

## GROWING IN THE CITY

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens  
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Source: FCFCG

*Affectionately known as 'The Fed', the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens is a representative body for community-led farm and garden organizations in the UK. In addition to representing and promoting its members on national, regional and local levels, FCFCG also provides advice and support services.*

*With a diverse group of members ranging from organic community orchards to simple pockets of urban space saved from development, The Fed represents over 1300 community-managed projects. They exist mainly in urban areas and are created in response to a lack of access to green space, combined with a desire to encourage strong community relationships and an awareness of gardening and farming. Assistant Director Ian Egginton-Metters tells more:*

### **What does "sustainable development" mean to you?**

*In terms of sustainable development, we're talking about making sure future generations don't suffer for what we're doing today. But it's not purely environmental. Unless you have people on-board and engaged, you can't truly have something sustainable. It's absolutely essential to have a social aspect. You need to take people with you.*

*One thing we've tried to address is how far we should go to address 'good practice', and how we can remain accessible. We made a conscious decision not to be an environmental centre because once you have that label, people expect you to have the latest technology and practices, and rip you to pieces if you don't. For example, the organization does not say that we're purely for organic farming, but should we promote it and signpost people in that direction? You might alienate some people immediately. Some might not be able to do organic farming, or they might want to but at the moment they don't have the resources. We have to be able to engage with individuals and communities where they're at in this time. We're not perfect role models, but role models going in the right direction.*

### **Why do you support Every Action Counts?**

We support EAC for a whole range of reasons. In part, because we know that individuals make a difference. Most of what city farms and community gardens achieve is a result of hundreds of volunteers making a contribution, although what each one inputs is relatively small. Even people volunteering on an occasional or ad hoc basis will learn more as a consequence of their contribution. We're trying to give people the opportunity to contribute.

### **The School Farms Network assists and support school farms and facilitates the exchange of information and ideas. Why was it important for you to start the network?**

In part, the Federation's experience is in engaging communities in practical and sustainable activities. What school farms have got is the educational expertise and less the community involvement. We took it on board that the existing city farms and community gardens would benefit from the school farms, and vice versa. It's very difficult for those groups to invest their own time and resources for networking, and that's what the Federation is good at, to facilitate discussion and co-ordinate and advise.

Part of the other reasons is that city farms and community gardens are informal learning environments and schools could make use of them and incorporate them into a more formal part of the curriculum. It would make sense that we would make use of the experience of school farms and city farms and community gardens as well, to build relationships between the two, to share experiences.

### **What lessons have you learned along the way?**

You should never expect 100% response from anything. Never get disheartened, but don't set your sights too high and get disappointed. It's important to have regular contact with the network and within the network, so that when a member of the network has a problem, then everyone else knows about it. But you can also go too far and send too much, to the point where people get turned off. But people usually engage the network for two reasons, one is that they're interested and enthusiastic, and two is that they're in trouble. But they have to know that the network exists.

Not everything can be done over email or phone, so it's important to have opportunities for people to meet, and it's important that these opportunities are spread out around the country. It's also important to facilitate ownership, to engage the people in the network, so they can feel that it is their network, so that the Fed is supporting them, rather than the people supporting the Fed. So I would never chair a meeting, for instance, but someone else from the community.

### **How does the School Farms Network fit into your community-based work?**

City farms and community gardens are learning opportunities for the whole community. It's really important that we help people to learn and re-engage with hands-on activities, particularly those related with the environment and food production. City farms and community gardens are fantastic ways of doing that. And school farms are part of that learning process, and therefore we need to use that to recognize that people learn, and they can therefore change their lives, through hands-on experiences.

We can now help schools improve their access, open up the schools, to help parents to get involved. So in some sense, school farms are becoming more like city farms and community gardens, but there will always be differences, because the school is primarily involved in delivering a specific curriculum.

### **Does FCFEG have other environmental policies?**

We do have an environmental policy which is currently being improved considerably, and we're making sure it's part of a sustainable policy, rather than purely environmental. We're trying to develop this policy through engagement, from our staff to our members. The worst thing about policies is that they're just printed on paper that everyone ignores, because they don't understand them or because

it's been imposed on them. Some changes will be incremental. It's trying to make sure we have policies that fit for maximum impact.

### **What's next for FCFCG?**

One area is more partnership working with other organizations so that collectively we have greater influence on sustainable development. Another area is to be more upfront and forceful in sharing good practice with members, which is going to push them further than before. We'd like to be working much more at a strategic level with central, regional and local authorities. What we would like to do is more regular work with them, less ad hoc, because we see the potential for change.

In one sense, we have to revamp how we service our membership. At the moment, a new member receives a whole box of publications and materials which works with a small number of members, but it's not sustainable, not just in raw materials but just in the process. And we should be increasingly using the website instead of newsletters for communication, but hopefully we will ensure we can stay in contact with our members, to ensure there's a face-to-face communication. The Fed was different for some members, because of the personal contact. It's not just about filling out an application form and receiving a box. There was a person, a real human being, making contact and recognizing they existed, and this opened up a dialogue for them to talk about issues, and allows them to develop a relationship to ask the Fed for more information and help.

### **Facts and Information**

- There are 59 city farms, nearly 1000 community gardens, 66 school farms and a number of community-managed allotments in the UK.
- An estimated 500,000 people volunteer on city farms and community garden, and they attract over three million visitors each year.

### **Further Resources**

- To find out more about FCFCG, or to look for city farm and community gardens in your area, visit their website at [www.farmgarden.org.uk](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk).