



Community Food Growing: Multiple societal benefits warrant integrated support measures

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Summary of the research

In our project, 'Grassroots Visual Storytelling about Community Food Growing', participants in such initiatives have made short films about their experiences, mainly in London and Reading. They learned methods for visual storytelling, filming and then editing. For this purpose, the project was structured as a course held three times (spring 2021, autumn 2021 and spring 2022).

Participants' films demonstrate multiple societal benefits, e.g. emotional well-being, self-confidence, cooperative relationships and mutual learning. As their films show, the Covid-19 pandemic created difficulties for food initiatives but stimulated cooperative efforts to sustain or even expand them. Despite Covid restrictions, participants (often with their children) got to know each other better, extended friendship networks and built food-growing skills. The stories also showed how community food growing activities bridged social differences of ethnicity, national origin and age. The activities inspired people's enthusiasm and skills to extend food-growing beyond their own initiative. These benefits depend upon experienced staff with the suitable 'people skills' to make volunteers feel welcome and to facilitate their cooperation, thus building a community sense of belonging.

Key findings

While fulfilling their own needs, participants felt they were doing socially useful activities, such as supplying food banks and learning skills for enhancing locally produced food. Cultivation skills have been extended to homes, schools and other food growing spaces. Earlier feelings of being powerless were overcome by a sense of shared purpose, serving a greater good, the opportunity to 'make a difference' and create a group agency. One story described how a local community garden became 'a place to be, escape and recover'. Such activities have strengthened community bonds, inter-generational learning, skills-sharing, inter-cultural exchanges and thus social cohesion.

As the stories also showed, such closer relationships strengthen the future basis for more cooperative, reciprocal, socially resilient practices despite disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The activities inspired people's enthusiasm and skills to extend group food-growing more widely, towards a 'food culture' appreciating the origin of healthy, environmentally sustainable food. These benefits help to support efforts at localizing food production, which provides livelihoods for producers and distributors.

Policy recommendations

As outlined above (see further below), the multiple benefits underpin several policy recommendations. Community food-growing initiatives should be given greater support from Local Authorities, especially in these policy areas:

- public health: well-being, nutrition, social prescribing, therapeutic gardening;



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- education: visitors (especially schoolchildren) gain knowledge about the origin of nutritious food and inspiration to use such knowledge more widely.
- food provision: environmental sustainability, nutritional quality and affordability; improvement as participants extend food growing to more spaces.
- land use planning: long-term secure tenure for food-growing spaces as public assets, including unused spaces (beyond meanwhile spaces), rather than use land to favour financial-assets. ~
- climate & nature conservation: food production with lower GHG emissions; green spaces for biodiversity; forest gardens as carbon sinks.
- community cohesion: community arts, cooperative activities overcoming social divides.

Some support measures have been provided, but these remain sporadic, uncertain and fragmented across policy areas. Local authorities should 'Take a cross cutting approach: include food growing in public health strategies, food strategies, local plans, and climate and nature strategies'. And these areas should be linked in planning policies (see more detail in [Sustain report](#)). The societal benefits depend upon experienced staff with the suitable 'people skills' to make volunteers feel welcome and to facilitate their cooperation. Community food-growing initiatives need stable core funding in order to maintain such capacities.

MINI-CASE STUDIES

Wolves Lane, London: synergies among activities

The [Wolves Lane Centre](#), once a plant nursery run by Haringey Council in northeast London, has been turned into a web of interdependent activities (see [Anne's film](#)). Before the pandemic, there were at least 20 volunteers per week helping maintain the palm house and the outdoor landscaping. Six other greenhouses produce food; two grow for charitable distribution and four are small business start-ups, one of which served an organic box scheme also located on the site. A flower-growing coop uses the eighth greenhouse. Several of these organisations have additional volunteers. Site overheads were covered about half each by grant funding and rents. Meanwhile donations came from visitors to the tropical greenhouse, Haringey's 'mini-Kew Gardens', an urban form of agri-eco-tourism. In early 2020 the pandemic hygiene restrictions ended the visits and so jeopardised that income stream. As a different way forward, volunteers responded by selling seedlings and plants grown from cuttings from the palm house stock. Thus the pandemic occasioned an important new source of income generation, crucial for all the site's activities. Their interdependencies have analogies with alternative agri-food systems; their economic viability depend on sales beyond food per se, as well as solidaristic commitments to a better future.

As regards funding: Since Haringey Council handed over the site to the voluntary sector in 2016, essential capital works have been funded from various sources, in particular: Council funds for insulation materials; a crowdfunding appeal (match funded by the GLA) for solar panels; and a large grant from the National Lottery to build a new community hall, offices and teaching accommodation. The DCLG funded two years' part time salary for a staff member. The Centre's activities will remain dependent on external funds for the foreseeable future.

Food4Families, Reading: replicating the benefits

Reading's [Food4Families](#) programme has established or facilitated numerous community gardens; see [Dave's blog](#) and [film](#)). When a large space at the former Civic Offices was temporarily left vacant, it was turned into [Lavender Place Community Garden](#) (see [Kath's film](#)). During the Covid-19 pandemic this attracted regular volunteers from Reading Food Growing Network, from Deenway Montessori School pupils and Activate Learning Reading College students. Also attracting numerous refugees, the site brought together crops from their homelands into a Global Garden and a wellbeing garden designed by a volunteer.

It also had a large section for former Ghurkhas. During the pandemic, all these spaces provided a safe, convivial means to escape from social isolation, engage in socially useful activities, meet people from diverse backgrounds and spread skills for wider food-growing. The Lavender Place site was due to be taken back for development in spring 2022, so Food4Families sought a replacement site. Given the success of Lavender Place in creating a vibrant community hub, Royal Berkshire Hospital invited Food4Families to design and build a new garden as part of its staff well-being centre.

Calthorpe Community Garden, London: 'We feel at home here'

Within a wider project, the [Calthorpe Community Garden](#) hosts diverse activities, especially group food-growing, where volunteers learn cultivation skills and exchange knowledge about them. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, a tutor distributed seeds for volunteers to grow food in their own spaces, organized Zoom sessions to discuss their experiences, and thus spread the skills to wider networks. With appropriate Covid precautions, the on-site activities helped people to overcome social isolation, while bringing together people from diverse backgrounds (especially from Latin America), who otherwise would not have known each other. This illustrates how community food-growing brings multiple societal benefits, especially community cohesion. Yet the Calthorpe also exemplifies the sector's chronic dependence on short-term grants; this limits the continuity of the crucial 'people skills' for dealing with volunteers.

The Calthorpe was the site of this project's first dissemination event in September 2021. After seeing films from other food initiatives, volunteers emphasised their sense of group belonging and social usefulness there, e.g. in supplying food to vulnerable people and learning cultivation skills with wider relevance. As our report highlighted, volunteers 'feel at home' there in many senses. See report with photos, <https://cobracollective.org/news/calthorpe-community-garden>

Further information and weblinks

Sustain, The Role of Councils in Community Food Growing:

<https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Sustain-Briefing-Councils-and-Food-Growing.pdf>

Our overview of the films with links to them: <https://cobracollective.org/news/second-insights-community-food-growing>

Padlet page with links to the films, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6851866>

Podcast describing the grassroots storytelling course and some insights from the films: Episode 8 in the series, [The Pandemic and Beyond](#).

Free online course for learning how to make your own short film:

<https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=7086>

Webinar for practitioners interested to make their own films, December 2021:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsL_7gG5B_U

Project Partnership: [The Open University](#), [Cobra Collective](#), [Reading International Solidarity Centre \(RISC\)](#), and [Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming](#).

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