

# rhubarb

LOCAL ACTION ON FOOD'S QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

## 'Food Works' in the Big Apple

New Yorkers are the latest city folk to have a food strategy, launched by the city council in November 2010. Like similar strategies in the UK, 'Food Works' covers the whole food system and aims to tackle environmental sustainability and improve the health of the city's population. Initiatives include developing procurement guidelines to buy regional food, creating a wholesale market for regional produce, supporting urban food growing by protecting community gardens, and including urban farms in the national Census of Agriculture. Other pledges involve: expanding healthy and affordable food programmes by increasing the number of food co-operatives, farmers' markets, and mobile fresh produce-selling Green Carts in the city; and reducing food waste. Well if they can make it there...

[http://council.nyc.gov/html/food/fw\\_consumption.shtml](http://council.nyc.gov/html/food/fw_consumption.shtml)

## Southampton goes fruity

Residents in Southampton are teaming up to bring an orchard to the city. Fruit trees from a nearby orchard are on sale for people who have a garden, and also to buy as presents or donations to more public places such as schools. Transition Southampton is buying the trees in bulk so the cost per tree is cheaper, and people can order in advance which trees they want to buy for collection in February. All the trees have been selected to be easy to grow, the right size for small gardens, and easily pollinated, and experts are on hand to give out top fruit tree-growing tips.

[www.transitionsouthampton.org](http://www.transitionsouthampton.org)

## An allotment a day...

Allotment gardening really is good for your health, according to new research from the Netherlands. The authors from Wageningen University surveyed 121 members of 12 allotment sites, and compared them to 63 respondents living nearby without an allotment. They found that, after adjusting for income, education level, gender, stressful life events, physical activity in winter, and access to a garden at home, older allotment gardeners reported better health and well-being, and both young and old were more physically active

than the non-allotment owners.

"Around the world, allotment gardens are increasingly under pressure from building and infrastructure developments," said the authors. "In light of the present findings, governments and local authorities might do well to protect and enhance allotment gardens."

[www.ehjournal.net/content/9/1/74](http://www.ehjournal.net/content/9/1/74)

## Local food champions win BBC Radio 4 awards

Congratulations to Stroud farmers' market, which was crowned the UK's best food market, in the 2010 Food and Farming Awards. The market was praised for breathing new life into the community, as a place where people meet, catch up with friends and connect with local farmers and craft people. Every week it serves up fruit, vegetables, meat and fish; plus cream, beer, wine and cakes. There is hot food to eat on the street, and a buskers' corner for extra vibrancy. Other awards went to 'real bread' advocates Richard Bertinet, who was named British food champion, and 'best food producer' Alex Gooch, an artisan baker based in Hay-on-Wye.

[www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/ffa/2010/finalists/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/ffa/2010/finalists/)

## Jam session in Sheffield

Grow Sheffield's Abundance project is a community-led group that harvests surplus fruit from trees around the city and redistributes it locally. This year it has embarked on a new venture; borrowing a kitchen and working with volunteers to produce their own brand of chutneys and jams. It is selling bottled goods at local farmers' markets and food events around the city, and any income raised goes back into the project.

[www.growsheffield.com](http://www.growsheffield.com)



Abundance volunteers making chutney  
Photo: Gemma Thorpe  
[www.gemmathorpe.com](http://www.gemmathorpe.com)

Local  
ACTION  
ON FOOD

*The words alone may cause you to shudder or yawn, but planning policy is an essential tool to help build sustainable food systems, argues Helen Babbs*

Planning has something of a bad reputation. You'd be forgiven for thinking it was not only boring but also a hindrance rather than a help. But planning policy could actually empower communities in their bids to become more self-sufficient. Professor Tim Lang, from City University's Centre for Food Policy, certainly thinks planning is one solution to an impending food crisis.

Declaring it "unfashionable but inevitable", he insists that good planning should be seen as a collective response rather than an infringement on the consumer's right to choose. "The myth about planning is that it's top down. The reality is it's about social processes to meet need. Let's hear it for planning!" he says. In order to shift our food systems towards sustainability, Lang argues, we need rapid change within a coherent framework.

Carolyn Steele, author of the influential book *Hungry City*, believes examining how towns and cities looked in the past is a useful exercise. Take London for example. The street names around what was Cheapside Market reflect how food once shaped the English capital. The navigable Thames lay at the heart of the city's food system, and Poultry and Bread Street were where people went to buy poultry and bread, and Friday Street was the destination for fish. Livestock literally walked itself to Smithfield meat market.

In the 1800s the food system was visible, not hidden. Things have changed, and Steele says we need to put the human back into food. Her concept of creating a 'Sitopia' transforms the city into a 'food place', somewhere characterised by permaculture not monoculture, and where eating locally and seasonally is possible for everyone.

So far, so abstract. How does this shift towards sustainability come about, how can humans be reinserted into food systems, and how can planning help community growers?

This autumn, planners joined forces with architects and activists, including representatives from Sustain's Local Action on Food network, to discuss all these questions. The European Sustainable Food Planning conference was a hot house of ideas and inspiration about the way our towns and cities should be designed. Lang and Steele both spoke at the event, alongside academics and practitioners who are all dedicated to the idea of integrating sustainable food systems into planning policy.

Designers talked about how food and agriculture are

becoming legitimate areas for them to take on, but warned that a flow into real projects and actual architectural practice doesn't necessarily follow. However, most insisted that the picture isn't bleak, that jobs as 'food systems planners' are becoming more common, and cities are adopting food strategies. Brighton and London have both done just that, and recently Sustain has been advising on a food section for the new London Plan, which will be published in early 2011. New York's recently announced 'Foodworks' plan also has some interesting planning-related aims (see article on page one).

Sustain believes that influencing planning policy is a good opportunity to promote sustainable economic development, regional food hubs and food justice, by ensuring things like access to food shops, diverse retail environments and community growing are built into town master plans. It is currently drafting a report to persuade planners of the importance of incorporating food into their work. The report will assess the potential of the current planning system to help create more sustainable food and agriculture, and highlight initiatives that already include good food and farming in planning policy and practice.

There are many positive examples, both in the UK and further afield. In the US, the American Planning Association has a policy guide on community and regional food planning. This provides an overview of the connections between planning practice and the production, processing, packaging, distribution, transportation, access, consumption and waste disposal of food.

Closer to home, the Brighton and Hove Core Strategy asserts that 'planning will support programmes which...recognise, safeguard and encourage the role of allotments, garden plots within developments, small scale agriculture and farmers' markets'. Similarly, the Bath and North East Somerset Core Strategy says it will 'actively encourage local food production', while the North Norfolk Core Strategy says 'proposals that would have an adverse impact on the operation of weekly or farmers' markets will not be permitted unless appropriate replacement provision is made as part of the proposal'.

It's widely recognised that our current food and agriculture system is damaging rather than enhancing sustainable development. Sustain has found that, while there are a range of national planning policies that could support more sustainable food systems, and there are local examples where this is the case, in general they aren't routinely being put into practice.

It is important to remember that planning policy originally came out of a desire to protect public health. The concept is slowly being embraced again, as policy makers begin to appreciate the importance of designing sustainable food systems. Things aren't likely to evolve without the help of non-planning professionals or without public support, and community groups and voluntary organisations have an important role to play, both in demanding and advising on change.

*Helen Babbs is freelance writer, with a special interest in urban nature and food growing – [www.helenbabbs.wordpress.com](http://www.helenbabbs.wordpress.com)*

## The customer isn't always right...on price

*Polly Higginson investigates the true costs and challenges for cafés and eateries serving ethical food*

Having worked in many different cafés and small independent caterers, I have experienced first hand the raised eyebrows and rolled eyes when people find out the organic cake to go with their coffee costs a couple of pounds a slice. Unfortunately, the public, brainwashed for years into thinking food should cost pennies rather than pounds, can still be reluctant to pay the real price of decent food.

There are some fantastic sustainable eateries around the country, with the potential to boost local food systems, by supporting local producers, creating jobs and educating the public. But running a profitable café is tough stuff. There are thousands of cafés serving affordable lunches and cups of coffee, and margins are tight, so choosing to sell food that is also local, seasonal, organic and Fairtrade is quite a commitment. Trying to convince people that spending a little extra on their lunch is worthwhile makes it even harder.

It seems obvious, but many customers seem to forget that good quality local and ethical ingredients cost more. Other costs include paying someone a decent wage, purchasing more expensive biodegradable packaging and sometimes buying more expensive ingredients, so the window for making a profit gets even smaller. And charging higher prices for a better product is constantly undermined by competitors offering a similar product – but without the sustainable qualities – for a lot less.

To investigate the real costs of providing sustainable food, we worked out costs for some regular café fare, made with organic, Fairtrade, and local ingredients. The margins on items like a chicken sandwich or chocolate brownie left little room for manoeuvre. In fact you would have to charge £6.50 for a chicken sandwich to make it worthwhile! But there are products – like an egg sandwich or oat cookie – which can be made with high-quality ingredients and still leave room for a profit. A watchful eye on portion control and a realistic analysis of potential wastage goes hand-in-hand with making this work.

As a general rule menus should be based around more vegetables, fruit and pulses and less dairy and meat. This not only supports a more sustainable diet but leaves more room for profit. Cafés can cut costs by growing their own produce, such as herbs and salad leaves. Money can also be saved by reducing energy and water use.

Communication is also key with customers. If we expect people to pay more, we need to arm them with clear information about what they are buying, where it comes from and why it's worth the extra.

*Sustain's Ethical Eats project is working with the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency to help caterers get to grips with sustainable business planning, covering issues like menu planning, costing and portion control. Contact [charlotte@sustainweb.org](mailto:charlotte@sustainweb.org) for more information.*



'Group of Slumless, Smokeless Cities' by Ebenezer Howard, author of *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1898). Howard's design principles for cities are more relevant than ever for informing the planning of urban food systems.

## Events etc.

### Food co-op and buying group events

**January** *across England*

There are events being organised throughout January in York, Ipswich, Suffolk and Richmond. Check out [www.foodcoops.org](http://www.foodcoops.org) for more information.

### Trading skills for urban food growers

**February** *Location TBC*

A day's training and business planning for urban food growers. Contact [polly@sustainweb.org](mailto:polly@sustainweb.org) for more information.

### Cookery leader training

**9-10 & 23-24 February** *East Sussex*

These courses provide training for people who want to set up food-related initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of their communities. The two-day course is £160 and some subsidised places are available. [www.communitychef.org.uk](http://www.communitychef.org.uk)

### Growing Schools conference

**23 March** *Garden Organic, Coventry*

Workshops will include edible container gardens, composting,

running an apple day, and organic pest and disease control. Book before 31 January and save £20 per person. Contact Gary Richardson: 07711069092

### Bake your Lawn

The Real Bread Campaign is encouraging everyone to bake their lawn! All you need is a patch of earth and a handful of wheat; a great project for anyone who wants the low-down on how to grow it, mill it, bake it and eat it. Check out the website for a free information pack. [www.realbreadcampaign.org](http://www.realbreadcampaign.org)

### In print: Friends of the Earth publications

At FoE's online shop you can find free booklets on a wide range of subjects from waste and recycling to renewable energy. It also offers a great selection of green living books and a 15 per cent discount for Local Action on Food members. [www.foe.co.uk/shop](http://www.foe.co.uk/shop)

### In print: 'Grow a grocery' guide

Unicorn Grocery, the pioneering whole food co-operative owned and run by its workforce, believes that "there's room for a Unicorn-type store in every city". It hopes this guide will make starting a new shop an easier process, and help existing shops improve and/or expand. [www.unicorn-grocery.co.uk](http://www.unicorn-grocery.co.uk)

**Funding: UnLtd** is a national charity that supports social entrepreneurs and social enterprises. Applications for small grants can be made at any time (£500- £5,000) to cover running costs for projects that want to get an idea off the ground. Level two applications open in February 2011, with grants of up to £15,000 available, and also dedicated business support to help with the development of a social venture. [www.unltd.org.uk](http://www.unltd.org.uk)

Monthly funding round-ups are sent to Local Action on Food Members via our email newsletter *Rhubarb-e*.

Please add your events to the Local Action on Food calendar at [www.sustainweb.org/foodcalendar](http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcalendar)

## Member spotlight north east food discovery

North East Food Discovery was created to inspire both children and their parents about the food they eat. It was set up by Newcastle based food charity East End Health, and the Country Trust, and recently secured funding from the Big Lottery Local Food programme. Its aim is to help schools and communities understand and enjoy food, its origins and nutritional value, and to promote the importance of using local, sustainable produce. It will work with children from the most disadvantaged communities over the next three years. Children will be educated on the 'plough to plate' story of local food through five main projects. These include:

- visits to local farms
- assemblies given by local food heroes
- cook-and-eat sessions where children can have a go at making some famous local recipes
- food-growing training, and
- a young entrepreneur scheme where pupils can sell the produce they grow.

The food-growing training programme has been set up in partnership with Newcastle University and involved converting a piece of derelict land into a productive allotment known as 'Wor Lotty'. It means 'our allotment', and the schoolchildren who use the site. The project is also working with the Jamie Oliver Foundation to run the Ministry of Food North East – busy times ahead! For more information contact [laura@eastendhealth.co.uk](mailto:laura@eastendhealth.co.uk) or 0191 276 0595.



The name was chosen by the

schoolchildren who use the site. The project is also working with the Jamie Oliver Foundation to run the Ministry of Food North East – busy times ahead! For more information contact [laura@eastendhealth.co.uk](mailto:laura@eastendhealth.co.uk) or 0191 276 0595.

## JOIN LOCAL ACTION ON FOOD

We're a network of food growers, community food projects, food co-ops, restaurants, campaigners and passionate individuals that have come together to create a more local and resilient sustainable food system.

### Member benefits

- The latest information, news, funding and jobs via our monthly newsletter
- Discounts on network and member events
- Support and promotion of your project

### How to join

For more information about membership contact [polly@sustainweb.org](mailto:polly@sustainweb.org) or sign up at [www.localactiononfood.org](http://www.localactiononfood.org)



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