

Urban Agriculture Task Force: Building a Just and Sustainable Food System in Sheffield

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Challenge and Response

South Yorkshire's food system faces a familiar set of challenges that mirror wider national trends: insecure land tenure, underutilised assets, fragmented governance, diet-related health inequalities, and a lack of consistent policy support for sustainable local food production. In Sheffield, these challenges are felt acutely in areas such as Gleadless Valley, where health inequalities, food poverty, and limited access to appropriate green space intersect.

The Urban Agriculture Task Force (UATF) was created to interrogate and intervene in this system, focusing initially on the Gleadless Valley ward, and the wider South Sheffield Local Area. The Task Force's aim is to contribute to a food system that is both socially just and environmentally sustainable, while demonstrating methods that can be replicated elsewhere in the region.

A core feature of the UATF's approach has been to work across nested governance structures: beginning at neighbourhood level, and building outward to wards, Local Area Committees, the local authority, regional networks, and national campaigns. This has allowed the UATF to develop

a grounded understanding of local issues, identify systemic gaps, and design interventions that can be strategically scaled.

The UATF has also prioritised a multidisciplinary and multi-partner approach, combining practical farming, landscape design, education, research, and policy advocacy. By connecting community groups, public institutions, and academic research, the UATF has acted as a connector and enabler, bringing coherence to a fragmented food system and working towards the shared goal of a sustainable, fairer, and more accessible food system.

Findings and Potential Impacts

The work of the UATF can be grouped into three achievement clusters, each of which demonstrates progress at different scales of intervention.

Cluster 1: Urban Horticulture – Evidence, Policy, Infrastructure, and Design

A major contribution of the UATF has been to develop a layered approach to urban horticulture, linking research, policy advocacy, infrastructure reuse, and hands-on design.

- **Urban Horticulture Mapping Project:** In partnership with Jill Edmondson at the University of Sheffield, UATF researchers mapped Sheffield's existing growing spaces, assessed socio-economic dynamics, and identified new opportunities for food-growing using Geographical Information Systems (GIS). While the research highlighted the potential for expansion, it also revealed systemic barriers: lack of secure land tenure, inadequate funding, limited training opportunities, and insufficient policy support.
- **Right to Grow Campaign:** Building on this foundation, the UATF contributed to the national Right to Grow campaign, led by Incredible Edible. Working with local authorities in Sheffield, Hull, Leeds, and Liverpool, the project explored pathways to move from a permissions-based to a rights-based model of access to land for food growing. This work has seeded practical conversations with councils about embedding food growing into health, climate, and greenspace strategies.
- **Sheffield Local Plan:** The UATF responded to the Sheffield Local Plan consultation, noting each instance where food growing was omitted

from greenspace, urban renewal and housing development proposals, and suggesting new phrasing that positions equitable food access as a core component of good landscape design and management policy.

- **Norton Nurseries:** The UATF also played a key role in bringing underutilised infrastructure back into productive use. After years of advocacy, Sheffield City Council tendered the lease of Norton Nurseries, the city's only large-scale glasshouse site (1,650 m²). In 2024, the social enterprise Food Works successfully secured the lease and began transforming the site into a hub for community food production, volunteer training, and sustainable catering.
- **Growing and Composting Working Group:** Supported by the UATF, this ShefFood working group provides a platform for growers, community groups, and researchers to collaborate on scaling agroecological food production and composting in Sheffield. Early meetings in 2025 built momentum on land access and circular waste systems, fostering new partnerships, policy engagement, and knowledge-sharing. The model offers strong potential for replication across South Yorkshire.



- **Landscape Design and Installation Projects:** Complementing these systemic interventions, the UATF has also designed and implemented a range of smaller-scale projects: orchards and sensory gardens at schools, edible beds at GP medical centres, raised planters in public spaces, and green infrastructure in regeneration schemes. These projects show how food-growing can be embedded into everyday community environments, linking education, health, and neighbourhood renewal.

Taken together, these initiatives show how research evidence, policy advocacy, infrastructure recovery, and practical design can be integrated to build a supportive environment for urban horticulture.

Cluster 2: Education & Training – Building Food System Literacy

A second strand of UATF's work has focused on education, training, and the cultivation of food system literacy across age groups and professions.

- **Medical Student Placement:** In 2024, the UATF hosted a month-long Social Accountability Placement for four medical students from the University of Sheffield. Students were immersed in local food system challenges in Gleadless Valley, contributing to projects at Regather Farm, S6 Foodbank, and Gleadless Valley Wildlife Trust. A Community Needs Assessment undertaken by the students generated new data on barriers to healthy eating and access to green space. The placement deepened

the students' understanding of the social determinants of health and the role of food systems, while building practical skills in community engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration.

- **Woodlands School Farm Education Pilot Project:** Also in 2024, the UATF worked with Year 6 SEN pupils from Woodlands Primary School on a bespoke farm-based education programme at Regather Farm. Over two months, students participated in food-growing, habitat creation, and creative activities. Teachers reported remarkable gains in confidence, teamwork, and problem-solving, while families observed positive changes at home. The project culminated in a celebratory farm picnic, underscoring the value of hands-on, nature-based education. This programme

has been repeated in 2025, and will continue in the future supported by DEFRA subsidy.

- **Climate Ambassadors:** Members of the UATF have become approved practitioners to the national Climate Ambassadors scheme which connects climate and environmental sustainability volunteers with nurseries, schools and colleges across the UK. The UATF participated in the Good Life Schools Summit (June 2025), and advice has been offered and/or workshops delivered at the following schools: Newfield School, Woodlands School, King Egbert's Secondary, Anns Grove Primary & Arbourthorne Primary.
- **School and Community Designs:** Complementing these programmes, the UATF has developed orchards, sensory gardens,

and edible beds in school grounds and public spaces. These projects provide outdoor classrooms for environmental learning, while supporting children and communities to connect with food and nature.

This cluster demonstrates how the UATF contributes to a lifelong learning pathway - from primary school children, to university students, to professional training - embedding sustainability, health, and food awareness into education at multiple levels.

Cluster 3: Connected Landscape – Neighbourhood to Peri-Urban Integration

The third cluster of activity has focused on connecting urban neighbourhoods with peri-urban farms, demonstrating the value of a joined-up landscape approach.

- Gleadless Valley Landscape Strategy: The UATF has contributed extensively to the Gleadless Valley regeneration programme, advocating for the integration of agroecological urbanism and nature-based solutions. Proposals include community orchards, composting sites, rain gardens, swales, wetlands, and green travel corridors. The newly acquired Regather site at 181 Blackstock Road will act as an anchor hub for coordinating these initiatives, linking food, nature, and community wellbeing.
- Moss Valley Cluster: Adjacent to Gleadless Valley, the Moss Valley is home to a cluster of agroecological enterprises, including Regather Farm, Moss Valley Market Garden and Sheffield Organic Growers, contributing to South Yorkshire’s nature friendly farms, smallholdings

and community gardens and allotments cultivate nearly 40 hectares, employ nearly 100 staff with a collective turnover of £8m, engage nearly 2,000 volunteers contributing 200,000 volunteer hours and support over 1,000 vulnerable people annually. They provide a working demonstration of how peri-urban agroecology can support local economies, health, and biodiversity.

- Food Growing in the Public Realm: Smaller interventions, such as a raised herb and wildflower bed at the Gaunt Shopping Precinct, illustrate how edible landscapes can be woven into regeneration schemes, making sustainable food visible and accessible in everyday spaces.

By linking neighbourhood initiatives with peri-urban farming, the UATF has developed a model for a resilient, regenerative city-countryside partnership, where local production, ecological restoration, and community wellbeing reinforce one another.

Scaling and Governance Insights

A cross-cutting theme of UATF’s work is the question of scale. Traditional models of “scaling up” risk diluting the local connections and values that underpin food system transformation. The UATF has instead explored the potential of:

- Scaling out: replicating successful approaches in different localities.
- Deep scaling: embedding changes in cultural norms, behaviours, and institutional practices.

By working through nested governance structures,

the UATF has shown how local initiatives can inform ward-level, city-level, regional, and even national strategies. This offers a practical alternative to “bigger is better” models, and aligns with international research on food system transformation^{1,2}.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence and experience of the UATF, the following recommendations are made to policymakers:

1. Embed rights-based access to land for community food growing in planning and governance frameworks.
2. Audit and repurpose underutilised assets (e.g. land, glasshouses, public spaces) for food production through community or social enterprise leases.
3. Integrate food and farming education into school curricula, medical training, and health/ social prescribing pathways.
4. Support peri-urban agroecological clusters with secure land tenure, investment in infrastructure, and public procurement contracts.
5. Adopt nested governance structures for food system policy, ensuring neighbourhood-level insights shape regional and national strategies.

Next Steps

The next stage of this work will be delivered through the INNATURE project (2025–2029), which represents a four-year continuation and expansion of the UATF’s mission. INNATURE will:

- Establish eco-social hubs (such as 181 Blackstock Road) to anchor neighbourhood action.
- Deliver landscape connector demonstrators, linking urban regeneration sites with peri-urban farms.
- Scale education programmes into structured, accredited pathways for schools, universities, and professionals.
- Develop monitoring frameworks to evidence impacts on health, biodiversity, and economic resilience.

Through INNATURE, the work of the UATF will move from a series of pilots and prototypes to a connected regional model for just and sustainable food systems.

1 Connelly, S. & Beckie, M., 2016. Scaling up food system governance: From local to global. Agriculture and Human Values, 33(3), pp.501–514.
2 Friedmann, H., 2007. Scaling up: Bringing public institutions and food service corporations into the project for a local, sustainable food system in Ontario. Agriculture and Human Values, 24(3), pp.389–398.

