



**March 2011**

## AD HOC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Edible York Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee undertook the review and the following Members were involved:

Councillor D'Agorne (Chair)  
Councillor Funnell  
Councillor Galvin  
Councillor Waudby

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Please contact:  
Tracy Wallis  
Scrutiny Officer  
Scrutiny Services  
Tel: 01904 551714  
Email: [tracy.wallis@york.gov.uk](mailto:tracy.wallis@york.gov.uk)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee would like to thank the following for their contribution to the review:

St Nicholas Fields  
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)  
Edible York  
York Wildlife Trust (YWT)  
York Diocese  
Head of Parks & Open Spaces at City of York Council  
The Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) supporting the Sustainable Schools Strategy

## CHAIR'S FOREWORD

Many organisations and individuals have started to rethink how we might change the way we do things in response to climate change and the increasing cost of 'fossil fuels'. One response piloted in Todmorden has been to develop a greater level of self sufficiency in food at a local level, with publicly accessible land being cultivated by community and neighbourhood groups.

'Edible York' was launched in November 2010 and this scrutiny topic has focussed on how the Council can work with a broad range of initiatives to promote local food growing across the city in partnership with such groups and local residents.



**Councillor Andy D'Agorne**  
Chair

## KEY OBJECTIVES

At the start of the review the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee agreed the following aim and objectives for the review:

### Aim

To improve how City of York Council supports community food growing

### Key Objectives

1. To develop an information page on City of York Council's website which provides information and links to organisations involved in food growing initiatives
2. To identify the barriers to communication between City of York Council and voluntary organisations
3. To identify potential areas of land in the city suitable for food growing
4. To consider how best to enable and encourage individuals and groups to grow food
5. To encourage schools to participate in local food growing initiatives

*(For clarity this review excluded the function of allotments in community food growing although it is recognised that there are crossovers between the two areas of food productions)*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Edible York Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee proposed the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** That a collection point be established at the Hazel Court Household Waste Site for garden tools and that Council Officers investigate and implement a suitable system for collection, storage and distribution of the tools (including exploring the possibility of working with the Community Furniture Store to distribute these) This should be for a trial period of 6 months and if successful then permanently implemented (*fourth key objective*)

**Recommendation 2:** That the Council website be updated to include more and clearer information about food growing opportunities, food growing information and links to voluntary sector organisations (*first key objective*)

**Recommendation 3:** That the Council actively promotes local food growing by providing information and encouragement by using:

- The Council's website
- Existing publications (Your Ward, Your City, Allotments Newsletter, Housing Tenants Newsletter)
- Providing a link on the Council website to an appropriate York based 'Green Portal' if this becomes established.

In order to provide information to residents on food growing opportunities as well as to generally promote the food growing agenda within the city (*overall aim and fourth key objective*)

## RECOMMENDATIONS continued

**Recommendation 4:** That the Head of Parks and Open Spaces clarifies and co-ordinates the provision of information (internally & externally) in relation to food growing on City of York Council land (*second key objective*)

**Recommendation 5:** That a register of mentors be set up through advertising in the Allotments News for mentors for schools, community groups and individuals (*fourth & fifth key objectives*)

**Recommendation 6:** That City of York Council policies relating to green space management including amenity and communal housing areas should reflect a broad presumption in favour of it being suitable for food growing unless demonstrated otherwise e.g. potential harm to nature conservation or biodiversity, presence of utilities and services, sports use (*overall aim and second key objective*)

**Recommendation 7**  
That the Schools Forum be asked to continue funding the Advanced Skills Teacher Post that supports the Sustainable Schools Strategy and that possible ways of strengthening the local food growing element of the Sustainable Schools Strategy be looked at (*fifth key objective*)



## CORPORATE STRATEGY

This topic is linked to the 'Sustainable City' aspect of the Corporate Strategy 2009/2012:

'We aim to be clean and green, reducing our impact on the environment whilst maintaining York's special qualities and enabling the city and its communities to grow and thrive.'

In addition to this the Council's Sustainability Officer has said that the work of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee supports the wider sustainability agenda and the Sustainable Community Strategy. Specifically it supports the Sustainable City chapter which aims to reduce York's ecological and carbon footprint and supports local food initiatives. It also supports the city's climate change framework and action plan and can be seen as a great tool in starting people to take more sustainable action and raise awareness of wider sustainability issues.



## METHODOLOGY

This review took place between December 2010 and March 2011. The Edible York Ad Hoc Scrutiny Committee held a number of formal and informal meetings to gather information on this review topic:

**Meeting one** A formal meeting was held to agree the remit, scope and timetable of the review.

**Meeting two** An informal meeting was held to meet with key partners in the voluntary sector. This was held at the Environment Centre at St Nicholas Fields. Members received information on various local food growing initiatives within the city. Discussions were also had in relation to the second key objective of this review.

**Meeting three** Another informal meeting was held to discuss all the key objectives with Council Officers. The Advanced Skills Teacher responsible for the Sustainable Schools Strategy also spoke to the Committee about the fifth key objective of this review.

**Meeting four** At a further informal meeting the Committee received information on their discussions to date and discussed potential recommendations arising from the review.

**Meeting five** This was a formal meeting where the Committee considered and signed off the final report arising from the review.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE REVIEW

'Gardeners who grow their own fruit and vegetables could be the healthiest people. That's the conclusion of Dr Laurence J Trueman, a molecular biologist and biochemist currently working as a consultant to the horticulture industry specialising in the effects of eating fruit and vegetables on human health.'

Various initiatives including the 'Five a Day' scheme have been prominent in the media in recent years in an effort to promote a diet richer in fruit and vegetables than many people eat. One small but effective way of encouraging people to eat more fruit and vegetables would be for the Council to have a more positive support programme in place that allowed people to access clear and concise information on food growing and the opportunities and support available within the city to do this.

The Committee were keen to promote the benefits of home grown food, as they believed it to have significant health benefits. Some argue that not only will the food you grow taste better it is generally believed to be healthier, especially if picked and eaten fresh from the allotment or garden. Dr Trueman who is quoted on the Royal Horticultural Society Website states that 'freshness is a major factor in the effectiveness of fruit and vegetables to fight disease and the best way of getting the freshest produce is to grow and harvest your own.'

## TALKING TO KEY PARTNERS

Members met with the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT), St Nicholas Fields, the Archbishop's Advisor for the Environment, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) and Edible York to learn what food-growing projects were happening in the city.

**YWT** did not currently have any food growing projects within the city. They had however, submitted a grant application to deliver the 'Dig In' project in York. This is a Big Lottery funded project that will support community groups to grow food with an emphasis on supporting young people and families. Ten initial sites within play areas across the city have had been agreed with City of York Council. They will know shortly whether their bid has been successful.

**St Nicholas Fields** was York's leading organisation promoting sustainable living. From their base at York Environment Centre they provide inspiration, advice, practical examples and services to enable people in York and beyond to move towards a sustainable future. They also ran various courses on growing your own food as well as being involved in a project called 'Bearing Fruit' to plan, design and develop a community orchard.



## TALKING TO KEY PARTNERS continued

**York Rotters** is a partnership project between St Nicholas Fields and York Council. Amongst other things they run occasional courses on how to grow your own vegetables using home made compost. **The Archbishop's Advisor for the Environment** explained that throughout 2011 the Diocese would be focussing on ways they could help the environment. They mentioned an initiative in Oxfordshire called **Grow Zones**, which was a community project aimed at eliminating food miles and turning gardens over to food growing. This may be something that could be copied in York.

**BTCV's** main initiative was the 'Carbon Army' which encouraged people to grow their own food. They had produced a guide containing advice on food growing. They had food growing projects running all over the country, had built raised beds for food growing in schools and generally worked with schools and other organisations in relation to food growing in all ways. They had recently put in a local bid for lottery funding to run a 'York Get Growing' project. They also plan to run courses in food growing that are open to the public and have a target to grow food within 20 different community sites within York.



## TALKING TO KEY PARTNERS continued

**Edible York** focuses on growing food at home, on allotments and on public land. They currently support a network of food growing projects across York with an aim to making it possible for everyone in York to grow, cook and eat their own food. They have been awarded lottery funding to create five community beds across the city and are committed to creating these over the course of the next year. In addition to this Edible York also runs an initiative called Abundance, which is concerned with harvesting and distribution of fruit from trees across the city.

**Garden Share** initiatives enabled people with gardens to be matched with people who wanted to grow food. There were local schemes running throughout the country, usually in those places associated with the Transition Town movement.

**Landshare** is an initiative that brings together people who wish to grow their own food by connecting them with those who have land to share. It is a Channel 4 initiative, which now has approximately 55,000 growers, sharers and helpers. There are various plots of land offered for food growing in and around York.

The Committee were also aware of other initiatives such as the '**FiveThousand project**' which provided resources to unemployed people to grow their own produce. However, due to the tight timescales of this review the Committee were unable to hear directly from all organisations.

## KEY FINDINGS

During discussions with key partners and Council Officers the Committee became aware that there were a large number of food growing initiatives going on within the city. They then considered the following points in relation to each key objective of the review.

### FIRST KEY OBJECTIVE

The overall aim of this review was to improve how City of York Council supported community food growing. The Committee looked at the current relevant pages of the Council's website which can be accessed via the following link: [http://www.york.gov.uk/environment/Parks\\_and\\_open\\_spaces/](http://www.york.gov.uk/environment/Parks_and_open_spaces/)

After considering the information currently provided on the Council's website and discussing this with Council Officers and key partners it became clear that as there were so many projects going on within the city, all being run by different organisations it would be useful if there could be a single place from which to access information about them all.

The Committee supported the view of the Head of Parks & Open Spaces that the website could provide a lot more information. They felt that clearer signposting could help residents find information more easily.

## KEY FINDINGS continued

At the moment on accessing the Parks & Open Spaces web pages there was an 'Allotments' section. The Committee suggested that this be changed to 'Food Growing & Allotments' and within this section to build in a further menu offering the following options:

- ⇒ Allotments
- ⇒ Food Growing
- ⇒ School Food Growing Projects

Each of the above themes could then have its own information page. Within these pages there would be scope to add in links to relevant partner organisations within the city; for example, within the 'Food Growing' section there could be links to the Edible York website and the BTCV website. The section could also include links to the websites of national organisations such as the Royal Horticultural Society amongst others with a very brief explanation of what each link contains.

The aim of the suggested changes to the website was that the Council's website would become the first place that people would go to access information about all aspects of food growing, including links to websites (both local and national) offering advice on food growing, and preparation of and cooking of home grown food.

## KEY FINDINGS continued

### SECOND KEY OBJECTIVE

Members discussed the barriers to communication with key partners and Council Officers and identified the following key points:

- ⇒ There was a need for a 'one stop' information point that could provide access to everything related to food growing within the city. There were many food growing projects happening across York and it was important that information about all of these was shared.
- ⇒ An idea for a 'Green Portal' had been gathering momentum for some time and this was envisaged to be a 'one stop' website for all things green (not just home food growing information). Currently no known person or organisation had the time to voluntarily spend on such a project. The Committee were supportive of such a project but felt that it needed to be run independently from the Council. However they thought that if the project did get off the ground then a link to it should be included on the Council's website.
- ⇒ There was a need to improve communication in relation to food growing opportunities in the city. One easy way of doing this would be to use Council publications such as Your City, Your Ward, the Housing Tenants Newsletter and the Allotments Newsletter to provide encouragement for residents to grow their own food.



**KEY FINDINGS continued**

- ⇒ There was a body of opinion amongst the voluntary sector and the Committee that there were difficulties involved with using Council land for growing food. The Head of Parks & Open Spaces clarified that a draft licence for using Council land for food growing had recently been approved by both Property Services and Legal Services and was now ready for use. The Committee agreed that Officers within the Council and members of the public needed to be made aware that this was the case and this needed to be better communicated.
- ⇒ The Committee believed that communications between City of York Council departments needed to be improved and be more positive. There had been an incident where a food-growing scheme was prevented from going ahead because of what was seen as over zealous risk management. Improved communication between departments could enable a better understanding of potential risks by all parties and allow discussions to take place in order that any risk was managed in a more positive way.

**KEY FINDINGS continued**

**THIRD KEY OBJECTIVE**

The Committee was informed that Parks & Open Spaces were responsible for over 200 sites within the city; many would be suitable for food growing. There were also numerous other sites owned by Parish and Town Councils, schools and highway verges, which offer potential. The Parks and Open Spaces Team were responsible for identifying sites and would consider any specific sites that Members may wish to suggest were suitable for food growing.



Community groups could contact the local authority about these sites via the Contact Centre or by contacting the Parks &

Open Spaces Team. This is something that, at no further cost, could be emphasised by using the newly improved web pages.

**KEY FINDINGS continued**

**FOURTH KEY OBJECTIVE**

One way of enabling and encouraging both groups and individuals to grow their own food would be through the use of existing Council publications. These could be used to promote the basic idea of food growing at a local level and to raise awareness about food growing opportunities within the city.

There was scope to explore initiatives around garden share but Members realised that there could be potential legal problems if the gardens being used were attached to Council Housing. However, initially Council publications could be used to encourage communities/streets to undertake growing projects together especially in terms of clearing overgrown gardens and communally growing food in them.

Discussions established that encouraging and supporting residents to work at a pace they could cope with was important. It was important that residents and groups did not feel overwhelmed and that support was available to help them. Initially overgrown gardens and allotments could appear



**KEY FINDINGS continued**

**FOURTH KEY OBJECTIVE continued**

daunting. Recruiting volunteer mentors from amongst existing allotment tenants and associations to help clear overgrown plots would be beneficial, as would the continued support mentors could provide. The regular Allotments Newsletter could be used to advertise for volunteers to become mentors. In addition to this Brunswick Organic Nursery have indicated that they would be happy to clear overgrown plots, however it was expected that there would be a small charge for this.

Members of the Committee were keen to give all residents the opportunity to grow their own food, whether individually or as part of a group. They believed that a lack of tools may be a barrier to some people or groups new to growing their own food and therefore suggested that the Household Waste Depot at Hazel Court look at setting up a collection point for garden tools that were being disposed of. It was envisaged that these tools could be collected from Hazel Court on a regular basis by an organisation such as the Community Furniture Store and sold on at low cost. Any scheme that was successfully implemented could also be promoted and advertised within existing Council publications and on the Council's website.

## **KEY FINDINGS continued**

### **FIFTH KEY OBJECTIVE continued**

The Scrutiny Committee met with the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) for Sustainable Schools. The role of the AST is to advise schools on how to be sustainable. There are eight different themes running through the Sustainable Schools Strategy of which food growing is one.

Approximately 40% of York's schools are involved in food growing projects and it is hoped that with the help of the AST this will gradually increase. The AST acts as a coordinator between the schools and aims to bring cohesion to some of the food growing programmes. In the long term the role was about ensuring that the Sustainable Schools Agenda remained as part of the school curriculum. The Committee and the AST also discussed the role of the Edible Schools Group, problems with tending plants over long school holiday periods and asking allotment tenants to act as mentors to schools.

The AST post was currently financed for the next financial year. The Committee were aware of the progress achieved through this role and wanted to see funding for the post continue. This would allow for the co-ordinated expansion of the food growing agenda within schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Scrutiny Committee were supportive of the various food growing initiatives happening across the city. They were also hopeful of seeing an increase in people growing food within their own gardens, in allotments and on suitable Council owned plots of land. It was important for the Council to promote food growing and the recommendations arising from the review suggest various ways in which this should happen.

The Committee cannot stress enough the importance of encouraging children and their families to become involved in food growing and the need to enable this by removing as many barriers as possible. It was important to use all methods available to encourage children to become involved in growing their own food. They believed in the importance of actively involving schools in food growing and would like to see every school in the city have some form of food growing programme.

The AST played a vital role in supporting the Sustainable Schools Agenda. Members of the Committee felt that funding for this role should continue and ways of strengthening the food growing element of the Sustainable Schools Strategy should be considered.

The introduction of a licence enabling food growing on Council land was a positive step. However this needed to be promoted inside and outside of the Council.

## SCRUTINY'S ROLE

For each completed scrutiny review, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee produces a final report containing their proposed recommendations for the Executive's consideration.

In most cases, the Executive will approve all of the recommendations made and will instruct officers to proceed with the actions required in order to implement them.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is responsible for monitoring the progress of implementation and receives regular update reports from the Scrutiny Officer. Once they are confident that a recommendation has been fully implemented they will agree to sign it off.

In addition, each year Scrutiny Services produces an Annual Report which includes an assessment of the successful outcomes from each completed scrutiny review.



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