Planning for Urban Food: The Experience of Two UK Cities

JOE HOWE

Introduction

Despite a surge of interest in all things related to food production and consumption, with a few exceptions, there has been a noticeable silence from planning researchers and practitioners concerning the land-use implications of urban food-growing activities. Consideration of this and the factors detailed above prompted the following question—what are the implications of urban agriculture initiatives for the UK planning system? In attempting to answer this question this paper sets out to explore the nature of the relationship between urban agriculture and planning. This paper initially highlights the rise in interest in food issues; it then considers why urban food production should be considered within the remit of planning before detailing two case studies in an attempt to further unpack this relationship. Following a discussion of the research findings, the penultimate section attempts to make suggestions about how planning can contribute to urban agriculture.

There has been much social and political debate about growing food in recent years (Shaw, 1999). This debate has been mirrored by a surge of academic interest in food. The UK-government-funded Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) ‘The Nation’s Diet’ programme (1992–1997) illustrates the growing concern with social aspects of food choice, the results of which are reported in Murcott’s edited collection (Murcott, 1998). Indeed, the emerging international engagement by academics with issues of food is reflected in a number of key texts (see, for example, Mennell et al., 1992; Lupman & Chapman, 1995; Lupton, 1996; Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Keane, 1997; Macintyre et al., 1998). However, much of this research has tended to focus on rural agriculture, bypassing or perhaps even ignoring food that is grown within urban areas.

Urban food production is central to the existence of many poorer cities across the globe (Ellis & Sunberg, 1998; Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1998; Tewari, 2000; Bakker et al., 2001). It is only recently, however, that the richer industrial nations of the world have begun to consider the possibilities of urban agriculture and its potential benefits to relevant policy makers (Garnett,
1996; Hynes, 1996; Howe & Wheeler, 1999). Literature on the subject highlights the value of urban food-growing projects as a powerful vehicle for tackling intimately linked social, economic, educational and environmental concerns (Hopkins, 2000). Several countries have witnessed the emergence of national movements based on increasing awareness of the inter-linked social, environmental and economic benefits of urban food growing (Smit, 1996; Stocker & Barnett, 1998; Mbiba, 2001). In addition, many community-based regeneration projects incorporating an urban food element have emerged in recent years.

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Whilst food is so high on the political agenda, it is hardly surprising that there has been an increase in worldwide attention to urban agriculture (Mbiba, 2001). This carries with it implications for both planning practice and planning research. Given that urban agriculture is a type of land use it clearly should fall within the general remit of planning control. Within the emerging body of literature on urban agriculture, however, the relationship between urban food growing and planning has only recently begun to be explored, highlighting the relatively uncharted nature of the topic (Martin & Marsden, 1999; Howe, 2001; Howe & White, 2001).

Whilst significant research has previously been directed at particular types of food-growing activity, the limited number of studies that attempt to deal with different forms of urban agriculture in relation to the planning system is perhaps surprising. The research that does exist generally paints a picture of urban agriculture remaining marginal in the urban planning process. A recent review of the strategies employed by urban planners to regulate urban food production in a number of cities around the world demonstrates that integration of agriculture into urban planning and city development has remained consistently low (Mbiba & Van Veenhuizen, 2001). In the United States, for example, Pothukuchi & Kaufman (2000) demonstrate a low awareness among land-use planners of increasing urban agriculture activities. Recent studies in Russia and Canada demonstrate that many planners do recognise the potential of urban agriculture but find themselves constrained by insufficient budgets (Barr, 1997; Moldakov, 2001; Wekerle, 2001). Nevertheless, a city’s ability to feed itself is perhaps an important component of sustainable development (Barton, 1995; FAO, 1998; Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), 1999).

The benefits of urban agriculture are far reaching (Howe & Wheeler, 1999; Sustain Alliance, 1999). From an economic perspective it offers support for local economies by providing vocational training and producing fresh fruit and vegetables that may be particularly hard to come by in pockets of the inner city. Supermarkets shy away from these areas of high crime and low disposable income, leaving them barren retail deserts. Environmentally, urban food production has the potential to preserve biodiversity as it utilises primarily organic production methods. Intensive farming techniques in rural areas, accompanied by the heavy use of chemical treatments, have had a devastating environmental impact. The proximity of urban agriculture as a supplier of goods is also advantageous. Currently, production occurs in one location, consumption
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in another. By changing the location of agricultural production, however, consumers’ dependence on outside resources and the need to import food will be reduced. The products of urban agriculture are transported only short distances or are sold on site. This locational advantage removes the need for the heavy packaging required for the transportation of food products, thus providing a less wasteful source of food production. Although the contribution of urban agriculture to the overall demand for food in cities is likely to remain limited in the foreseeable future, it goes some way to providing an alternative to the transport burden of current production systems.

Growing food in urban environments also creates documented social and health benefits, such as greater food security, nutritional diversity, community cohesion and psychological well-being. The benefits associated with urban food growing demonstrate its value as a tool for encouraging sustainable urban development. Advocates therefore see a strong case for its promotion in planning terms (Martin & Marsden, 1999; Pothukuchi & Kauffman, 2000; Howe, 2001). The rewards offered by urban food growing, however, may seem pale in comparison to the higher financial return and profile of other land uses such as housing and industry. Several factors may inhibit the development of urban agriculture or limit the exploitation of the benefits of producing food in urban areas. Vacant land may be available in cities, but artificially inflated land costs may price out urban food-producing activities. Alternatively, surrounding land uses may be incompatible with urban food production, thus making sites unsuitable for development for this purpose. As with rural agriculture, there are some health and environmental risks associated with food production in cities. Land contamination may prevent the future development of urban agriculture on certain sites, or limit their ability to produce goods of a required standard for consumption. Urban food growing inevitably faces fierce competition for land and financial resources. It is in mediating such problems that the planning system could be of real influence to the future of urban food growing.

Planning is in a unique position to direct the development of urban agriculture (Figure 1). However, the UK planning system has traditionally had little direct involvement in food issues. Development plans represent the single most important tool available to planners in moulding urban form. Development plans are a mechanism for the allocation of land; sites are designated for (but not restricted to) the development of specific land uses. They provide an invaluable means of integrating urban food-growing activities into the urban profile. However, development plans are heavily shaped by national policy; failure to acknowledge urban food production at a national level will inevitably have an impact on the consideration afforded by planners to this issue at a local level.

Retaining interest in food-production issues has proved difficult in the past, highlighted by the inability of the Thorpe Report (Departmental Committee of Inquiry into Allotments, 1969) to move the boundaries of current legislation. Interest in urban food production in the 1960s prompted the commissioning of the Thorpe Report, which drew attention to the benefits of urban food-growing activities for urban populations and the failure of existing policy to effectively manage such activities. Thorpe criticised existing legislation as vague, obsolete and incomprehensible, and proposed that new legislation be formulated. His
recommendations never progressed beyond the paper of his report, however, and policy remained unchanged.

Urban Agriculture in Leeds and Bradford

As part of an ESRC research project, in-depth case studies of Leeds and Bradford were chosen to investigate the relationships between urban food growing and planning. Bradford, a relatively pioneering local authority showing clear signs of grasping the potential benefits of urban food growing, is compared with the similarly small-sized local authority of Leeds where policy appears to be less well developed. Research involved an analysis of local authority policy documentation related to urban food, interviews with officials and representatives from the environmental and food-growing lobby, and interviews with planning and sustainability officials in both cities.

The empirical scope of this study was restricted to urban food growing on allotments, urban farms and community gardens, although it is recognised that urban food growing can take a variety of forms. These activities are strongly self-selecting. Within purely urban areas, allotments are the oldest and most important public resource in terms of the scale of people directly involved and the land dedicated to urban agriculture (Crouch & Ward, 1988). Allotments also fall largely under council ownership and control. Similarly, given their public status and well-documented roles in urban regeneration, both urban/city farms and the various types of community project conveniently called ‘community gardens’ have an obvious place in any study focusing on planning policy and urban agriculture. Community gardens in particular have gained increasing
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significance in recent years and will continue to do so in the light of the revision of government housing policy. Household gardens are rapidly becoming a thing of the past as a result of the pressures on urban space. Community gardens to a certain extent compensate for this loss. A relatively new addition to the urban landscape, community gardens are places of interaction for local communities and offer a diverse landscape and range of activities suitable for all sections of the community. The importance of green space and recreational space alongside physical development is widely recognised, and their inclusion in development initiatives is a distinctive feature of current development trends.

Leeds and Bradford both have allotments and one urban farm apiece, Bradford City Farm and Meanwood Urban Farm in Leeds. In addition, Bradford is home to the well-known Springfields community garden. This 7.5-acre garden was opened in 1995 after the securing of £250 000 from a City Challenge bid in 1992.

Policy Context for Urban Agriculture

At a national level, planning policy is articulated in a series of planning policy guidance notes (PPGs), the most relevant of which for the purposes of this study are set out in Table 1. Arguably the most crucial issue covered by central government guidance is that of competing demands on urban open space. Essentially policy, in the form of PPG3 and PPG17 respectively, seeks to achieve a balance between two aims: first, to maximise the reuse of urban ‘brownfield’ land for new housing and minimise building on ‘greenfield’ sites; and second, through the protection of urban open space to maintain the quality of life within urban areas. Green-belt policy is also relevant, both directly through its controls on the type of development permissible within the urban fringe, and also through its longer-term impact on land values and the shape of urban areas. The Regional Guidance for Leeds and Bradford is provided by Regional Planning Guidance Note 2 (RPG2). Its relevance to urban food production is its emphasis on concentrating housing development within existing urban areas to assist urban regeneration and on the protection of the green belt.

The content of Unitary Development Plan (UDP) policies in Bradford and Leeds is certainly influenced by the framework imposed by national and regional planning guidance. Consequently, UDP policy in the two cities has many parallels. For example, both attempt to reconcile housing needs with the protection of urban open space. Local differences, however, have implications for urban agriculture and have influenced the development of urban food production in each authority area.

Allotments

Allotments represent the only type of urban food growing directly covered by a policy in either UDP. The Bradford UDP has a specific allotments policy, EN12 (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council (CBMDC), 1993). In the Leeds UDP, however, there was originally a separate allotments policy at deposit
Table 1. Planning Policy Guidance Notes most relevant to urban food growing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Policy Guidance Note</th>
<th>Relevance of content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPG1 General Policy &amp; Principles (February 1997)</td>
<td>emphasis on sustainability as one of three themes which underpin the UK Government’s approach to the planning system (paragraphs 3–7). Ties in with sustainability as a key rationale of urban food growing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| PPG2 Green Belts (January 1995) | (i) fundamental aim, prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open (paragraph 1.4). Relevant to urban fringe (‘peri-urban’) food growing  
(ii) control over development, presumption against inappropriate development (paragraph 3). Relevant to peri-urban food growing |
| PPG3 Housing (March 2000) | (i) emphasis on maximising recycling of urban ‘brownfield’ sites (paragraphs 22–23)  
(ii) importance attached to greening of residential areas and desire for balance to be struck between open space and housing (paragraphs 52–53) |
| PPG17 Sport & Recreation (September 1991) | emphasis on conserving valuable urban open space (paragraph 25) |

stage but this was modified following the public inquiry into the plan, and reference to allotments changed into a paragraph within the explanatory text of a general policy, N1, on green space (Leeds City Council (LCC), 1997). Although both policies effectively set up a presumption against development of UDP-designated allotment sites, the wording of the Bradford policy is more specific about the circumstances in which development of allotments will be permitted. The Bradford policy thrust is also more pro-active where allotment use seems minimal, referring to the commitment of the council to take steps to encourage their use locally before contemplating development for other purposes.

**Urban Green Space**

The principal policy governing urban green space in Leeds, N1, indicates that development on land allocated for allotments will not normally be granted unless it can be demonstrated that the allotments are under utilised. In Bradford, the equivalent policy, EN7, sets up a presumption against development of ‘major urban green spaces’ that would damage their ‘open and green character’. The explanatory text to EN7 is interesting: it notes that suitable uses within these areas “may include … horticulture … where the proposals retain the open and green character of the area” (paragraph 5.43).

The combined effect of Bradford and Leeds allotment and green-space policies is important to consider. First, there is a general presumption against the
development of land designated in the UDP as allotments (Bradford) or protected green space (Leeds). Second, where an allotment is developed, there seems (at least on paper) to be a reasonable possibility that it will be retained for an open-space use (and therefore not necessarily lost to food growing forever). Third, the policies on major urban green space in Bradford and protected green space in Leeds seem to leave open the possibility of using such spaces as a resource for urban food growing. In particular, permissible uses include ‘recreational use’ (N1, Leeds) and ‘horticulture’ (paragraph 5.43, EN7, Bradford).

Green Belt

The principal green-belt policies for the two districts are EN1 for Bradford (CBMDC, 1997) and N33 for Leeds (LCC, 1993). Central government guidance on green-belt policy is relatively rigid. Green-belt policies for both cities reflect this, with overlap in may respects. In particular, both EN1 and N33 seek to restrict development to a few permitted categories except in ‘very special circumstances’. These permitted categories closely follow those outlined in PPG2, such as “building or change of use for agriculture, forestry, outdoor sport … or other uses which preserve the openness of the green belt ...” (CBMDC, 1997, p. 26). Leeds also has a supplementary series of 25 policies that flesh out N33 (LCC, 1993). One of these, GB24, relates specifically to allotments, noting that: “allotment gardens will be permitted within the Green belt provided they are not detrimental to visual amenity”. The explanatory paragraph 5.14.1 adds to this less than positive endorsement, stating: “allotment gardens may be an appropriate use for land for which no other viable use can be found”.

Household Trends and Green Space

Projections for household numbers in both districts are on an upward course, with Bradford and Leeds predicted to experience 13 and 5.9% growth respectively between 1991 and 2006. The relevance of household growth to urban food growing relates to the question of allocation of scarce land resources. In both UDPs, there is a clear recognition of the requirement to ensure that housing needs are met without eroding the quality of life which open space provides. In the case of Bradford, pressures on land in the inner city seem to be particularly acute. Similarly, in the Leeds UDP, at both a district-wide and a local scale, the protection of urban green space is explicitly recognised as a critical environmental constraint in the search for housing land (paragraphs 7.4.4 and 7.4.7).

Planning Practice and Urban Agriculture

In both districts, planning officials claimed to have a relatively high level of awareness about sustainability issues, although one officer in Leeds noted that
this was from personal interest and work on the UDP rather than from specific professional training. In Bradford some of the planning officers had received formal sustainability education. Respondents from both districts agreed that planning policy had traditionally paid little attention to urban food growing, except in relation to allotments. Both sets of respondents felt that this was perhaps due to a perception of the limits of planning, one officer from Leeds adding “why bureaucratis it [i.e. food growing]?”.

Both sets of officers thought that there was support for urban food growing locally, for example from ward councillors around Springfields in Bradford. However, they saw little evidence of support for urban food growing as a general concept, except perhaps among a very small number of councillors noted for their interest in ‘green issues’. The local planners generally accepted that a good cause could be made for urban food growing on environmental grounds, with some seeing its benefits extending more broadly to encompass health and people’s sense of well-being. Conversely, an officer from Bradford argued that locally other uses might have a stronger claim on particular sites than food growing. In particular, he pointed out the great shortage of land suitable for housing in inner-city Bradford. Similarly, one of the Leeds respondents also questioned whether the ‘inefficient’ growth of food on valuable urban land represented the best use of this resource.

Section 5.65 of Bradford’s UDP states that provision of allotments in the district will be met by the protection of those currently provided, although policy EN12 states that development on the allotments may be granted where ‘alternative provision’ is made or where ‘community support for the allotment is negligible’. One officer from Bradford thought that UDP policy towards allotments struck the right balance between allotment protection where there was genuine demand for allotment use, and the recycling of valuable urban land where demand for allotments was minimal. This balancing act took place against a backdrop of enormous pressure to find sites for new housing in inner urban areas. Leeds planners were only aware of one allotment site (Headingley Station) that had been directly affected by the UDP. However, it was thought that the allotments policy might have been weakened over the course of the UDP process with the dropping of the specific allotments policy (N1A) from the deposit draft.

There was considerable agreement between the planners in the two districts over the reasons for allotment loss. Housing seemed to be the main use for former allotment sites, but locally allotments had gone to other uses, such as industry in south Leeds. Overall, the Leeds respondents noted the pressure which allotments came under during the 1980s’ property boom. Across both districts the only definite knowledge of genuinely new (as opposed to replacement) allotment sites being created was limited to Springfields Community Gardens in Bradford.

An examination of the UDPs reveals that, in Leeds, allotment allocation to other uses is very minor; the only genuinely new proposed allocation is for part of the Headingley Station site as ‘new housing land’ under site policy number H4.42. In contrast, UDP allocations affect over one-third (12 out of the 34 sites) of allotments in the ‘central area’ of Bradford; the majority of sites appear to be going to housing.
Future Planning Policy and Urban Agriculture

Regarding the future of planning policy and urban food growing, the planners interviewed were asked to broadly consider the following:

(i) whether they saw any prospect of increasing council involvement in promoting urban food growing in which planners might play a role;
(ii) how such a policy of promoting urban food growing would affect other areas of planning policy.

For Bradford, planners noted that in the first UDP review the lessons learned about the value of food growing in community gardens would be incorporated into new thinking. However, it was felt that the next UDP would continue to focus on allotments. In Leeds, planning officers generally thought that issues such as urban food growing were outside mainstream planning. A typical response was: “planners are not required to look at it by statute”, suggesting that attention will only be gained if there is an external push of some kind, such as from public interest. It was generally agreed that whilst planning could be part of a council-wide policy on city food production, it could not lead to anything on its own. Officers from both districts agreed that if a council-wide policy was devised, planning, as a land-use profession, could play a role with other partners.

All officials noted the potential for conflict between promotion of urban food growing and the ‘compact city’ idea. However, the two concepts were seen as perfectly compatible providing neither was taken to extremes. Thus, the preferred option was a moderate compact city policy that recognised the value of public open spaces of all kinds, including those for food growing. Similarly, there was broad agreement across both districts on the great potential that urban regeneration offers in terms of introducing urban food production schemes, with the usual provision that local support be gained for this first.

Views on urban parks varied. In Bradford, officers noted that parks were already well used and often either contained allotments or were adjacent to them. They dismissed the notion that Bradford was comparable with locations such as Harlem and New York in which community gardens have rescued many neighbourhood parks from dereliction. In Leeds, one officer thought that parks did offer potential for urban food growing although she felt this was really an issue for leisure services rather than the planning department. In both districts, interviewees agreed that green-belt policy placed no obstacles to simply growing on the land. The problems became apparent when people wanted to live in the green belt (which covers virtually the whole of the rural Leeds and Bradford districts), which policy prohibits. For both districts, officers thought that the potential for using derelict land for urban food growing was limited. This was partially because of issues related to contamination and, as one official stated, “that the popular idea of vast reserves of derelict land was now an outdated myth”. As a result of the economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s, most derelict land had now been built on.

One obvious role which planning could play in relation to food production would be in the provision of information, particularly in relation to contami-
nation on particular sites. However, following the dropping of plans to require local authorities to compile contaminated land registers in 1993 (Ball & Bell, 1994), the role of local authorities in relation to the collected information is unclear. Bradford does not have a register of any kind on contaminated land, but it was believed that the department would attempt to help with any queries concerning individual sites. In Leeds, the Planning Data Team has collected some information on contamination, although this is far from comprehensive.

Environmental Units and Urban Agriculture

Neither district has elected to develop Local Agenda 21 plans as such. Instead, Leeds and Bradford are both promoting broad ‘visioning’ exercises from which they hope to achieve a general consensus on how their districts should develop into the 21st century. In both districts, officers from their respective environment units thought that there was fairly poor linkage between planning policy expressed in the UDPs and sustainability principles. In both cases, this was partly a question of timing. The UDPs were well under way by 1992, the Leeds UDP commencing in 1989 and its Bradford counterpart in 1990. More fundamentally, interviewed sustainability officers emphasised that the Bradford UDP was concerned with development, it was not about creating a sustainable district, although it was felt that central government planning guidance was often simplistic and failed to take account of the specific needs of different parts of the country.

A number of aspects characterise the general response from the environment officers concerning the value of urban food growing. First, that a focus is required to communicate the sustainability message. Second, this focus has to be about everyday things, about basic necessities (such as food). Officers saw great advantages in growing food over ‘traditional’ environmental approaches. Traditional approaches may have little relevance to many local people who do not have a particular interest in nature, whereas everyone needs to eat. Third, food is something simple, it is an issue that you can do something about.

Local authority environment officers encountered obstacles in promoting urban food growing as a sustainability vehicle. In Leeds, the local press had apparently been unhelpful when attempts to promote allotment uptake in the city were introduced in 1995 through the use of rent concessions for the unemployed, ethnic minorities and pensioners. Headlines in the local newspaper such as ‘chain gang of the unemployed dig for victory’ were not helpful in encouraging council members to pursue the issue. In Bradford, the principal obstacles were seen as being unfamiliarity with the language and idea of urban food growing and sustainability in general, and entrenched attitudes (notably within the wider planning system). One officer commented that:

no one understood what we were talking about with urban agriculture—they thought we meant garden centres or a green tourist centre.

One sustainability official interviewed had recently consulted with Bradford Planning about the potential for developing a localised ‘community’ composting system using the council’s park waste as one waste source. He was told that
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composting was an industrial activity that would have to occur in the industrial part of the city. He commented that this made a mockery of the now widely embraced planning principle of mixed uses, adding: “it was actually an extremely good use of farmland which the farmer didn’t want”. Another official noted that development of Springfields Community Gardens created a major problem because they lie in the green belt, although the gardens are built on former mine workings, a classic ‘brownfield site’.

We had to call it an ‘Institute for the Public Good’—a training centre, because it was on Green Belt land. That shows you how difficult it would be for anyone else who found an acre next to a housing estate!

The main opportunities for promoting urban food were seen to revolve around urban regeneration and health, given the large sums available through competitive funding regimes like the Single Regeneration Budget and many European Union (EU) initiatives. However, officers drew attention to problems that currently exist with the way that bids are assessed. Typically, bids with the most chance of securing funding follow conventional, financially driven, criteria. Officers claimed to have compiled some creative bids along more sustainable lines but these had not been as well received as more conventional bids.

Discussion: Planning and Urban Agriculture

A summary of the relationship between planning and urban agriculture in Leeds and Bradford is shown in Table 2. It is evident from this that at the broadest level the planning system affects, and is affected by, urban food growing in very different ways depending on the type of activity at issue. In particular, there is a contrast between allotments and the other two forms of activity studied.

Allotments and Planning

Of the three forms of activity studied, allotments are unquestionably the most significant in relation to planning. Their importance arises from a combination of factors:

(i) their established historical status around which a unique body of law has developed;
(ii) their scale—both land area and number of active participants;
(iii) the degree of local authority control over the fate of allotments arising from local authority ownership of the vast majority of sites.

In planning terms this status means that allotments cannot be ignored; this is highlighted by the fact that allotments are the only form of urban food-growing activity to be explicitly covered by a district-wide policy in both cities.

Assessment of the extent to which planning affects allotments points clearly in one direction. As Table 2 notes, forward planning’s land allocation role may be a critical factor in determining allotment survival. There is apparently a noticeable difference in the policies of Leeds and Bradford over this issue. In Leeds, the UDP process has seen very little impact on allotments. In the UDP
TABLE 2. Planning function and urban food growing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning function</th>
<th>Allotments</th>
<th>Urban farms</th>
<th>Community gardens</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Local plans: impact of land allocation and nature of relationship</td>
<td>significant influence on land allocation through local plans, an important factor in allotment survival</td>
<td>once farm established, impact tends to be localised</td>
<td>localised role, but potentially significant, e.g. problems in developing Springfields due to green-belt status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Attention given to urban agriculture in UDP (policy section)</td>
<td>prominent: specific allotments policy in Bradford UDP and reference to allotments in Leeds UDP policy on green space</td>
<td>no specific policy: no other UDP policy reference found</td>
<td>no specific policy: no other UDP policy reference found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Development control: impact and nature of relationship</td>
<td>difficult to judge: no specific data available, but clearly potential for major impact on erection of huts, greenhouses etc. if development policies strictly applied.</td>
<td>significant influence due to development control implications on high level building work and introduction of alternative technology</td>
<td>significant influence due to development control implications on high level building work and introduction of alternative technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Urban regeneration: significance and nature of relationship</td>
<td>locally important, e.g. potentially negative in inner city where there are increases in pressure for scarce land resources, or positive in assisting in provision of funds for upgrading of facilities</td>
<td>locally important as a focus for urban regeneration</td>
<td>locally important as a focus for urban regeneration in bigger projects, e.g. Springfields</td>
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proposals map (deposit draft), only one allotment site (Heatingly Station) was allocated for development in the form of some housing. However, the decision to target part of Heatingly Station for development seems understandable from a glance at the activity distribution map, which shows a cluster of other allotments in the vicinity of Heatingly Station and an apparent abundance of
alternative provision nearby. By way of contrast, UDP land allocation in Bradford threatens a much greater impact on allotments, particularly in the inner wards of Bradford, where over one-third of the sites in this central zone are threatened particularly by proposed housing development. The decision may be justified, at least in some cases, by local conditions. Certainly pressures on land do seem to be particularly acute in inner urban areas of Bradford. Here, there is a combination of high rates of population growth, trends towards smaller family size, a cultural reluctance amongst Asian families to move away from the inner city where relatives remain, and a severe shortage of flat land. Together these factors make any under-used allotments an understandable target for housing or other development.

The significance of the planning system’s land allocation role has been intensified by the enhanced status of the development plan. These legal changes set up a (weak) presumption that if an allotment is designated for a particular use, for example housing, and an application is made to develop the site for housing, then the application will be dealt with in accordance with the plan, i.e. in favour of allowing housing development. It should be noted, however, that this does not automatically mean that allotments designated in the UDP for non-allotment uses will be developed.

Other factors, such as the treatment of many allotments in the two cities as ‘statutory sites’, also come into play. The significance of statutory protection is debatable. Under the 1952 Allotment Act, statutory status means that where a local authority, as a landowner, wishes to allow development of an allotment site, the consent of the Secretary of State for the Environment must first be obtained (Wardle, 1983). In theory, the Secretary of State will only permit development once the local authority has proved that the site is no longer required for allotment use or that alternative provision can be made. Opinions varied amongst respondents as to the value of statutory status. The secretary of the Leeds & District Federation of Leisure Gardeners thought that statutory status did confer some degree of protection. Conversely, the chair of the Bradford Allotments Group saw it as something of a ‘red herring’, noting that if a local authority wanted to develop a site, it was relatively easy to show a lack of demand. Indeed, the majority of those interviewed recognised that maintaining allotments’ use was a key to the survival of threatened sites in Bradford. If these sites could be kept well tenanted, development would be politically unacceptable regardless of UDP allocation.

Land allocation on a proposal map is only part of the picture of forward planning policy on allotments. The policy wording is also important. The stark contrast in planning policy between the two districts blurs somewhat when this factor is taken into account. Bradford has a clear, specific and positively expressed allotments policy. On this basis, protection for sites allocated as allotments rather than for another use, as so many are in the ‘central area’, seems to be positive in Bradford. By contrast, in Leeds, whilst map allocations leave allotments virtually untouched, allotments policy is relatively vague and lacks the commitment by the council to boost usage before considering development. Where does this leave allotment protection in the two cities? In the short term, Leeds’ allotments have been left relatively unscathed, but in the longer term,
however, what remains of Bradford’s allotment sites may have rather clearer and more specific protection.

Development control appears to play a less critical role in allotment life than forward planning. Until recently, both authorities had agreements with the department responsible for allotments about permissible and non-permissible building development. However, in 1997, Bradford planning department decided to discontinue this arrangement following vociferous complaints by local house- holders over the erection of a structure on the site. In Leeds, applications to erect storage huts or greenhouses continue to be dealt with solely by the leisure services department. Planning guidance would need to be introduced to rectify such discrepancies.

It is difficult to reach a conclusion about the impact of urban regeneration. However, it seems fair to assume that major regeneration projects can be important locally. For example, the Secretary of the Leeds & District Federation of Leisure Gardeners was able to obtain £80 000 from the Leeds Urban Development Corporation for upgrading facilities on self-administered sites. Equally, the effect might be negative if increased development pressure and higher land values rendered existing sites non-viable.

Urban Farms and Community Growing Projects

A number of small community gardens seem to have developed on allotment sites throughout Leeds and Bradford. Consequently, many of the planning issues that affect allotments also affect these community gardens. The Beeston food-growing project mostly involves the growing of herbs in back gardens. The planning implications of such a project are likely to be minimal and quite different from the scale of issues thrown up by the development of larger initiatives such as Springfields. With these points in mind, the comments in the following analysis on community gardens are based on Springfields, the only community garden researched in detail.

Urban farms and community gardens appear to have received little attention from a forward planning viewpoint or as part of any district-wide policy. This is not surprising, as in both cases the number of sites and land areas involved are comparatively far smaller than for allotments. Moreover, these forms of activity are of much more recent origin than allotments. Locally, urban farms have been established for less than 20 years and by the time Springfields received approval in 1993, the Bradford UDP was into its deposit draft stage. This general lack of attention, however, does not signify that forward planning policy is insignificant to individual sites. Bradford’s Local Agenda 21 officer noted the great difficulties that Springfields had experienced in getting any development on site because of its green-belt status. Similarly, attempts to establish a community garden on the Headingley Station site may be thwarted by allocation of part of that site for housing.

In contrast to forward planning, development control plays a more direct role in influencing the development of urban farms. All these sites have buildings and all either have, or are developing, buildings or other features incorporating elements of alternative technology. Inevitably this means contact with develop-
ment control. For Meanwood Urban Farm, the outcome was reported by the farm manager to be entirely positive, despite the apparent “radical nature of the new Environment Centre design”. However, Springfields illustrates the potential conflict with development control in the broad sense of that term, where problems arose with the language of urban food growing. There was also the problem of the technology itself, for example the refusal of a drainage engineer to accept compost toilets rather than conventional sewage treatment as an option.

The community gardens and urban farms see themselves acting as a community focal point and at some level being a focus for urban regeneration in line with current government thinking (Urban Task Force, 1999). With Springfields, the relationship is particularly intimate. Springfields is the spin-off product of the City Challenge regeneration of the Holmewood Estate, the aim being to extend improvement to the building fabric of the gardens and wider landscape of the estate. Thus, providing interest exists within a local community, urban regeneration seems to constitute a major opportunity for introducing food-growing schemes.

Findings highlighted a number of other interactions between planning and urban food growing. For example, green-belt policy, with its emphasis on ensuring development is kept within the existing urban envelope, indirectly influences urban food growing by shaping urban form, thus intensifying pressure on open-space land uses such as allotments. Another example is the issue of zoning versus mixed uses. A suggestion by the Bradford Local Agenda 21 officer regarding starting up a community composting scheme for local organic waste on a farmer’s field was rejected on the grounds that composting was an industrial activity which belonged in the industrial part of the city.

**Can Planning Enhance Urban Agriculture?**

Where does this leave the original notion that the planning system has a major role to play in relation to urban agriculture? Clearly, it would be easy to overstate the current importance of planning in relation to urban agriculture. Nevertheless, planners responsible for land-use allocation and as repositories of information can aid urban food growing by supplying information to interested groups on the amounts and whereabouts of vacant and derelict land, data on whether a particular site is contaminated, and even information on site ownership.

**Forward Planning**

Despite the recently enhanced status of the development plan, mere designation on a map cannot by itself make anything happen, but it can make an important positive or negative contribution. Suggestions of how planning can boost its positive contribution to urban food growing may include the following.

- The development plan should have a clear and distinct allotments policy.
- The policy should include a firm expression of the value of allotments and
should state what criteria will be used to determine that an allotment site should be developed.

- Policy should also set out the commitment of the local authority to pro-actively encourage allotment use (as in Bradford) before any decision is taken to develop. Arguably this is something which is beyond a planning department’s control and more the responsibility of the department directly responsible for allotments. However, its inclusion in planning policy is a sign of positive local authority commitment to allotment preservation.

- Where allotments are developed, policy should aim to ensure wherever possible that the site is retained as green open space for community use, which also preserves the option for reuse at some future date for urban food growing.

- In recognition of the growing number of community gardens, and their potential benefits, it may now be appropriate to include a separate policy encouraging these projects.

- Policy should seek to protect urban green space in view of its invaluable contribution to the quality of urban life. Planning policy in Leeds and Bradford already purports to do this, although whether it has struck the right balance is difficult to judge. It is also essential that policy promotes flexibility so that under-used parks and ‘left-over’ green space around housing estates can be used for food growing. Policies along these lines are already included in the Bradford UDP, but specific reference to food growing as a legitimate use would provide firmer encouragement to prospective growers.

- Locally, green-belt policy can assist food growing on the urban fringe by taking a positive attitude that recognises it as a legitimate and beneficial use of land.

**Development Control**

The planning system’s commitment to sustainable development *nationally* ought to be reflected *locally* by adopting a positive approach to alternative technology and sustainable land-use patterns. Taking development control in a broad sense to include landscape architects and drainage engineers, fieldwork revealed problems in this respect. To some extent, these were perhaps the inevitable result of new ideas and technologies taking time to permeate the system and achieve a level of acceptance. Linkage with forward planning is obvious here—local plans must embrace sustainable design as a key component of creating a sustainable future. With this in mind it is interesting to note that Leeds’ planning department has recently brought out a draft guide to sustainable design (LCC, 1997). Development control may also be relevant to urban food growing as a source of funding through planning agreements.

A ‘hands-off’ approach, whereby development control is effectively dealt with by the department in charge of allotments, as in the case of Leeds, has some compelling advantages. Arguably, this delegation of responsibility suits a form of development which is usually on small scale but which could result in a flood of applications if full planning permission was required every time someone wanted to erect a shed or greenhouse. Such an arrangement also removes some of the ‘red tape’ that might otherwise discourage allotment use. However,
questions arise over the democratic consequences of this approach. Under these circumstances, who can the householder in Leeds contact if s/he wants to raise an issue over allotment development? Referring cases of complaint back to the planning department could alleviate any such instances of ‘democratic deficit’.

**Urban Regeneration**

It is within this area of planning practice that the planning system has most scope for creativity, since development is often partly freed from the usual constraints of lack of finances and existing development patterns. Planning can promote urban food growing through urban regeneration as follows:

(i) through the funding of projects based on urban food growing—for example, Springfields emerged as a result of a City Challenge project;
(ii) through ‘designing in’ attention to food growing as part of landscaping schemes. This can take the form of new allotments near housing developments, or ‘designing in’ community gardens on a housing estate where there is a demand;
(iii) through ensuring local people are involved in the regeneration at an early stage and throughout the regeneration process. Consultation is far too often mere tokenism.

**The Limits to Planning**

The findings emphasise clear limits to what planning can achieve on its own in promoting urban food growing. First, planning cannot impose anything from on high. Regardless of how ‘good’ urban food growing may be from a sustainability viewpoint, local support for its inclusion in local planning is essential if it is to survive and prosper. Second, most urban food growing is, and will remain, outside planning control, taking place in sites like back gardens with no day-to-day contact with the planning system. This is perhaps not a bad thing, since it avoids ‘bureaucratising’ food growing. Third, planning can often only make small inroads alone. Other local authority functions, particularly leisure services and property services, are also important to urban food growing on a day-to-day basis. Successful strategies for the promotion of urban food growing demand a partnership approach between agencies because of the cross-cutting nature of the activity.

Planning currently only has a direct major role relative to urban food growing for some forms of activity. This function is mostly negative in nature, that is, it can prevent urban food growing through land allocation and development control, but historically it has had little involvement in actively promoting this activity. Even with the reforms suggested above, planning’s overall role still remains fairly limited.

Although the immediate subject of this paper has been urban food growing, its underlying subtext concerns the way that planning relates to sustainability itself. In many ways this relationship is still a distant one, despite repeated commitments to sustainability in PPG1 (Department of the Environment (DoE),
1997) and elsewhere at national and local level. As one officer in Bradford particularly emphasised, these shortcomings are largely a product of the statutory framework within which planners work. His view was that many individual planners were well aware of the issues around sustainability, but they were unable to step outside the confines of a framework that had not caught up with these issues.

Conclusions

Food growing is an important issue. It is emerging on the policy agenda of cities in ‘advanced’ nations and has a potentially vital role to play in achieving the much-desired policy goal of sustainability. Planning has an important role in relation to certain types of food-growing activity (notably allotments) at certain specific times, such as during UDP land allocation or in a development control situation. However, for most forms of food-growing activity, for most of the time planning’s direct role in relation to food growing is relatively small. Urban agriculture is determined by the availability of community and private land for city populations to garden, by a growing interest in gardening as a recreational activity, and by consumers’ desire, and indeed need, to have healthy foods. These trends converge to make urban agriculture a growing and dynamic activity. It is political rather than natural boundaries, however, that inhibit the involvement of planning in urban agriculture. Without effective regulation, its development will be limited. At a national level, policy fails to recognise urban food production, and this transcends to the local level where it is dealt with tentatively. While planning in isolation can do little to firmly establish food production on the urban agenda, the limitations to what the planning system on its own can achieve simply strengthen the need for a strategic approach, in which planning can play a valuable role.

Assuming, as seems reasonable, that the benefits of urban food growing apply broadly, then how should planners respond? The answer is, in essence, that a planning system ostensibly committed in PPG1 and elsewhere to the principles of sustainability could and should do far more than it currently does to exploit this instrument to promote sustainable development. The changes it needs to make to realise this potential can be roughly categorised into two types. They include changes specifically relevant to urban food growing and also much broader changes relating to the planning system’s ability to embrace sustainability as a whole.

Broader reforms comprise a mixture of changes to national planning policy and procedural changes. Whilst these changes are necessary to fully realise the potential of urban food growing, their significance goes much deeper. They relate to the ability of planning to fully embrace the concept of sustainability itself. Urban food growing does perhaps defy some cornerstones of national planning policy. This includes national targets for urban brownfield land recycling for housing, which ignore the need for sustainability to have a strong local dimension. It opposes simplistic acceptance of the compact city idea as the only model of urban sustainability, at least in its extreme form. More decentralised models may be equally valid in certain circumstances. Perhaps most radically of
all, it lends support to the idea of low-impact development and the need to re-think rural planning and green-belt policy. Finally, urban food growing emphasises the trans-boundary, trans-disciplinary nature of so many aspects of sustainability. Planning departments can evidently best support urban food growing as part of a genuinely corporate commitment to Local Agenda 21 by local authorities, within which food growing would be one policy strand.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of following organisations and people: the multitude of individuals who agreed to be interviewed or to provide documentation, the Economic and Social Research Council for partially funding this study, Suzanne Hodge, David Proctor, Paul Wheeler and Iain White. Thanks also need to be extended to the two anonymous referees and the very patient editor of this journal.

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