HOW GIVING COMMUNITIES THE RIGHT TO GROW FOOD ON PUBLIC LAND HELPS LOCAL AUTHORITIES MEET GOALS ON HEALTH, SUSTAINABILITY, FOOD PROVISION AND MORE.

With 78% of people believing that substantial or radical changes are needed to fix the food system[1], **community food growing** offers a practical, scaleable grassroots solution which local authorities can have a direct hand in supporting and developing.

Embracing and encouraging community growing will, through adoption of a Right to Grow on public land, offer a multitude of benefits from food provision, health improvements and social cohesion to improved biodiversity and reduced carbon emissions.

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What is Community Food Growing?

Community food growing (CFG) is simply groups of people coming together to grow food as part of shared projects, with and for local people. There is no standard model for CFG, with some prioritising food production, or others focusing on providing a place for people to connect and many perform an educational function. Most people in urban spaces do not have access to their own land or gardens where they can grow food, so community growing projects are about connecting urban populations with pockets of green spaces with which they can actively engage and participate. Community food growing projects are an act of practical hope, towards creating a climate resilient, socially-just agri-food system.

What makes Community Food Growing an important urban strategy?

Urban food growing is sometimes seen as a 'nice-to-have'. However, in our changing world urban food growing, particularly in the form of CFG projects, will increasingly become a 'need-to-have'. This document outlines just some of the many ways that urban CFG projects can offer huge benefits for communities.

Community food gardens should not be viewed as hobby projects, which allow a few people to 'do a bit of gardening' but as the community anchors that they are, which knit together a web of benefits spanning the complex social and environmental needs of our urban populations and offer highly impactful benefits for food, environment, health and social needs which might not be immediately obvious.

Community gardens can help foster broader community cohesion[2], cross-cultural understanding[3] as well as reduce crime[4], and a 2011 social return on investment study showed that for every £1 invested in community gardens, £3.56 of social value was returned[5].

Barriers to Community Food Growing

There are a range of challenges that impact the success and scale of CFG projects in urban spaces, from funding to skills and land availability. But, some of the most straightforward problems to solve can be attributed directly to local authority policies, or lack thereof.

- **Councils may provide limited information about available land**, and offer very limited access to land without any secure tenure. As a result, community groups find it very hard to identify and make use of potential growing sites.

- **Council policies may result in community groups being required to pay** for costly leases and public liability insurance, which pits the comprehensive social and environmental benefits of CFG against an incentive to monetise public land assets, and which can result in preventing community food growing in the most deprived urban areas.

- **Council roles are fragmented across administrative units**, making it hard for Council officers to offer support to potential projects and in turn creating a frustrating and complicated system of processes for community groups to navigate.

- **There is often limited responsibility for community food growing across council units**, because its connection and relevance to specific policies is poorly understood.

An Open University study[6] found that Council barriers to community gardening generated public distrust which deterred engagement with Council officers and that the lack of community engagement can result in climate (and other) policies which do not recognise the benefits of these projects.

With funding limitations as a factor in preventing local authorities from driving community food growing forward, adoption of a Right To Grow policy will open up the bottle-neck created by Council barriers by empowering community groups to take forward this important work, without feeling they need to 'fight' the council for the opportunity to create these widely beneficial projects.

CFG projects are a key tool for building the knowledge and skills needed in our urban communities to address sustainability challenges in the future. While CFG projects may face challenges right now caused by a lack of skills, this can only be addressed by steadily scaling community food growing creating the skill-development opportunities that will allow CFG projects to truly flourish in the coming decades.

What is the Right to Grow?

The Right to Grow is not about turning public land over to individuals for food growing projects that will benefit private individuals or groups. It is fundamentally a collaborative tool that makes way for community projects to create shared assets, with food, access and involvement available to the wider community.

A Right to Grow acknowledges that the use of public land - especially those plots which are under-utilised such as verges and 'in-between spaces' - are powerful assets which can be harnessed for public good through the will and actions of the community, if only they are permitted and encouraged to do so through granting a Right to Grow.

Implementing a Right to Grow

In practical terms, a Right to Grow policy will be delivered in different ways by different authorities, depending on their structure, funding, and the community they serve, but there are key elements for success.

The key elements of a Right to Grow policy should be that the council;

works in collaboration with community groups to develop suitable processes and systems for delivering a Right to Grow, such as through a working group with local growers, food partnerships and relevant officers.

makes provision for leases and liability insurance to be available at no cost to community growing groups

makes information about available public land easily accessible either as maps or lists

TIME
HEALTH

How Growing Food Can Change Your Life

CBC NEWS

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Growing spaces benefit local relationships, biodiversity, education and cultural connections, supporters say

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COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS SHOULD BE PART OF THE NEW NORMAL – HERE'S WHY

A local, decentralised food system isn't just good for consumers – it's got big benefits for farmers and our environment as well

Treehugger

Tackling Community Food Security Through Gardening

From community gardens to gardening groups, working together to grow food makes for a more secure community.

Vox

CLIMATE

The real value of urban farming. (Hint: It's not always the food.)

theguardian

London's food-growing schemes offer harvest of fruit, veg and friendship

Community plots, such as Islington's Octopus sites, provide social benefits and can lessen supply shocks, supporters say

70% think it's important that the food system helps resolve inequalities in our society[7]

Benefits for Food Provision

The cost of living crisis is causing more families to experience food scarcity, and over 4 million children in the UK live in homes without adequate access to food. With a changing climate impacting large-scale agriculture and the UK being highly reliant on imports of fruit and veg, these challenges are likely to worsen in coming years[8]. People engaged in food growing report lower levels of food insecurity and higher wellbeing, than those not involved with food growing[9], but 1 in 8 households have no access to a garden where they could grow food. In England, Black people are nearly four times as likely as White people to have no access to outdoor space at home[10]. Where private food-growing spaces are not an option, opportunities for involvement in community food growing can increase a person's agency in determining the quality and availability of food in their household while supporting skill development for further food growing in the community.

Those unfamiliar with just how productive urban growing can be might assume that our nation's food needs can only be served with large-scale agriculture. However Urban yields are often just as good if not better. For crops like cucumbers, tubers and lettuce yields are 2-4 times higher than conventional farming[11]. The Rurban Revolution study estimated that urban green spaces in Great Britain, at their upper limit, have the capacity to supply more than 8× what we currently grow in terms of fruit and vegetables, and substantially contribute to inhabitants 5-a-day. For example, in Liverpool, by harnessing all of the city's urban green spaces it would be possible to produce roughly 113.4 metric tonnes of fresh fruit and vegetables per year. Taking into account the population of Liverpool, this equates to 192.2kg of fresh fruit and vegetables per person per year[12]. That's more than the World Health Organisation's recommended intake of fruit and veg.

There is increasing demand for allotments as more people recognise the multiple benefits of growing their own food. Having a local space to grow fresh, affordable food, meet others, share tips and knowledge, stay active and cut food miles, are all things that appeal to an increasing number of people. But the Local Government Authority Environment Board recognises[13] that it is a major challenge for authorities to meet their duties to attend to current demand due to spare land in short supply, growing waiting lists and limited funding.

An increase in community growing projects on public land can be part of an additional offering for individuals and families on allotment wait lists, and can serve as an opportunity to build the knowledge, skills and networks that will allow them to grow their own food in the future.

When considering food provision, it's important to also consider the quality and nutritional density of that food. Nutritional deterioration begins as soon as crops are harvested which means that locally grown produce that can get into people's kitchens much faster and

offer more nutrients compared to those which have been imported or have moved through large, complex supply chains. Vitamins and antioxidants in some types of produce may be more than 100 percent higher in local crops versus imported ones[14].

Opportunities to meet local authority food provision and sustainability strategies through increased CFG

POLICY EXAMPLE	BENEFITS OF CFG
"Escape the Junk Food Cycle and protect the NHS"	CFGs can be an opportunity for people consuming high-volumes of ultra-processed foods to taste fresh fruit and vegetables, building confidence in eating them and encouraging the consumption of more of those foods.
"Create a long-term shift in our food culture"	Engaging in community food growing gives people the skills not only to grow their own food, but also to identify high quality, nutritious fruit and veg and can spark an interest in eating better. This knowledge gives people the opportunity to make life-long changes to the way they consume food.
"Everyone should be able to eat the food they need to thrive"	Community food growing can be an opportunity for those who cannot afford enough fresh fruit and veg to access such products either through volunteering or via services such as community larders which are often connected to community food growing projects.
"Systematic programmes of learning around food for families as part of a universal and targeted offer to local families"	CFGs create an opportunity for people to learn where their food comes from, and to learn about a diverse range of fruits and vegetables and how they might incorporate them into their diets. Many CFGs also create opportunities for local people to learn how to cook home-grown food.

CASE STUDY: HAVANA, CUBA

Havana is often touted as one of the great examples of cities that have radically altered the way their citizens live and work through the introduction of urban agriculture. Urban farming saved the city when the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 led to a sudden oil shortage, a deep impact on the economy and a destabilised food system. Following proactive support from the local government, around 8% of all land in Havana is under cultivation producing organic food for the city's inhabitants. Figures vary from year to year, but **around 90% of all the fruit and vegetables consumed in Havana are produced in the city's urban farms and gardens.**

Benefits for Health

Getting your 5-a-day is crucial for promoting good health and consumption of poor-quality diets is the leading cause of death and a top contributor to Non-Communicable Disease burden[15]. However in a 2022 survey 48% said they were buying less vegetables due to the recent cost of living crisis[16], and only 18% of children and 29% of adults in the UK meet the 5-a-day recommendation[17].

Food growing opportunities in the hearts of urban spaces are an important part of addressing the health crisis. People engaging with and living near to urban food growing tend to make healthier and more ethical food choices[18] and increases in fruit and vegetable intake were seen in households where members were involved in community gardening[19].

The health benefits of CFG extend well beyond diet. Swedish researchers who studied more than 4,200 people aged over 60 found that those who performed a high level of "non-exercise physical activity" including gardening tasks such as cutting the hedge or mowing the lawn, were 27 per cent less likely to suffer from heart attack, stroke or angina[20]. Gardening for 30 minutes burns as many calories as playing badminton or doing yoga[21].

Estimates from 2006 put the wider economic costs of mental health problems at over £110bn/year and gardening has been shown to have benefits for people's mental health. Studies have found significant reductions in depression and anxiety and improved social functioning resulting from participation in gardening[22]. CFGs are an excellent opportunity to develop social prescribing to support mental and physical wellbeing. The charity Mind has over 130 ecotherapy projects and studies have demonstrated their projects support wellbeing, help people at-risk of developing a mental health problem and aid the recovery of people with existing mental health problems.

Gardening and food growing can help people to cope with the symptoms or treatment of other serious health problems including those at the end of their life in hospices or other care situations; and also people learning to deal with drug and alcohol dependency[23].

Researchers in Philadelphia found that those who are involved in urban gardening projects find life more satisfying and feel they have more positive things happening in their lives than those who are not[24].

Opportunities to meet local authority health strategies through increased CFG

POLICY EXAMPLE	BENEFITS OF CFG
"Loneliness and isolation are reduced by meaningful social contact at all life stages"	Community growing provides a low-pressure environment where people can form social bonds through shared activities usually accessible to people of all kinds and abilities.
"Investing in prevention over the longer term to promote a more sustainable health system"	CFG equips people with life-long skills which they can use to improve their diets and change their relationship with food.
"Ensure positive experiences of being active for young people"	Participating in gardening is a positive experience which combines physical activity with learning and skill building in a non-competitive environment accessible for many body-types.

Benefits for Climate and Sustainability

With climate change, soil degradation, water shortages and the increasing price of fossil fuels, the intensive rural agriculture we have collectively come to rely on is becoming an ever more unstable source of affordable food. Urbanisation has also exacerbated the effects of extreme weather, with urban spaces experiencing the worst of high heat and flooding events. In order to adapt to our changing world, local authorities are increasingly setting ambitious sustainability goals, and CFG can be a powerful tool to improve the immediate climate of urban spaces, enhance local sustainability and improve the impact our towns and cities have on the wider world.

A 2022 meta-analysis[25] showed that urban green spaces and urban agriculture are similar in their ability to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services such as supporting biodiversity, storing carbon, infiltrating water and reducing extreme heat:

Heavy rainfall and the pressure on our waterways from sewage overflows is an increasingly critical issue. Gardens in urban environments can be an excellent way of reducing water runoff. Not only is rainwater absorbed into the exposed earth, and held by healthy soil and plant roots, many community gardens have measures in place to capture and hold rainwater such as trenches, water butts and ponds.

Urban spaces are heating up 29% faster than rural areas, and the World Economic Forum has called for the 'greening' of cities to help address this[26]. Green spaces and water reduce temperatures in cities because water vapour given off by plants or from

water bodies cools the air by evaporation, and some plants, such as fruit and nut trees, can also be planted to provide much-needed shade.

Some may assume that cultivating food leads to a loss of biodiversity and negative impacts on an ecosystem, but this is based on the impacts of large-scale rural intensive agriculture. A comprehensive study[27] looking at the impacts of community gardens and urban farms defies this assumption, showing that they positively affect biodiversity and local ecosystems. Authors of the study said that these urban gardens supported "incredibly high levels of plant and animal biodiversity". Community gardens are also important for supporting critical pollinator populations, especially wild bees, as well as being important reserves for wild plant species which are threatened in urban spaces[28].

Growing food in community gardens for the local area is an effective way to tackle carbon-intensive food miles, reducing the reliance on food driven in from around the UK and from abroad and improving community knowledge about seasonal eating, which allows people to make more sustainable food choices when purchasing from supermarkets.

As well as the direct benefits of community growing from a sustainability perspective, another factor at play is that regular nature exposure can foster a meaningful connection between humans and the natural world. Personal experiences with nature can be a significant driver of pro-environmental behaviour[29] which can help communities to become more sustainable in a whole host of different ways.

Opportunities to meet local authority environment and sustainability strategies through increased Community Food Growing

POLICY EXAMPLE	BENEFITS OF CFG
"Put in place measures that adapt homes and businesses, so they can reduce overheating risk and contribute to urban cooling"	Converting disused areas of land into heavily planted food-growing spaces will increase water transpiration, taking heat away from urban spaces. Urban-orchard planting schemes, which line streets with fruit and nut producing trees which people can forage from freely, can provide shade as well as food and habitat for wildlife.
"Work with partners to develop Natural Flood Management projects to allow catchment-wide adaptation to flooding and sea level rise"	Bare, compact or poor-quality soil as is often found on disused land, is unable to hold large volumes of water after heavy rainfall events. However soil that is cared for through community food growing projects which is rich in organic matter and has had the complex soil life networks restored, dramatically increases how much water soil can hold during heavy rainfall.
"Increase the contribution of land under the ownership of, or managed by the Council to pollinator conservation"	Increasing the availability of council owned land for community food growing, through the Right to Grow, will allow community groups to take on the stewardship of the land. CFGs have been shown to be of huge importance for creating habitat for pollinator species, and those growing fruit and vegetables are likely to take steps to create pollinator habitat because of their reliance on healthy pollinator populations for successful food production.

Opportunities to meet other Local Authority goals through community food growing

Redirect green spaces maintenance costs: by enabling community groups to take over public spaces saved funding could be repurposed to directly support community food growing.

Planning & place-making: encouraging developers to design CFG growing rather than sterile lawns creates spaces that will be more valued by the wider community

Community empowerment: communities feel a new sense of collective purpose and agency when they take over neglected public spaces.

Heritage & culture: CFG is an opportunity for older generations and diverse cultures to pass on their food growing knowledge, especially in the growing of local and heirloom varieties that are under threat.

Employability: enabling individuals to develop horticultural and gardening skills which could then develop into a livelihood.

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