

Awareness and Action in the UK

Recently, richer industrial nations began to consider the possibilities of urban agriculture and its potential benefits to relevant policy-makers (Garnett 1996, Howe and Wheeler 1999). This literature highlights the value of urban food growing projects as a powerful vehicle for tackling intimately linked social, economic, educational and environmental concerns, arguing that the rationale for urban agriculture has never been stronger. In the UK, there is increasing awareness of the interlinked benefits of urban food growing. Planning, as an inclusive, future oriented vocation, which seeks to enhance the liveability of localities is ideally placed to strengthen community food systems. Nevertheless, the role played by UK local planning authorities in regulating urban agriculture has received only scant attention to date (Howe 2001, Martin and Marsden 1989).

This paper redresses this deficit by presenting findings from a UK Government Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded survey examining the role played by planning in regulating urban agriculture on allotments, community gardens and city farms. The survey of all metropolitan planning authorities produced 32 usable replies, representing a response rate of 46%. The survey was concerned with:

- ❖ exploring planners' attitudes to and knowledge of urban food production; and
- ❖ examining the regulation and coordination of urban food production.

Planning conditions with regards to health issues acquires considerable importance

Respondents varied in seniority, ranging from Principal Planning Officer to non-planners involved in urban food schemes.

PLANNERS' ATTITUDES TO AND KNOWLEDGE OF URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION

The survey revealed that there was an encouraging awareness, and perceived significance, of urban food issues amongst planners (more details are given on the RUA website in tables of the survey results):

- ❖ Of the respondents, 47 % claimed to have low levels of awareness regarding food issues,

Allotment garden

Sustain



with 22 % claiming to have a high level of awareness.

- ❖ Sustainability targets and health were seen as being the most significant potential benefits of urban food schemes (22 %).
- ❖ Fifty percent regarded urban food growing as having a significant role in environmental factors, 41 % in social factors, 47 % in education and 22 % in urban regeneration.
- ❖ Of minor importance is the economic role of urban food production, according to 21 percent.

The data suggests that a link may exist between the claimed level of awareness of urban food issues and the perception of the relative importance and benefits of urban food growing.

It also appears that a distinction may be drawn between planners' knowledge of the issues surrounding urban food production and their knowledge of land-use issues, notably on allotments. A number of the comments made by respondents point to a higher level of land-use knowledge than

specifically for urban food. This suggests a tendency for planners to view issues purely from a land-use perspective.

THE REGULATION AND COORDINATION OF URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION

In examining the regulation of urban food production, the survey initially explored the planned local coverage of urban food (see box).

The plan coverage provides a strong indication of the way in which urban food production might be viewed by the land-use planning system and, to a significant extent, sets the context within which it is to be regulated. While clearly a small sample, the potential difference in treatment by the planning system of allotments, community gardens and urban farm sites resulting from this division in policy coverage may also be significant. The different plan coverage raised the question of whether planning protection strategies and mechanisms would differ between various

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urban food sites or whether the dichotomy between the planning regulation of allotments and urban farms and community gardens would persist.

Essentially, none of the responding planning departments appears to treat urban food production as a discrete issue specifically within the statutory planning arena. This is reinforced by the comments of a number of authorities, and in several instances, the siting of urban food production as a “Local Plan” or “planning” issue was questioned. Two respondents suggested that the Local Agenda 21 process was a more likely arena for this issue, and one questionnaire was passed from the planning department to a community allotments’ officer for completion. Nonetheless, it remains clear that a number of planning departments are involved in schemes which do relate specifically to urban food and extend beyond purely land-use considerations. Significantly for the input of the statutory land-use planning system it appears from the data concerning revised development plans that certain steps are now being taken towards identifying urban food production as a planning theme in its own right. This suggests a potentially significant impact upon the input of the planning system into the regulation and coordination of urban food, with more focused statutory treatment accompanying the broader framework for contribution.

In considering the response of the planning system to urban food, the survey revealed that:

- ❖ The greater number (44%) of respondents thought that their policy

framework neither encouraged nor discouraged the development and protection of urban food production, though a significant proportion (31%) said their policy framework actively encouraged this. No respondent thought their framework actively discouraged urban food schemes.

- ❖ 47% considered that their local policy framework gave urban food about the right level of significance, than gave too little (28%).
- ❖ At the national level, this situation was reversed: 38% of respondents thought the national policy framework gave too little significance to urban food production against 25% who considered its significance about right.

In relation to development control, the survey revealed that:

- ❖ Only one authority suggested that a planning application had been received specifically for development on an urban food site.
- ❖ Planning conditions were imposed on urban food sites in three authorities. These related mainly to health issues, e.g. the condition of the soil at the site.
- ❖ If the demand for urban food sites was no longer sufficient, the majority of respondents stated that retaining some form of open space or recreational area would be desirable. One authority stated that sites might be used mainly for residential development, since they were primarily located in areas denoted in the development plan as “primarily residential use.”

- ❖ Conflict regarding urban food sites had arisen in 12 districts. Of these, nine related to pressure to develop on allotment sites, particularly where these were considered under-used.

These issues of demand for, and potential changes of, use at urban food producing sites are related to the issue of conflict between food production and other forms of land use, either during plan preparation or in development control. Since this relates directly to land use, this issue appears particularly salient to the planning system. In addition, the possibility of planning conditions with regard to health issues acquires considerable importance in the context of the use of brownfield sites and seems to be an area in which the land-use planning system can exert a direct effect through its statutory powers.

CONCLUSION

The rising interest in food growing as a recreational activity combined with consumers’ desires and indeed the need for healthy food are combining to make urban agriculture an emerging and dynamic activity. However, the development of urban agriculture is dependent upon the supply of land. Urban land is a highly prized, and priced, commodity and urban food production faces fierce competition for land and financial resources from land uses with higher profiles or offering greater returns, such as housing and industry. This puts pressure on urban food producing sites, and it is for planning to legitimate their position within the urban environment.

In general, planning’s direct role in relation to food growing is relatively small in the UK. Indeed, urban agriculture sits uncomfortably within the UK planning framework. Nevertheless, planning’s apparent low level of involvement is perhaps perplexing given the significance of food to the metropolitan system. Cities are complex, dynamic entities within which food production and consumption are important components. The challenge for the statutory framework is to recognise and integrate every aspect of the urban system, including food production, into sustainable development strategies.

- ❖ Of the 32 authorities responding to the questionnaire, 26 had policies in their development plans relating to allotments. Only four had policies relating to urban farms; three to community gardens, and eight to various “others”, notable among which were open/green space policies, and policies dealing with rural agriculture in boroughs containing rural land.
- ❖ Of the 20 respondents providing details of the development plan chapter headings under which specific allotment policies fell, 14 cited headings broadly relating to leisure and recreation; four related to the environment, and two to open/green space.
- ❖ Only three respondents regarded their development plans as specifically designating sites for urban food production.
- ❖ Of the four authorities whose current plans contained no policies aimed at any form of urban food sites, two said future plan revisions were likely to contain such policies and two thought they were not.
- ❖ Of the 28 respondents whose development plans contained policies relating to at least one form of urban food site, 12 said that no policies specifically related to urban food production were to be introduced. The other cases, however, suggested that policy in this area is to be developed further.