

Urban Agriculture in the London Borough of Bexley

Municipal officials face challenges in making decisions about the future use of urban agriculture. Whereas the financial costs and benefits for alternative land use are clear, they are not so clear for agricultural use. Essentially, technical decisions on the use of land are made with an eye on local politics and pressures from competing constituencies.

URBAN AGRICULTURE IN LONDON AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Allotment gardens are probably the most visible and oldest form of urban agriculture in the United Kingdom. They are associated with food growing campaigns during the World Wars (I and II), but their prominence as sources of food has declined since the 1950s. More recently, city farms have emerged as another form of urban agriculture. However, most activities on these farms are not about food production but about social, community and environmental regeneration. There are other spaces like backyard gardens and verandas that are often included in discussions of urban agriculture.

The legal and institutional regimes for land allocation and use are well elaborated and publicised (Garnett, 1996; Crouch et al. 2000; Howe, 2001). In contrast to the developing countries (especially cities in Africa), cultivation in London takes place in designated and planned zones (city farms, allotment gardens). However, despite this 'serene' view, land problems also exist in this context, although they are of a slightly different dimension. The greatest problem is that of unused and under-utilised allotment garden land. Using the case of the London Borough of Bexley this paper seeks to illustrate the difficulties faced by planners and councillors in

dealing with land for urban agriculture in a western city since 1999.

ALLOTMENT LAND IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BEXLEY

The London Borough of Bexley is an outer London local authority in the South East of the city. It is one of the greenest areas of the city if one considers availability of both passive and active open green spaces. Open lands and allotments are managed in accordance with Agenda 21 principles. Currently, there are close to 36 allotment sites, where each site has plots of various sizes. 'Self-managed tenant committees' under Delegated Management Licences manage about eight of these sites. The rest of the sites are managed by the council and together add up to about 1577 plots. The Bexley Council conducts regular reviews of the status of allotments, and the 2001/2002 review revealed that demand for these plots is declining despite the popularisation of urban farming, food markets, organic food and Agenda 21. Table 1 shows this declining trend in plot occupancy.

This table shows that about 63% of the land is occupied. The level of utilisation has not always been this low. For example, in 1975, Bexley had about the same number of allotment plots (1600) on approximately 99 acres (40 hectares) of land. All were allocated and fully utilised.



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Some members of the Woodlands Farm trust at work

The demand was high in 1975 as indicated by a waiting list of 740 compared to just 9 at 2002, clearly showing the decline in demand. (Bexley London Borough, 1975: 21-22).

However, the figures in Table 1 hide variations of occupancy by site. Some sites are fully occupied while others are partially occupied. Figure 1 gives a distribution of the sites and levels of occupancy showing that in 2002, six of the sites were fully occupied (i.e. 0% unused land).

Where plots are under-utilised, there is a cost to the council for maintenance. To clear and rotovate a single plot may cost up to £500. The council provides each site with a gravel access road, water, fencing, marking of plots and storage facilities. The estimate for maintenance of all sites in 2002 was given as £240,000. The council is always anxious to reduce these costs and one way to do so is to sell unused sites. Sites that remain under-utilised or unused for years are considered for possible alternative use – usually disposal for building construction.

THE COUNCIL'S INTEREST IN LAND DISPOSAL

Disposal of land offers the council substantial financial benefits through income from land sales and property tax on subsequent developments on the land.

TABLE 1:ALLOTMENT DEMAND IN THE BEXLEY BOROUGH: 1996 – 2002

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Total Number of Plots	1710	1728	1360	1339	1341	1370	1384
Total Vacant Plots (Un-occupied)	562	601	337	312	296	331	389
% Vacant Plots	33	35	25	23	22	24	28

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Bexley Council, 2002

Generation of additional income is a priority for the council given the need to provide and fund efficient services in the borough. Funds are needed for education, health and other capital-intensive developments.

Of the several sites not fully utilised, a few have already been sold to real-estate developers, including the Thistlefield Allotment Gardens site sometime between 1997 and 1999 to Croudace Ltd., a housing development company. Following the regular property reviews and consultations with key stakeholders (Bexley Federation of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners) the 2.5 acre site was sold by tender for a capital sum of £1.5 million. Croudace Ltd. Built 30 houses that were sold in 2002 at prices ranging from £190,000 to 250,000 and the company was 'eyeing other sites in the borough'. A property tax of about £110 per month is levied on each of these properties.

According to the councillors who participated in the decision making process, funds earned from the sale were used to improve schools in the borough and for debt redemption. "Anybody wanting allotments in the borough can get them...there is no shortage of land for those wanting to do gardening" (Councillors - Tandy, Campbell and Downing, 21/09/2002).

PEOPLE'S RESPONSES TO THE DISPOSAL

The classification of under-utilised land as surplus land to be disposed has often made headlines in the local press. The Bexley Express (5th March 2003:6) reported that gardeners and the area's 'green fingered community' were alarmed and angry at the idea of further land disposals. The press reports reveal the following about the users and the use of the allotments:

- Largely elderly members of the community who devote time and energy to cultivate the plots
- Some cultivators virtually live on the allotment produce
- Allotments also offer recreational environments and biodiversity in the city.

Discussions of allotment gardening have been outlined elsewhere though, all in all, quantification of these benefits is not as explicit as that for land disposals. This

puts pressure on the local authority to dispose of under-utilised land.

However, the concept of under-utilisation can be challenged by saying that what may appear as a surplus today will be in short supply a few years in the future. There could be other factors that lead to reduced demand, that if addressed would lead to a shortage of allotment land. There are alternative ways of using the land that may mean changing the existing or introducing something new. A good challenge to the notion of under-utilisation was given by farmer John Johnson who retorted:

... The council says that the open space is underutilised, but 63% of it is used. Only 30% of the people turned up for local elections but councillors don't see themselves as underutilised!. (Bexley Express, 5th March, 2003: 6).

GOOD PRACTICE AND THE FUTURE OF ALLOTMENTS IN BEXLEY

Bexley Council (planners, councillors, executives) has to balance a range of concerns, and respond to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Although final decisions may not be in everybody's favour, the processes and procedures leading to these decisions need to be clear, transparent and inclusive. Crucially, the local authority should not be seen as violating its own rules and regulations. In the case of Bexley, reviews of the land needs are done regularly as part of the council's asset management strategy.

- Consultations are widely done with representatives of user groups. In this case, the council is reviewing its allotment strategy and consulting with the Allotment Federation and the public. A report that was to come out in summer 2003 is now expected in early 2004 (1).
- Gardeners and members of the public can lobby their councillors and members of parliament to ensure that their views are included in the decision-making process.
- Where a site is to be disposed for real-estate development, as was the case at Thistlefield, comprehensive social, archaeological, environmental, design and traffic assessments are conducted. Reasonable and valid concerns are incorporated in the development plan and often set as conditions to be dealt with by the developer.

At the Thistlefield Allotment site, the

gardeners and the area's 'green fingered community' were alarmed and angry

public consultation process generated heated submissions with one group of 48 residents signing a single petition.

However, few of these submissions were about keeping the land for urban agriculture. Instead, there were concerns about what housing development would do to the neighbourhood with regards to extra demand for places in schools, extra traffic burdens and pollution, loss of greenery, noise from construction works, parking problems and increased demand for medical services. Traffic objections appeared to be the most dominant. The most valid objection was the one relating to the nearby Audiology Clinic, which requires a tranquil environment for its activities, and was now going to be adversely affected by the introduction of a residential complex in close proximity.

All these concerns were included in the design and orientation of the scheme. A last crucial point in terms of community participation, in general, and urban farming in particular, is that all these activities are publicised with the outcomes documented. It is possible to track back and identify where things went wrong and where they could be done better – this is a good practice. The processes of consultation and documentation can be long-drawn-out and confusing – planners are often accused of delaying development – planners never win!

NOTE

1) The urban allotments strategy currently in preparation will be of interest to many readers and ways to make the final report available for discussion under the RUAF framework will be explored.

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