**Local Partner and Climate Hub: Growing Communities Dagenham Farm**

Established in 2012, Growing Communities Dagenham Farm is transforming an ex-council nursery into a thriving growing and learning site. We grow a diverse range of edible crops using organic, no dig methods. We do this by growing a large range of plants and varieties, disturbing the soil as little as possible and keeping habitat areas for wildlife, maintaining health below and above the ground. In doing so, we have created a productive living classroom space that can be accessed by a diverse range of groups, guided by one of our organisation’s key principles “To champion ecological food and farming”. We are mission-driven, not-for-profit and pay a living wage for decent livelihoods on the farm.

It is part of Dagenham Farm’s core mission to engage and work within the community via a range of outreach and onsite activities, and to use community food growing to help address the climate and nature crises.

# Tell us a bit more about your existing community engagement and other ways people benefit from your work. Do you work with volunteers? In what capacity? Do you run training courses? If so, what are some examples? Do you host school groups / other educational visits? Do you host celebratory events such as Harvest Festivals, etc? Do you run an apprenticeship scheme or traineeships? What infrastructure do you have in place for hosting e.g. barn, on site toilets, etc.

Dagenham Farm produces organic vegetables (and fruit) in glasshouses and polytunnels and outdoors for sale locally and through Growing Communities' fruit and veg bag scheme. The farm works on long-term projects with students from local schools and welcomes one-off school visits and corporate volunteering groups. Opened in 2012, the farm grows about five tonnes of veg every year. In the spring, there are significant quantities of spring greens, spinach and other greens. Then in summer/autumn, we grow salad and tomatoes, as well as chillies, cucumbers, squashes, beans, aubergines, courgettes, strawberries and melons. The farm aims to produce excellent, organic food closer to where people actually live as well as helping a new entrant to farming and engaging local people in food growing. Dagenham Farm shows the potential for growing – and selling – significant amounts of produce from farms on the outskirts of London and other cities. From 2015 to 2018, the farm was home to the Grown in Dagenham project, training local residents in food-growing and preparation skills and helping young people to learn about where their food comes from. We continued our community outreach work in 2019 through the Recipe for Life project funded by the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, working with families on low income, young people and older residents.

# How many people access your site on average per year?

We’re currently welcoming about 32 visitors a week, made up of our educational session visitors and long-term volunteers. In weeks where we have school visits this can go up to 120. However, for a sense of our capacity and experience, at the pinnacle of our Grown In Dagenham project we benefitted 1,854 residents from the farm in 2018. We would be thrilled to be able to welcome these types of numbers again.

# Which local organisations do you already work with? For example your local council, charities or community groups, schools, etc? (also identify main partners/collaborators)

In recent years we have worked closely with the following local organisations:

* William Bellamy and Eastbrook Schools
* London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Ranger team
* Barking & Dagenham public health team
* White House / Create
* London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Mental Health Service
* St Luke’s Alcohol rehabilitation centre
* Prison rehabilitation groups
* Lifeline Project
* Participatory City
* Moms on a Mission
* Dagenham Library
* Brookside House
* London Fire Brigade Cadets
* William Bellamy Children’s Centre Food Club
* Sue Bramley Children’s Centre

And at time of writing, we are actively working with:

* Barking and Dagenham College, hosting 3 classes per week (funded project)
* London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) Food Sector Development team:
* contributed to Good Food Research and Action Plan for the borough
* Hosted good food network event as a designated Good Food Champion Organisation in the borough
* We sit on the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Good Food Advisory board
* London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Food Education Partnerships team

“We are delighted to work with Growing Communities...a fantastic resource for the borough that can supply locally grown, organic produce and support a transformation in school food culture... a local organisation such as yourselves would be a fantastic ‘hub’ that could support a community of schools to achieve these aims.” - Lily McSweeney, Food Education Partnership Coordinator, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

* ‘Field to Fork’ project with Dorothy Barley school.
* LBBD Holiday Activities Fund food and nutrition support
* ‘School Food Matters’ visits from Riverside Secondary School, Trinity Secondary School, William Bellamy School.
* Company Drinks social enterprise – co-hosting an event and contributed to their local research.
* Donating plants to Eastbrook End Discovery Centre "

# Do you have the organisational systems and structures in place, or do you feel confident of getting them in place, to deliver a programme of outreach, on site activities and expanded community engagement over the next three years?

Yes.

# How is your work embedded in your local community? Please give further brief details of partnerships and relationships with other community organisations, local council and other authorities, public services, etc.

London Borough of Barking & Dagenham has “Good Food” as priority issue across seven departments now. GC was designated a Good Food Champion in their recent food landscape research, and now sit on the Advisory Board to create a Good Food Plan for the borough.

“Dagenham Farm is a vital organisation/growing space for the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham as we develop our strategic approach to food. In March 2023, we launched our cross-sector Food Partnership, a group of organisations... that will build a collective vision and action plan for a fairer and more sustainable food system, and buoyant local food economy. We are delighted that Growing Communities is a member of the advisory group.” Jo Wilson, Food Sector Development Lead, LBBD

The council are supportive of this Climate Action Fund bid, and express potential for match funding.

Our wholesale operation the Better Food Shed is nearby, connecting the farm to supply opportunities in the borough, e.g. schools catering and social food provision.

# What specific climate change and nature related challenges are facing your community/ area? Which of these are you helping to address and how?

Thames Estuary is one of driest and hottest areas of the UK. On the hottest day of 2022, fourteen houses burned down in a wildfire just over a mile away from the farm. Their burnt-out frames remain visceral proof of lack of resilience to extreme weather in our urban heat island.

The area is a desert for climate-friendly food. Quote from London Borough of Barking & Dagenham, Good Food Plan research “Only 11% (of residents surveyed) think it’s easy to access sustainable or planet-friendly food”. 75% surveyed said that healthy food was missing from local food offer. The farm’s methods and work:

* Have replaced half an acre of hard surfaces with soil to reduce run off and heat island effect.
* Turn up to 20 tonnes of local organic waste into compost some years, to supply our no-dig operation, enabling more carbon capture and rainwater retention.
* Our land management continues to increase biodiversity in the space.

# How have you involved local people, groups or organisations in shaping your activities and/or gathered any data from your local community that demonstrates the need for what you do? For example, any results from community consultations? Reported evidence and/or quotes?

We co-created our current funded activities with the local college, and council education team. Additionally, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Council’s 2023 Good Food Plan consulted hundreds of residents, community organisations and businesses on food in the borough. We are now on the Good Food Plan Advisory Board for creation of a plan to address findings from the above research.

In recent years, we have counted approaches from thirty-five local groups and council departments wanting involvement on or with the farm which we haven’t been able to engage with due to funding/resourcing constraints. (Detailed list available on request, as well as quotes from community partners citing the benefits that access to the farm would bring to their users).

# How do you ensure you are engaging with people from underrepresented and / or disadvantaged backgrounds and minority communities? Please give brief details about any strategies and activities to ensure greater diversity and broader inclusion in your project.

We design activities in line with our diversity and inclusion policy. We partner with trusted community leaders and learn from them what will make our offerings accessible and relatable to diverse groups. All recent funded outreach projects have focused on residents: On Universal Credit; With special educational needs; Experiencing food poverty; From ethnic minority backgrounds; In state schools (thus ensuring democratic access). We keep language simple and accessible, we adapt our materials and activities to suit groups and individual visitors best.

"One of the problems I’ve had ... at other places is... the lack of genuine diversity. many organisations voice commitment to gender, race, and disability equality, they are often still quite homogenous and I’ve struggled with this... At the farm, I feel... genuine acceptance of individuality that has made it easier for me to find my place ... a truly inclusive environment." - Quote from Grown in Dagenham participant

# Tell us how you will be able to use the activities outlined in the Taste a Better Future framework to inspire climate action, and create learning opportunities on climate and nature? How will they impact positively in the long and short term on local communities? How will these communities in turn take action on climate and nature issues? e.g. through a change in shopping habits such as buying more local, agroecologically grown food. Or transitioning to chemical / fertiliser free growing in their own gardens. Or more people cooking from scratch with fresh vegetables.

We propose to run all of the activities listed in the Taste a Better Future framework and are confident that participants who engage with us on the farm will be equipped with inspiration and some basic resources to begin (or continue) their transition to climate-aware growing and food choices. Learnings will include how to understand food labelling, how and why to grow chemical free, and a curiosity and interest in cooking with seasonal vegetables. Visitors will take away actions they can start with immediately. We know from past monitoring that repeat visitors use their experiences on the farm to spread impacts into their wider communities.

Our staff team includes experienced educational session leaders, some of whom are “convert” past project participants themselves, giving them a natural connection to inspire fellow residents to change certain behaviours. From previous outreach projects, we have educational materials, workshop outlines, tried and tested activities and games to animate the principals for all ages across a wide range of groups and pre-existing levels of understanding.

The farm is an inspiring, living classroom where every element of infrastructure and practice is guided by climate-aware principals. It is a green oasis hidden next to a busy A-road, housing estates and grey industrial spaces. Its transformation story is a dramatic one – when we first took tenancy it was sterile concrete, hard standing with a history of chemical led growing. We now welcome diverse and dense wildlife - animated proof of nature thriving because of our actions on the farm.

# What other activities would you like to deliver to enable your local community to gain a deeper connection with nature that could lead to changing people’s behaviours, a greater care for the environment and action on climate change?

As part of the Taste a Better Future programme, we would like to:

* host two growing trainees a season at the farm
* Host more schools than the minimum specified in the framework
* Make produce available to visitors in various ways – farm gate sales, pick-your-own and basic seasonal catering, depending on the activities scheduled for the day, responding to the overwhelming demand from residents surveyed.
* Be a resource hub for all interested in climate appropriate growing – offering:
* a clear and attractive selection of take-home learning materials
* a tool swap/exchange/donation library
* Ecologically sound compost and plant plugs for sale or donation occasionally where possible.

Alongside these, we would display and promote local partner organisations resources, maps and information at the farm, to raise the profile of the other good food and growing activity in the borough to amplify all opportunities for residents to continue their learning journey locally. Leveraging all momentum towards sustained behaviour change.

# What groups would you like to engage with? How will you address barriers to participation for underrepresented and harder to reach people and communities? Please give a brief description of any relevant activities you’d like to do but haven’t yet had the resources to deliver. How you might engage new audiences and get more people involved in your project.

We want to engage with:

* Parents of young babies without childcare, with relaxed sessions
* A vocational group from the local college
* Families and communities who we reach through borough’s Food Bank network
* Families and communities who we reach through Children’s Centres
* Adult Special Needs students

We overcame many barriers to participation in our previous Grown in Dagenham and FoodNet projects where the vast majority of participants were from marginalised and disadvantaged communities (statistics available on request). We will embed and build on learnings from those projects. We will use our Good Food plan network to partner with established and emergent growing spaces led by ethnic minority individuals e.g. Fruitful Orchard CIC, and organisations with strong connections to disempowered groups e.g. Company Drinks. Other Partner Good Food Champions are also conducting current research on barriers to good food growing in the borough (due Dec 2023) and we will utilise these learnings too.

# How would you like to embed further in your local community? Please give brief details of any partnerships / relationships you’d like to pursue.

* + - Being a resource hub for all, as above
    - Being well known and used by many schools in the area and therefore becoming a trusted family resource outside of school hours as well.
    - Being able to offer time and guidance to other local growing spaces who we have the opportunity to be more connected to than ever through the fledgling Good Food Plan network.
    - Being able to deliver more activity which contributes to the council’s good food plan aims, lever­aging opportunities for their support and investment in good food while it is a priority for them.
    - Removing as many barriers to access as possible identified in Good Food Plan research.

# Being a Climate Hub Local Partner will also involve participation in knowledge sharing and disseminating learning amongst the rest of the cohort and new potential hubs looking to replicate the model. This could involve presenting at webinars and events, hosting site visits, etc. It may also involve participation in research and contributing to the development of reference materials and educational resources. Does this sound feasible? Would this be useful? What would you like to see? What might the implications be for your wider organisation? Anything we should be aware of? For example, the need for greater communications skills training and support.

Perfectly feasible. It would be useful to have a guideline time commitment for this so that staff time can be planned for in advance insofar as possible. Shared educational resources and signage design will be very helpful as all the hubs will be creating very similar content on many subjects. We would like to see how other partners have designed engaging signage and educational materials on the relationship between agriculture/food choices and climate change.

# Would you be willing to offer peer-to-peer support to other Climate Hub Local Partners? This might involve sharing existing resources such as template policies and other documents; offering *ad hoc* advice or mentoring on specific topics; providing connections and introductions to other organisations; signposting to useful resources.

Of course. We are already committed to this through our creation of the Better Food Traders network, which includes peers like OrganicLea, Sutton and Kindling Trust. We’ll be pleased to connect with a set of specifically peri-urban growing partners. If this is built into the project it would be appropriate to budget a small level of staff time for this so that we are able to contribute fully.

# At the end of the three years how might your organisation be operating differently due to participating in Taste a Better Future? How might you build on the work after the funding ends?

We will use these activities to promote ourselves as an anchor organisation for the borough’s Good Food Plan which has great potential for attracting further investment to the farm in connection with the mandatory community infrastructure money being brought into the borough from the enormous development of sites for the 2026/27 relocation of City of London’s three wholesale markets – Billingsgate Fish, Smithfield (meat) and New Spitalfields (fruit and veg) markets. Food will be a cross-department priority for council going forward and the more activity we can prove our benefit to the borough with, the more funding we will be able to attract. We expect that the borough will have a more established food network by this time, and that we will be named an anchor organisation in that. And will be well informed as to how best we can contribute to ‘raising all ships’ in the borough.

Farm productivity is increasing every year and by the end of this project there may be a small surplus to support a low level of community engagement activity outside of funded periods also, which there isn’t now.

We will have a richer library of materials, resources and experiences to draw from in future community engagement work, and up to date monitoring feedback from which to apply for future funding.

We will use learning from this project to inform and evidence future need to leverage other funding.

# What is the balance between mechanisation and manual labour in your food production methods? Please give an explanation of production relying on machinery vs manual labour (e.g. bed prep with tractor; planting, crop care and harvest by hand) and / or land area managed by different systems (e.g. fixed beds vs field cropping) or whatever measure makes most sense to you. We would like to gauge the opportunities for engagement, participation and skills development at the human scale i.e. not entirely reliant on operating machinery and power tools, which we recognise are often necessary for running a viable business.

We are a no dig farm and have no mechanical tillage of the soil. We have one lawn mower and a branch cutter but are otherwise unmechanised. We do detailed polyculture planting to try and keep our soil full and healthy and this requires a variety of skilled manual labour.

# How do you sell / distribute your produce in the local community and who benefits from this? Please give details of Veg Box / CSA scheme. Any other retail or wholesale relationships. Do you donate produce? If so, how and where? If you also buy in produce for distribution then please tell us the % of what you sell that is grown on site.

Dagenham Farm sells the majority of produce to Growing Communities veg box scheme, based 12 miles from the farm. This provides around 3,600 Londoners with access to produce from the farm. We also supply a number of restaurants and - enabled through short-term project funding – are providing produce to Barking and Dagenham College Special Educational Needs students.

We have donated produce to food banks and through a solidarity scheme at a children's centre in Newham and supplied produce at cost price to local residents through funded projects for good food activities.

We have occasional farm-gate sales and ran a stall at Dagenham East tube station (hosted by Transport for London) for local residents. These are popular but resource intensive. We are keen to provide more produce in our local vicinity and are also exploring setting the farm up as a collection point for the GC veg scheme.

# Do you have any additional infrastructure needs on your site to be able to host greater numbers of visitors and volunteers? For example: tools, toilet facilities, water supply, storage.

Current volunteer facilities are not well fit for purpose. We have broken taps and lights, peeling paint, poor sink drainage, an outdoor classroom which is uninsulated, too narrow and without electricity and water. We lack outdoor space with shade and outdoor handwashing facilities. Our wish-list for improvement works includes:

* Extending and insulating outdoor classroom
* Running electricity and water to outdoor classroom and installing accessible sink and drainage
* Adding outdoor shade
* New lights and taps in current volunteer space
* Repainting current volunteer space
* Small-scale repairs to the roof
* Repair of a polytunnel for use as an all-weather teaching space and training plots. Current covered space is densely used as productive space so isn’t accessible for groups to practice with
* Reducing water waste in irrigation system -repairing leaks and servicing pumps and water storage

# What is your experience of monitoring and evaluating your project’s impact? For example conducting surveys or focus groups on behaviour change and shifts in attitudes of project participants and/or beneficiaries; monitoring who is and who isn’t involved in your work; carbon reduction data; biodiversity metrics. Please give brief details. And tell us what support, if any, you think you might need to deliver monitoring and evaluation.

We have monitored, evaluated and reported on our past funded projects using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods including:

* Baseline and exit surveys and interviews evaluating impact over time
* Focus groups
* Video interview testimonials
* Session feedback forms from leaders
* Tracking and monitoring of visitor/participant numbers
* Tracking/monitoring of demographics to help us have a better picture of who is accessing the farm

This experience has fulfilled requirements to report back to past large funders, including the National Lottery. We keep robust records for our Soil Association certification inspections. We were part of the ELMS pilot for Defra and were able to provide detailed information on our land and resource use. We are planning to carry out a carbon audit this year using the Farm Carbon Calculator. As it would make sense for all hubs to be using the same tools and metrics, we'd welcome thoughts on whether this is a good tool to use. Similarly, we are exploring tools to measure biodiversity and would welcome any pointers in relation to this.

Growing Communities has experience in complex systems surveying and evaluation, recently evidenced in our report with the New Economics Foundation, concluding that £3.70 of value for people and planet for every £1 spent with Growing Communities.