

Peri-Urban Practitioners Forum 7
Farming Council Land
21st July 2023 - Land Skills Fair, Abbey Home Farm

Speakers: Marlene Barrett (Organiclea Workers' Co-operative) and Steph Wetherell (Bristol Food Producers)

History of Organiclea (OL)

- Started in 2001 when a group set out to revitalise vegetable growing in the Lea Valley, and wrote to a number of local councils requesting land. Waltham Forest Borough Council, offered five abandoned allotment plots, where veg production began. From the start the allotment officer at Waltham Forest was a champion for OL.
- Around 2010, OL had opportunity to create a linear orchard along a cycle path. In collecting trees from the council's Hawkwood Plant Nursery, they discovered that the 12 acre site was due to be shut down imminently.
- Allotment officer facilitated a meeting with the leader of the council, where OL members made the case for the employment and health benefits they could offer if they took over the site. Also made the case for how organic growing there would align with the council's climate change strategy. The land couldn't be used for housing as it was in the Green Belt.
- Lucky timing! Opportunity to take on Hawkwood coincided with the local food lottery fund, so OL team could argue that by offering the tenancy to OL they would be able to bring lottery money into the Borough.
- Initially they were given a one year tenancy, but subsequent tenancies have been longer. Key point - ask for something small at first.

Bristol Food Producers

- Initial food production also began on allotment sites, before some land was offered to start a CSA at Simms Hill.
- Again, the allotment officer at Bristol City Council was key to making this happen, and it is notable that since the Allotment officer was made redundant 8 years ago, not new farms have been established. A Smallholdings and Allotments Officer has recently been reinstated. Key point - Build strong relationships with a diversity of people in the council, to ensure that the role of "champion" is not concentrated with one individual and therefore at risk if that person is made redundant/moves jobs.
- Recently two x one acre allotment holdings have been made available on an allotment lease
- Steph's strategy is to try and find political or economic levers, to establish leases on council land. It is critical to get people on the Council's Lease team on board with food production. The challenge is persuading the council to put time into creating a lease for £500/year, rather than seeking much larger amounts (thousands/millions) that would be possible for housing developments.

- Getting council officers and councillors out to growing sites is very effective in convincing decision makers of the value of local food production. Suddenly the penny drops about what it is all about. In particular, demonstrating that collective rather than individual allotments work better for many people.
- Councils move very slowly when making decisions about land leases.
- Look at who else (besides councils) owns land - e.g. riding stables, NHS Land.
- Bristol Food Producers recently ran a Land Match event, in which they invited 25 landowners to listen to would-be farmers and growers making pitches for what they would like to do with land. No matches have been made as yet, as most of the land was a bit too far out from Bristol for what many of those making pitches were seeking.
- The council now know what land they have as a result of the work of Bristol Food Producers. They have audited all their land and have a database of its orientation, quality of soil, access, availability of water and electricity.
- Speak the council's language! Understand that for them social impact and environmental care are more important than food production.
- Ask councillors to direct you to the key people in the council office team. Individual council employees have less power for change without political support, so it is important to engage with elected councillors as well as officers.

General discussion - points arising

- For Wolves Lane Farm, the Head of Parks in Haringey was a champion, and could help unlock access to certain things. However, it's important to prioritise what you ask them as they can't do everything.
- Connect what your farm will deliver to the council's strategy, by putting it in their language to make it easy to slot in. e.g. Many councils have declared a climate emergency, so framing food production in how it can address the climate emergency is helpful.
- Councils like a concept, such as "Fringe Farming".
- Glasgow experience - Local antipathy towards council, means that progress is slow as this has to be overcome. Council are impatient with slow codesign process, but it is essential to acknowledge the slow progress of community development and allow for this, rather than imposing top down solutions, that communities are used to. "People Make Glasgow Communities" process = cultural challenge for council, who need to accept that community development is slow, messy and that outcomes will be unknown. Such development involves taking risks, as tenants may not care for land properly/buy in salad rather than producing it themselves and leave a mess. Strong risk of loss of trust on both sides if tenants leave a mess, and if councils only pay lip service to codesign principles.
- Doncaster experience (Bentley Urban Farm) - The community have adopted land and used reclaimed materials to develop it, at a low cost. They offer meals for latch key kids, using food grown on site ($\frac{1}{3}$), $\frac{1}{3}$ foraged and $\frac{1}{3}$ from waste stream, offered on a pay as you feel basis. They have less than one acre, but also access to neighbouring 4 acres. Their aim is to create a network of farms in pit towns. They started clearing the land, to

identify the landowner, on the assumption that the landowner would come out and ask what they were doing. Local MP is Ed Milliband, and Jo Miller (Head of Council) supports them, telling people to change their attitudes and make the most of the resources they have. Go for it anyway!

- Solution to mistrust with council - Find ways to be positive and build bridges. Aim to bring joy and positivity to negotiations. Councils are grateful for a mediator.
- Build a stakeholder management group to connect with the council.
- Connection with nature - Encourage people to just get to know and enjoy nature, before starting to work. Necessary to address many layers of disconnection from nature. This approach can sometimes clash with council's linear timing, as they just want to see plans for a community farm.
- Sitopia Experience (Von) - Sitopia, in East London, has taken on land that was a council golf course, as well as some adjoining Woodland Trust land for livestock. They have 10 acres, 2 polytunnels, 40 no-dig beds and a Mandala garden in the middle, which have evolved during the pandemic. Focus is on building relationships with the Woodland Trust, but they are finding some stagnation due to uncertainty around the transition from BPS to ELMs.
- Expectation management - If the land is not in good condition, it's important to ensure that the council understand that progress will be slow and negotiate peppercorn rent in the early years. This involves helping council officers make a paradigm shift from the quick conventional methods of land management they are used to (using chemicals and machinery) to slower, agroecological methods. It's useful to have evidence to demonstrate the long-term benefits of these slower methods.
- Councils are competitive with one another and will be open to opportunities to give them a lead on sustainability/social development.
- Recognise the pressure that councils are under - they are trying to do their job with a lack of resources.
- Acknowledge the price difference for agricultural land versus housing/studio land.
- Initially negotiate peppercorn rent, to just get in there, and then demonstrate the beneficial social impact of peri-urban food production. Peppercorn rent can act as matched funding to leverage other funding (i.e. Use the value of what the full rent would be as the matching component, as this is being "gifted").
- Use funding criteria of needing a particular length of lease as leverage to extend the lease.