

LONDON ASSEMBLY

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Leonie Cooper AM
Chair of the Environment Committee

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

(Sent by email)

18 March 2024

Dear Sadiq,

I am writing to share the findings of the Environment Committee's investigations into food security and sustainability in London. The Committee held a meeting on 7 February 2024 to explore issues relating to food supply and food growing in London, with the following guests:

- Nick von Westenholtz, Director of Trade and Business Strategy, National Farmers Union
- Sarah Williams, Programmes Director, Sustain
- Sheila Dillon, Award-winning Food Journalist, presenter of the Radio 4 Food Programme and the Food & Farming Awards
- Claire Pritchard, Chair, London Food Board
- Mark Ainsbury, Food Policy Manager, Greater London Authority (GLA)
- Brian Kelly, Director, OrganicLea

Addressing food security and supply challenges in London

The Committee heard that there are specific challenges for London's food security and that there needs to be a greater focus on food supply and food security in London. 99 per

cent of the food consumed in London is imported from outside the capital.¹ Guests highlighted that factors including trade policy, labour costs and labour shortages are all contributing to this insecurity.² These challenges are particularly concerning as the Committee heard that no one body or institution is responsible for the food system as a whole. Claire Pritchard, Chair of the London Food Board told the Committee:

“Who is legally responsible for Britain’s food supply? It turns out there is no one responsible unless you are in prison, in hospital or in receipt of free school meals. It is a completely free market with no one with any legal responsibility.”³

In February 2022 the GLA published a report by Oxford University’s Environmental Change Institute (ECI) examining London’s food supply, called *Enhancing the resilience of London’s Food Systems*.⁴ However, we heard in the meeting in February 2024 that due to delays in resourcing, work was only just commencing to respond to these recommendations.⁵ Given the importance of food security and resilience issues, action in this area should be prioritised.

The Committee also welcomes the fact that the National Preparedness Commission is currently reviewing this issue.⁶ The Committee believes the findings of this work led by Tim Lang, Emeritus Professor at City, University of London, and also a Member of the London Food Board, should be urgently considered. As multiple stakeholders are likely to have a role to play in improving the resilience of London’s food system, there should also engagement with the Boroughs Food Group, a sub-group of the London Food Board.⁷

Recommendation 1: The Mayor should publish an action plan by September 2024 at the latest, setting out how the GLA will take steps to improve the resilience of London’s food system, including addressing the recommendations of the 2022 Oxford University report.

Support for local food growing

Food growing is a core part of making London greener and healthier as a city, as well as helping people connect with nature.⁸ Sheila Dillon, the award-winning food journalist, outlined that reliance on food from supermarkets is affecting the sustainability of London’s food supply, and so independent food suppliers need to be supported:

“The key is lessening our reliance on supermarkets because they are in the ‘getting cheaper, screwing farmers and suppliers’ business. [...] You have to help the

¹ ReLondon, [London’s food footprint, November 2021](#); Environmental Change Institute, [Enhancing the resilience of London’s food system](#)

² London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024

³ Ibid, p.1.

⁴ Food Systems Transformation Group, [Enhancing the Resilience of London’s Food Systems](#), February 2022

⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 8

⁶ Sustain, [Improving civil food resilience – your help needed](#), July 2023

⁷ Sustain, [Taking a coordinated London-wide approach to food](#)

⁸ London City Hall, [Get growing](#)

independents. You have to think about what you can do for local food hubs and what you can do for local independents, making it more attractive to people to invest and to be part of those structures.”⁹

She went on to raise the “inherent unfairness” of the supermarket model where they have large sites with “gigantic car parks”, which directly contradict wider transport objectives for promoting public transport, walking and cycling.¹⁰

Claire Prichard, Chair of the London Food Board, highlighted the importance of local wholesale and street markets for providing an alternative where people can shop more regularly, and also the possibility of using cargo bikes to deliver food, which would also help to reduce emissions, saying “The big issue is movement and so I think there is a really interesting thing there.”¹¹

The Committee notes that the London Plan highlights the multiple benefits of food growing, including how “community food growing not only helps to improve social integration and community cohesion but can also contribute to improved mental and physical health and wellbeing.”¹² However, references to food in the London Environment Strategy are more limited. The London Food Strategy encourages people to grow their own food and to be involved in local initiatives such as Capital Growth,¹³ as well as encouraging London boroughs to promote community growing spaces and protection of allotments, and supporting people to set up food-growing enterprises through training programmes.¹⁴

During our meeting we were told about OrganicLea, a local food cooperative based in the Lea Valley which employs between 25 to 30 people per year on 12 acres of local authority land with a turnover of £1.5 million.¹⁵ Brian Kelly, Director at OrganicLea highlighted the impact of its work, including the “multiple benefits of trainees, volunteers and health programmes happening as well as [our] core business of growing food and selling it to local people.”¹⁶ Furthermore, OrganicLea has achieved net zero status and is sequestering 11 tonnes of carbon every year through its cultivation techniques.¹⁷ Sarah Williams, Programmes Director of Sustain, told the Committee:

“If you ever go up to OrganicLea, you will see that it is full of wild areas and trees and is absolutely harmonious with nature and biodiversity but also producing food and helping people learn.”¹⁸

⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 3

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3

¹¹ Ibid, p. 13

¹² Mayor of London, [The London Plan 2021](#), March 2021, p. 331

¹³ Greater London Authority, [The London Food Strategy](#), December 2018

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 28

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 28

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 28

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 27

The GLA has provided funding to Organiclea through the Good Growth Fund to expand this work,¹⁹ although the Committee heard that there have been delays to the implementation of this project due to the pandemic. The buildings funded through the project are now expected to be open in the summer of 2024.²⁰

Sarah Williams told the Committee that Growing Communities, a community-led food growing and selling organisation based in Hackney,²¹ has a “food zones model”, which “calculated that 2.5 per cent of our food could be produced in domestic, homegrown, urban areas. About five per cent could be commercially produced in urban areas and then about 17.5 per cent could be produced in the peri-urban area.”²²

The Committee also heard that there is the potential for other sites across London to become community growing projects. Brian Kelly outlined the scale of food growing potential within Waltham Forest:

“They [one of OrganicLea’s partners] have identified that there are 2,000 hectares of land in Waltham Forest gardens, basically, but that also includes land around housing estates and other things like that, so it is not just private gardens. If you grew at a certain yield level, which is doable - they are talking about fairly high yields per hectare - you could supply half the food required for the total number of Waltham Forest residents. [...] They are talking about £700 million worth of food being grown.”²³

However, Sarah Williams outlined that there is not a complete set of information about food growing sites in London. While she did not know about individual allotments, she estimated that only around half of community growing sites are used currently. She stated “We have a database of 4,000 gardens. We know not all of those are active. We think that around 1,500 are.”²⁴ As the GLA is the responsible authority for developing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy,²⁵ there may be opportunities for ensuring opportunities for food growing are adequately considered as a key contributor to biodiversity.

Capital Growth, co-ordinated by Sustain, is London’s food growing network.²⁶ It offers a number of food growing resources to encourage food growing, including guidance for constructing school gardens,²⁷ how to increase crop yield,²⁸ and advice for managing seasonal challenges for producing vegetables.²⁹ Guests told us Capital Growth’s work is very important as it provides a way of supporting education and skills within gardens, as

¹⁹ Sustain, [Growing food on urban fringes: a briefing for councils and landowners](#)

²⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 38

²¹ Growing Communities, [Our mission](#)

²² Ibid, p. 27

²³ Ibid, p. 6

²⁴ Ibid, p. 35

²⁵ London City Hall, [Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#)

²⁶ Sustain, [A year in London’s food gardens: Capital Growth network survey findings 2022-2023](#), December 2023

²⁷ Food Growing Schools London, [How to: Work with nature in your garden](#)

²⁸ Capital Growth, [Growing to sell](#)

²⁹ Capital Growth, [How to grow food in the city](#)

well as providing a “network of community infrastructure” for changing the culture around food.³⁰

The Committee heard that Capital Growth receives annual funding of £15,000 from the GLA.³¹ Sarah Williams described this funding as “a small contribution towards the work we do.”³² She stated that they would “like to be doing much more and to be a bit more strategic in how we are delivering that and to be able to really complement the work of the Food Strategy through some additional resources.”³³

Recommendation 2: The Mayor should allocate an increase in its funding to the Capital Growth programme to:

- ***Allow it to employ 2 full-time staff, instead of 2 part-time, as currently;***
- ***Develop an accurate, in-depth database of food growing projects and allotments in London and opportunities to expand these; and***
- ***Support an increase in food growing through Capital Growth projects.***

Recommendation 3: In developing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the GLA should ensure that opportunities to strengthen and expand food growing, including in allotments and community gardens, are mapped and widely discussed. This would help strengthen the evidence base for food growing to feature more strongly in any updated London Environment Strategy and London Plan.

Resourcing of the GLA’s Food Team to deliver the London Food Strategy and its Implementation Plan

The Committee welcomes the London Food Strategy, published in December 2018 and its subsequent implementation plan for 2018-2023.^{34,35} We support the aim for “every Londoner to have access to healthy, affordable, good food – regardless of where they live, their personal circumstances or income.”³⁶ We also recognise that many of these plans need to be updated due to the pandemic, and provision of food rather than food growing became a strategic priority.³⁷

The London Food Board has provided strong strategic advice to London since 2004, and the Committee welcomes the range of expertise and advice it offers. However, the Committee is concerned that the GLA’s Food Team has had a significant reduction in resources in recent years. Claire Pritchard, Chair of the London Food Board told us:

³⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, Brian Kelly, p. 31; Sarah Williams, p. 37

³¹ Ibid, p. 23

³² Ibid, p. 23

³³ Ibid, p. 37

³⁴ Mayor of London, [London Food Strategy](#), December 2018

³⁵ Mayor of London, [London Food Strategy Implementation Plan \(2018-2023\)](#), December 2018

³⁶ Mayor of London, [London Food Strategy](#), December 2018, p. 5

³⁷ Greater London Authority, [London Food Strategy Implementation Plan Update](#), November 2023

“There was a hiatus in the way that London Food Board was working, and it did not have a (GLA) Food Team for 22 months. We had no officers dedicated to doing the work of the Food Board because the Food Team had been moved around.”³⁸

Mark Ainsbury, Food Policy Manager at the GLA told the Committee that this hiatus had led to a lack of co-ordination which affected the ability to maximise impact:

“When I came back, the fact that there was a Food Policy Co-ordinator back in the building or back in the organisation was warmly welcomed by policy teams. [...] They [The GLA’s Food Team] had all been doing great stuff - in some ways even more stuff than I had hoped - in the 22-month hiatus, but it needs someone - and more than one person - to pull those things together and to see commonalities and co-benefits of different teams working together.”³⁹

Sarah Williams from Sustain also expressed concerns, saying there is “only so much... one person can do on their own, and I think there is a real opportunity loss.”⁴⁰ Due to the scale of food policy delivery and opportunities in London, the Committee believes that the Food Team at the GLA needs to be substantially increased in size.

Recommendation 4: The Mayor should increase the number of staff on the GLA Food Team to support the Food Board, Sustain and delivery of the Food Strategy and Implementation Plan.

London’s Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) Programme

The Committee warmly welcomes the positive impact of the Mayor’s Universal Free School Meals programme for children in state-funded primary schools for the period 2023-24 and 2024-25.⁴¹ The GLA states that this policy could help up to 287,000 children.⁴²

The Committee was interested in the potential for the Free School Meals programme to help increase sustainable farming and resilience in London. Sarah Williams described it as a “huge opportunity to start to lever procurement and that would also help us create the infrastructure.”⁴³ Claire Pritchard at the meeting stated that there is an opportunity to extend the Free School Meals programme, but this needs more strategic direction:

“[Free School Meals] could be linked to whole school approaches. It could be linked to community and older people because we have this incredible anchor programme that is reaching a huge population that we can build things around. [...] If Universal Free School Meals was a factory on the hill, everyone would be

³⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 8

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 22-23

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 23

⁴¹ London City Hall, [Free School Meals](#)

⁴² London City Hall, [Free School Meals - Guidance and support for families](#)

⁴³ London Assembly Environment Committee meeting, [Minutes](#), 7 February 2024, p. 5

knocking on the door and going to visit it. It is 1,000 people in every borough working in an industry. It is such an opportunity.”⁴⁴

Brian Kelly told the Committee that food growing is about “creating that connection around food and nature and community and none of it should be separated, but that is what has happened. Everyone has kind of got quite disengaged from both nature and food.”⁴⁵ Schools could have an important role to play in helping children and young people connect with nature and understand more about where their food comes from.

Recommendation 5: The Mayor should explore how the Universal Free School Meals programme can connect schools with food growing projects in London as well as the role the programme can play in leveraging procurement strategies which benefit locally produced and sustainable food.

I look forward to hearing from you, with your response to our recommendations. The Committee would welcome a response by 31 May 2024. Please address your response to Richard Clarke, Senior Policy Adviser, at Richard.Clarke@london.gov.uk .

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Leonie Cooper". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Leonie Cooper AM
Chair of the Environment Committee

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 17

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 31