



# From the ground up

*A manifesto to inspire community growing*



Produced by the SPAN partnership (Sustainable Production in Active Neighbourhoods)

# Summary

***Food unites us all. It provides tangible, practical ways for everyone to play a part in developing a world and natural environment that others will be able to enjoy in the future.***

When people are empowered to be part of the production and distribution of their own food, they will often take further action that improves their local neighbourhoods or helps to tackle wider environmental issues, such as the urgent need to combat climate change.

The SPAN action research has demonstrated the importance of the many initiatives and organisations that support community groups throughout the UK. Some of the findings are simple and straight forward. Others will require commitment from local, regional and national policy makers and funders.

**To mobilise local action, community groups involved in sustainable food initiatives need:**

- ***Hands-on support***
- ***Access to land***
- ***Sustainable growing***
- ***Increased wellbeing***

**The taste of round green peas grown plump in their summer pods; the aroma of a handful of herbs freshly cut from the garden; the feel of a waxy new potato just pulled from the earth...**

These are some of the pleasures of the growing season in the UK. Yet many people would not recognise them. They are becoming disconnected from the natural world and are no longer involved with how their food is produced - creating a lack of understanding that feeds into a spiral of local and global environmental degradation.

There is, however, a resurgence of small, community-based projects in Britain and overseas, which involve thousands of people in producing and consuming food while caring for the environment.

These projects are helping to revitalise local neighbourhoods by providing spaces where people can enjoy the practical work of developing a garden together and build a greater sense of community cohesion.

The benefits are tangible - these activities provide food and exercise that improve health; they encourage social enterprise; they reach excluded communities and increase a sense of local pride.

This reawakened interest in the land and how our food is produced demonstrates that anyone can take part in practical action that increases their sense of wellbeing. And if enough people act together they will collectively help to limit climate change and make their own contribution to improving the local and global environment.



# From the ground up

*This manifesto highlights the changes needed, at both national and local level, to get more local people actively involved in growing and eating sustainable food. It draws on the learning and ideas from everyone involved in SPAN (Sustainable Production in Active Neighbourhoods); a three year action learning programme funded by DEFRA through the Environmental Action Fund.*

The programme demonstrated clearly how local food projects not only provide a focus for improving the local area but also encourage and empower people to take action on wider issues, such as climate change and global sustainability.



The SPAN project began in 2005, when five national organisations - Community Composting Network, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Garden Organic, Permaculture Association (Britain) and Women's Environmental Network - came together to develop integrated ways of working that would involve more people in sustainable food production and consumption in their local neighbourhoods.

Ten pilot groups with a range of differing issues and locations in England were chosen and each was allocated a Lead Facilitator who helped them to access relevant specialist advice, training and resources to assist in their development. Learning from the experiences of the pilots was captured through the facilitator's network, and a SPAN Gathering brought everyone together to identify how other community groups could be supported in the future.

Many of the pilot projects found that their work on local food acted as a catalyst for action on wider issues, such as local and global sustainability and climate change.

The voices of people at the grassroots provide the foundation of this manifesto, which has been drawn up by the SPAN partners - people involved in growing and eating sustainable food through the pilot groups; community workers who took part in specialist workshops and activists working in the five national organisations. It is a manifesto that uses their experiences to set out the political and community framework that is needed **To Inspire Community Growing.**



**Thanks to everyone who took part and contributed to the SPAN programme during its three years. Your efforts, knowledge and enthusiasm have ensured its success.**

# Hands-on support

*We want community groups to benefit from consistent, hands-on support that will increase to grow and eat food that benefits themselves and the environment.*

## What needs to change

**Across the UK, community food initiatives involve thousands of people in projects that are critical to improving both their health and their neighbourhoods. However, groups often struggle to survive because policy makers and funders sometimes overlook the combined effect of many small projects on the wider environment.**

**When given consistent support that meets their changing needs, community groups can deliver long-lasting benefits by empowering local people and mobilising widespread community and environmental action.**



## The way forward



Policy makers, funders and local strategic plans should:

- Recognise that many community groups benefit from direct, ongoing and flexible support from trained facilitators and specialists, who can build their capacity to involve local people in sustainable food initiatives
- Recognise the collective impact of local food initiatives in spreading community and environmental action
- Place more emphasis on social learning as a vital part of encouraging people to care for the environment
- Make more effective use of gender analysis in formulating policies that empower community groups
- Support initiatives that enable community groups to access relevant, verifiable information that provides a sound foundation for their actions.

*"It's amazing how much you can achieve if you are given the space and resources to do it"*



# Learning from SPAN

East London's **Waltham Forest Food Hub** includes groups involved in growing food, running a community kitchen/café and recycling. The main partners are OrganicLea, a local allotment project, Forest Recycling Project and the Hornbeam Environment Centre - venue for many of the hub's activities.

Instead of bringing in external 'specialists', the Hub used the SPAN support to buy in the skills and expertise of local people who were already part of the Hub. This significantly increased their capacity to develop the project while remaining in control of how, and at what speed, it progressed.



**Growing People** is a well established community allotment project in Cudworth, near Barnsley.

Joining the SPAN programme enabled them to feel part of a wider network where they could benefit from sharing experience, knowledge and ideas with other people involved with community food growing projects.

## We will

- Identify and recognise grassroots groups that are carrying out groundbreaking work and enable them to share their knowledge
- Strengthen links between national organisations by helping to develop shared information systems, such as community maps
- Create 'learning webs' to improve the flow of information and skills
- Link existing networks, making resources more available to people on the ground through stronger local infrastructures
- Continue to develop more participation by minority ethnic and excluded communities.



*yourself - and you have to deliver too"*

# Access to land

*We want community groups to have access to land for local, sustainable, food production.*

## What needs to change



**Community groups are often unable to find suitable land for creating sustainable food projects. They may be hampered by red tape and poor communication with landowners. It may be too expensive to rent or purchase land purely for community use. Or there could be other reasons, such as local authorities selling public small-holdings and allotments without providing suitable replacement land, disagreement concerning food production, health issues around contaminated land and increased demand from competing land uses, such as the production of biofuels.**

## The way forward

- Policy makers should ensure that national and local strategic frameworks - such as Open Space Strategies, Sustainable Community Strategies and neighbourhood plans - include access to land for communal food growing and environmental activities
- Local authorities and allotment organisations should work together to ensure that suitable land is made available as public food growing areas
- Government should secure national and international agreement around contaminated land, remediation, health and food production
- Community groups and landowners should cooperate better, creating more available land for sustainable, community food initiatives.



*“This piece of land could be put to good use for the community. But we needed support to*



# Learning from SPAN

In 2005, **Eastside Roots**, a community group based in the Easton area of Bristol, developed proposals for a community garden centre on unused land next to a railway station owned by Network Rail. Although keen to support the initiative, Network Rail had to undertake protracted negotiations before the land could be released.

## We will

- Help community groups to access land by providing information and advice
- Hold a conference bringing together community groups, interested organisations and landowners, as part of an 'access to land' campaign
- Encourage land users, owners and managers - such as Housing Associations - to allocate land for community sustainable food production
- Influence local authorities to develop and implement strategies that include community food growing areas based on local needs
- Work in partnership with other organisations to rethink current land use to encourage sustainable food production.



With the help of a SPAN facilitator - who listened, encouraged and advised them through two years of delays and setbacks - the group persevered with their vision.

Now Eastside Roots officially leases the railway land for the development of the garden centre, and has established a new community food garden in Easton, which attracts hundreds of local residents to food-growing workdays, community events and workshops.

*help us keep going during all the delays."*

# Sustainable growing

*We want more community groups to be able to grow and access food that has been produced in harmony with the natural environment*

## What needs to change

**There is a growing awareness of the health and environmental benefits of producing and consuming food in harmony with the natural environment. But many community groups which are new to sustainable food projects need better support and training in holistic, environmentally-friendly techniques and cultivation methods.**



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## The way forward

- Policy makers, local partnerships and funders should build on the *Every Action Counts* campaign to increase training for community groups in holistic, environmentally friendly production methods
- Policy makers, local partnerships and funders should prioritise activities that turn 'waste' into a precious resource through composting and anaerobic digestion; reconnecting the natural cycle of growing food and reusing materials at local level
- Public bodies should ensure that they integrate biodiversity in any food-related strategies, as required through biodiversity legislation
- Food producers should aim to only use climate friendly methods that are integrated with natural ecosystems for the benefit of wildlife and people.

*"I always wanted to know more about permaculture and to learn how to compost properly."*



# Learning from SPAN

Sheffield-based group **Forest Gardening in Communities** has been involved in transforming a community allotment site into an edible forest garden.

They used support from SPAN to visit projects outside Sheffield and put vital questions to people directly involved in developing forest gardens. Practical workshops such as making herbal remedies and grafting fruit trees also succeeded in engaging the local minority ethnic population in the project.



## We will

- Collectively provide more holistic training and support that enables community groups to grow food in harmony with the natural environment, minimise waste, protect and conserve natural resources, and use sustainable construction and energy sources
- Work pro-actively in partnership with key wildlife organisations to integrate food production with methods of increasing biodiversity
- Work with other organisations to develop and promote techniques that ensure food growers are not contributing to climate change
- Support groups to grow food in small spaces, such as containers, balconies and roof tops, particularly in urban areas which lack green space.



Recognising the value of food projects for increasing health and wellbeing, the **Aylesham Neighbourhood Project** in Kent used SPAN's support to commission reports on the suitability of two sites for organic food production, and to visit community composting projects in London. This has enabled them to incorporate food growing and other environmental initiatives into their core work.

In the rural parish of **Exbourne**, Devon, growers from a local food initiative enjoyed a practical Q&A day with an organic horticulturalist. The issues discussed were important to the local gardeners who supply the community shop with fresh produce each week.

*Having a facilitator's support gave me that push."*

# Increased wellbeing

*We want better support that enables community groups to expand their work improving wellbeing through practical food initiatives.*

## What needs to change

**The vital role of practical food initiatives in improving mental and physical health, promoting shared values and understanding, and in developing community cohesion, can be undervalued by government, funders and local strategic partnerships.**



**Many community schemes involved in the production, consumption and composting of food, exist primarily to create therapeutic opportunities for disadvantaged or excluded groups, such as adults with learning difficulties, the elderly and minority ethnic communities. But these groups are generally small, poorly funded and scattered throughout the UK, making it difficult for them to come together to share their achievements and learn from each other.**

## The way forward



- Policy makers and funders should strengthen their support for practical food initiatives that improve health, wellbeing and community cohesion, and enable them to share good practice
- Government departments covering health, regeneration, food and organic waste management should collaborate more effectively so that the benefits of community initiatives are understood and promoted
- Community organisations should work with local and national agencies to develop training to help community groups document the social, as well as environmental and economic, benefits of their work
- Local government and other strategic organisations need a more 'joined up' approach, giving everyone access to fresh, healthy food by connecting consumers with nearby food producing areas and distribution networks
- Policy makers and local strategic partnerships should support environmentally-friendly local food producers and distributors so they can provide fair wages and improve local economies.

*"Being at the community garden gives me a feeling of empowerment and being 'in control'."*



# Learning from SPAN

When the **Windmill Community Allotment Project** in Margate joined the SPAN programme, they were uncertain about the future. SPAN helped them recognise their many achievements as a focus for community activities that increased the wellbeing of residents. SPAN helped the project develop a bright new vision involving youth groups, schoolchildren and elderly people, as well as pre-school children, who all grow and eat their own fruit and vegetables.



Several pilots have seen an increase of asylum seekers taking part in food growing activities. At Sheffield's **LEAF** project they bring practical skills and new ideas to growing food in a land and climate very different from their home country. Working in a safe, welcoming communal garden has helped asylum seekers meet new people and make friends while growing produce that helps feed their families.

*community cohesion and individual*

## We will

- Widen our work to target community groups not already engaged in local food initiatives and involve more marginalised communities
- Provide training, information resources and networking opportunities to help groups motivate and learn from each other
- Target areas where practical food initiatives are most valuable, particularly areas of urban and rural deprivation
- Work in partnership with other organisations to encourage greater links between local and ultra-local food producers and consumers.



*not just a cog in an unstoppable machine."*

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## SPAN Partners



### Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

FCFCG exists to support, represent and promote community-managed farms and gardens across the UK.

The GreenHouse,  
Hereford Street,  
Bedminster,  
Bristol BS3 4NA

Tel: 0117 923 1800  
admin@farmgarden.org.uk  
www.farmgarden.org.uk



### Garden Organic

(formerly known as the Henry Doubleday Research Association)

Garden Organic inspires, encourages and supports individuals and groups to grow organically. We achieve this through our research, our demonstration gardens, and our educational and promotional work. We focus on domestic, allotment and school gardens throughout the UK.

Ryton Organic Gardens,  
Ryton-on-Dunsmore,  
Coventry,  
Warwickshire CV8 3LG

Tel: 02476 303 517  
enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk  
www.gardenorganic.org.uk



### Women's Environmental Network

Women's Environmental Network is the only organisation in the UK working consistently for women and the environment.

PO Box 30626,  
London E1 1TZ

Tel: 020 7481 9004  
food@wen.org.uk  
www.wen.org.uk



### Community Composting Network

Community Composting Network provides help support and representation to community groups and social enterprises involved in the sustainable management of organic waste resources.

67 Alexandra Road,  
Sheffield,  
South Yorkshire S2 3EE

Tel: 0114 258 0483  
hello@communitycompost.org  
www.communitycompost.org



### Permaculture Association (Britain)

The Permaculture Association supports people and projects in Britain and around the world, through training, networking and research.

BCM Permaculture Association,  
London WC1N 3XX.

Tel/Fax: 0845 4581805  
office@permaculture.org.uk  
www.permaculture.org.uk

## Pilot Projects

**Apple Cause, Aylesham Neighbourhood Project, Eastside Roots, Exbourne Local Food Initiative, Forest Gardening in Communities, Growing People, Local Enterprises Around Food (LEAF), Marsh Farm, Waltham Forest Local Food Hub, Windmill Community Allotment.**

A number of influential organisations have already endorsed this manifesto. If you want to join them, get more details at: **www.spanpartnership.org.uk**  
For SPAN enquiries email: **span@farmgarden.org.uk**