

Presentation 3

Council perspective, how planning policies support a food growing programme - a case study from the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea

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The Community Kitchen Garden Programme in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea illustrates how food growing planning policies can have a role in supporting local food-growing.

About the Programme

The Community Kitchen Garden Programme “transforms under-used, neglected or disused areas of land into allotment style gardens where local residents can grow their own fruit and vegetables.” In short, it turns under-used spaces into gardens.

How It Works

The programme is managed by the Royal Borough Environment Project in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Since its start in 2009, it has grown to include 700 community kitchen gardens that benefit over 1,500 residents, which fills a need created by the fact that Kensington and Chelsea has no allotments. The programme runs in partnership with a range of stakeholders, including private landowners, housing associations, Groundwork London and Council’s Housing Dept. Since the average plot size is only 3 square meters, most new sites are too small to need planning approval. Therefore, they don’t have much *direct* interaction with the planning system, although as we’ll see later, there are indirect effects of planning policies.

Support for Growers

The structures that support growers are central to Community Kitchen Garden Programme. Two community gardeners are on staff to offer support, advice, and training during the growing season. In the off season, they organise a programme of workshops and events, and provide gardening support. In addition to this more top-down support, they encourage structures for self-support, specifically the formation of garden clubs to self-manage sites. The borough also has an annual gardening competition, which in 2012 began including a new prize for Vegetable Plots so that Community Kitchen Gardeners could compete.

RBKC Food-Growing Planning Policy

The Community Kitchen Garden Programme operates within the context of RBKC’s Food-Growing Planning Policies. I’ll highlight two for you here, which are written in full on the screen. The Consolidated Local Plan from July 2015 emphasises producing food close to its point of consumption, and encourages the use of private garden space, green roofs and sheds to facilitate small-scale on-site food production. Policy CE 1 on Climate Change requires development to incorporate measures that will contribute to on-site sustainable food production of an appropriate scale.

Success Factors

The council officer who manages the programme identified several factors that led to its success.

1. The first was strong political and resident support, with councillors and residents working jointly to identify the need for local food growing projects and championing this programme. This broad support helped both to deliver initial funding for gardens and to provide ongoing support.
2. Secondly, the programme's staffing structure is key to its success, especially the dedicated staff to support residents, which is fairly unique among these kinds of programmes. Their helping hand and enforcement of ground rules contributes to the programme's longer-term sustainability.
3. These two factors combine to offer ongoing support and maintenance that make the programme successful.
4. The importance of starting in bite size sections - before jumping in and installing a whole garden, assess the level of interest and only provide as many plots as will be used. If all plots are in use and a small waiting list exists, this creates buzz and excitement about the project and more people want to be involved and also look after their plots better.
5. Finally, it's important to celebrate success and make it fun! Actions include holding launch events, social events, or friendly competitions such as RBKC's highly coveted "Golden Gnome" award.

Lessons Learned

- The trials and errors of the implementation of the Community Kitchen Garden Programme have several lessons to offer. Council staff suggest encouraging early resident involvement and garden clubs, and using peer-to-peer training and local knowledge to help make them self-sufficient.
- There are also lessons here about the role of planning policy in urban food growing, which will be explored in even more depth later in the webinar. We see here that food-growing planning policy functions as support and back-up for borough food-growing programmes, but will not work on its own to kickstart a programme or ensure its support. We also see how these interdisciplinary planning policies can serve to foster cross-collaboration between municipal departments, such as the collaboration here between RBKC's housing and environmental staff.

Where do you think the greatest potential lies for the provision of spaces for food growing?

The answer would differ depending on if you're thinking of spaces for larger-scale, commercial or professional food growing, versus spaces for growing food in gardens or allotments that align more with goals of community building, green space, or public health. Thinking of the latter, since that's our main focus, I'd recommend looking into smaller, underutilised spaces that are already accessible to many people - housing developments, tucked-away corners of parks, institutions like hospitals or schools. It doesn't need to have started as a dedicated spot in the grand plan of a new development to be successful!

<https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/environment/environment-project/royal-borough-environment-project>