Re: Tower Hamlets Local Plan consultation- Women’s Environmental Network response

Women’s Environmental Network (WEN) has been actively supporting and promoting community food growing, recycling and waste reduction and gender equality in Tower Hamlets for 15 years. We work with community food growing groups and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women’s groups throughout the borough, providing free training and support on a wide range of topics.

Since 2010 we have coordinated the Tower Hamlets Food Growing Network (THFGN) which is comprised of over 1,400 members, and in 2014 we were commissioned by the Public Health department at LBTH to deliver ‘Gardens for Life’; a project to set up 15 new community gardens in 15 months. We worked with Registered Providers (RPs) on their land to set up 9 out of the 15 gardens in collaboration with residents.

As such, we have extensive grassroots experience of community gardens and their huge potential to offer a wide range of benefits. Our response to the Local Plan comes from our understanding of access to healthy and sustainable food as a cross cutting issue, which falls under at least three of the eight key topics outlined in the Plan.

We will highlight our two main responses and then address four of the sections in the Plan which we perceive as being relevant to community food growing in the borough.

Concern over removal of commitment to community gardens and urban agriculture

We are aware that the new Local Plan will replace the current Local Plan- comprised of the Core Strategy and Development Management Policy. As such, our main concern stems from the fact that the explicit commitment to “promoting and supporting local food-growing and urban agriculture” (Core Strategy, p50), and a recognition that “communal space should...support a range of activities including space for ... gardening and urban agriculture” (Managing Development Document; p31) appears to have been removed in the new Local Plan; which makes no mention of community gardens or urban agriculture, excluding one mention of allotments and city farms.

This is a problem, in our view, because from our extensive experience working with some of the most marginalised residents in Tower Hamlets, the demand for food growing space has been consistently high. In our Gardens for Life project, the demand was so high that most gardens on RP land had waiting lists, and we could have developed further gardens had time or resources permitted. According to London’s food growing network, Capital Growth, there are at least 93 community gardens in the borough, and in reality there are many more which aren’t registered with Capital Growth. As mentioned previously, the Tower Hamlets Food Growing Network has over 1,400 members. WEN is unaware of any similar network in London which consistently attracts such high
numbers of residents to high quality participatory events and training, from such a diverse range of backgrounds.

When the Gardens for Life project was under threat of receiving no further funding, 51 residents of Tower Hamlets signed our petition to protect the project at the Autumn Gathering of the THFGN at Chrisp Street Market in October 2014. Key comments from the petition include:

“As the area develops we need our green spaces more and more”

“This is completely vital for the community-environmentally and culturally. Fund it!”

“It’s important for everyone to be involved. Too much greenery is being lost.”

“It’s vital that children understand the process of food growing.”

WEN would argue that the council needs to re-affirm, rather than remove, its commitment to community food growing in the new Local Plan, and as a cross cutting subject it should be recognised in at least three of the eight key topics outlined in the plan.

**Section 3.4 Community Facilities and 3.4.2 Health, Leisure and Social Facilities**

We would argue that community gardens should be included in the list of key community facilities, recognising their vital status as a community health, leisure and social asset. Their potential to offer huge benefits to people’s mental health and wellbeing have been documented in both academic and civil society literature, including on the [Growing Health website](https://www.growinghealth.org) and the final report of our Tower Hamlets ‘Gardens for Life’ project, which showed a demonstrable improvement in wellbeing in 59% of surveyed participants.

We would also argue that some existing community facilities are not being used to their full potential, and at the same time many small organisations are struggling to survive due to increasing rents. We would propose more support to link up these organisations and spaces in creative ways to the benefit of residents.

**Section 3.7 Open Space and Green Grid**

WEN is disappointed to see no mention of community gardens in this section.

We strongly support the concept of ‘multi-functional spaces’, of which community gardens are a fantastic example in ways that other green spaces are not. We would add to the list of benefits already outlined the following extra benefits afforded by community gardens:

- Reducing isolation among vulnerable people, in particular elderly Bengali women. WEN has unique experience in this area and our on the ground experience shows that these sites can
be hugely important sites for Bengali women; as safe spaces outside the home to meet new people, exercise and grow food
- Opportunities for inter-generational, inter-cultural and inter-class interactions; gardening activities provide concrete opportunities to improve social cohesion
- The deterrence of anti-social behaviour
- CO2 reductions from food grown locally
- Waste minimisation from composting projects

We would support the statement about the potential for housing amenity land to be used to its full potential. Gardens for Life was a partnership project which brought together four RPs regularly on the topic of community food growing on housing estates, and created 15 new community gardens in 15 months. The potential for partnership projects like this to achieve multiple aims and benefits for residents should be highlighted in the updated Open Space Strategy.

We would strongly support the use of the Community Infrastructure Levy to support investment in public open space, and would further propose that in the context of decreasing public funding and increased competition for grant funding, that some of the revenue raised from the CIL be put into a food growing and urban agriculture fund which community groups and organisations could apply to.

Section 3.8.1 Waste Management

WEN strongly supports the statement that developments offer the potential for integrated waste management solutions. We would further want to see a commitment to innovative ways to reduce waste, such as food waste composting on site, as an exemplary rocket composter project in Camden was doing until recently. We would like to see more resources allocated to waste prevention and minimisation including behaviour change and education projects.

Section 3.8.5 Biodiversity

We would propose more innovative and practical suggestions to increase biodiversity in the borough, including a ban on pesticides, herbicides and fungicides by council green space managers as well as contractors and RPs, and a requirement for bee and other pollinator friendly planting. The Eric Street Bee garden in Mile End is an excellent example.

WEN is happy to provide any further evidence or information required. Please contact us on 020 7481 9004 or kate@wen.org.uk

Evidence
