and fair methods of food growing and food consumption be integrated into the curriculum to support long-term cultural shifts towards sustainability and fairness. These skills will also help young people to grow their own and open the possibility of jobs in the sector.

We need to build community power over decisions about food, growing and land in the borough

The Blueprint Architect Group recommends Tower Hamlets council increases resident participation in all policy development, through mechanisms like Citizens Assemblies and reaching communities through local grassroots initiatives.

This echoes CFGN's call for participatory, transparent, inclusive and democratic

collective decision-making processes to promote cohesion, health and increased access to food.²⁶

We need to build a supportive economic environment for local growers and producers

The council and other anchor organisations like hospitals and universities should **push for local procurement of produce where possible, particularly from community enterprises**. This supports local growers and minimises food miles.

Cross subsidy models like those being explored by Folx Farm where restaurants in the borough donate to support affordable food growing for local communities could help diversify income streams and increase income security for social enterprise growers. Food growing training can also offer a stream of income, and councils can support this as part of efforts to train residents.

Resources and peer support would help groups and organisations to understand how to diversify their income streams.

We need more community power over local assets

Councils need to work with residents to explore models of community stewardship over local land, organising spaces, and growing and energy infrastructure. In Public-Common partnerships, communities form partnerships with local authorities to manage assets. Piloting this type of approach could help ensure community interest is prioritised in decision making.

Community organisers need to keep getting better at making gardens for everyone

Projects can take the following actions to help underrepresented groups overcome barriers to being involved in community gardens

1. Ringfence budget to overcome residents financial barriers
2. Create spaces specifically for marginalised communities to come together
3. Support people from marginalised communities into organising and leadership roles
4. Talk to communities about what would make a programme accessible for them
5. Time and resource for relationship building must be planned in
6. Value care and solidarity

²⁶ CFGN, 'Manifesto - Our Common Ground'. Available at: <https://www.cfgn.org.uk/manifesto/>

7. Encourage communities to share knowledge and expertise
8. Consider how to delegate funding, resources and roles to communities
9. Create a culture that responds well to challenge and conflict
10. Organisers should use Equality Impact Assessments to pressure councils and housing associations to make Disability adaptations to their site, with the support of THCVS.²⁷

More detail about how to increase participation and leadership can be found in our brief '[Community Participation and Leadership in Food and Climate Action: What Have We Learned](#)'.

Thanks for reading

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

²⁷ THCVS, Cornerstone Project (2024). Available at <https://thcvs.org.uk/cornerstone/>

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