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**Urban Agriculture in shared spaces: The difficulties with  
collaboration in an age of austerity**

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## Urban Agriculture in shared spaces: The difficulties with collaboration in an age of austerity

### Abstract

The expanding critical literature on Urban Agriculture (UA) makes links between the withdrawal of state services and the institutionalisation of volunteering, while observing that challenging funding landscapes can foster competitive environments between third sector organisations. Where these organisations are forced to compete for survival at the expense of collaboration, their ability to collectively upscale and expand beneficial activities can be compromised. This paper focuses on a lottery-funded UA project and draws predominantly on observations and interviews held with project staff and growing group volunteers. Research conducted in Wythenshawe, Manchester (UK), highlights difficulties experienced by organisations attempting to function in an environment disfigured by depletion, illustrating conflicts that can arise between community groups and charitable organisations competing for space and resources. Inter-organisational dynamics are considered at two scales; at the grassroots level between growing groups, and at a structural level between project partners. In a landscape scarred by local authority cutbacks and restructures, a dearth of funding opportunities and increasingly precarious employment, external initiatives can be met with suspicion or hostility, particularly when viewed as superfluous interventions. The resulting “siege mentality” reflects the need for organisational self-preservation but perhaps paradoxically results in groups with similar goals and complementary ideologies working against each other rather than in cooperation.

### Keywords

Urban Agriculture; critical geography; neoliberalism; community growing; urban farming

### Introduction

As the prevalence of both grassroots and formal or “institution-led” Urban Agriculture (UA) initiatives increases across the UK, critical scholars have called for a move away from the advocacy narrative traditionally associated with UA research and for a greater consideration of the more contentious implications of growing food in cities (Tornaghi, 2014). Accordingly,

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3 research has sought to place UA activities within the context of social and environmental  
4 justice and to critique both its relationship with and its influence on the existence, development  
5 and ratification of a neoliberal hegemony. This paper is based on ethnographic research  
6 conducted with Real Food Wythenshawe (RFW), an institution-led UA project in Manchester  
7 (UK), over a two-year period. Here, we aim to move the narrative of UA forward, by exposing  
8 restrictions felt by UA practitioners in their ability to work as a collective in a challenging  
9 funding landscape. We suggest that while UA has potential to provide beneficial impacts, in  
10 some cases this is impaired by an inability to combine and augment efforts. Consequently, we  
11 call for a rejuvenated consideration of how shared environments that promote cooperation may  
12 be developed to allow UA projects to become more than the sum of their parts.  
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21 The body of this paper is divided into the following sections: the first begins by introducing  
22 critical conceptualisations of UA in order to establish the theoretical narrative for the paper.  
23 This is followed by a description of RFW, the UA project that is the subject of the research and  
24 a description of the research methods used. The presentation and discussion of findings are  
25 divided into two parts. First, a description of the place of research, Wythenshawe Farm,  
26 provides background and context, and dynamics between growing groups at a grassroots level  
27 are explored. This is followed by a description of the project's ability to establish and maintain  
28 partnerships, continuing the theme of collaboration, but moving away from the growing  
29 activities and towards the structural level of the project and its stakeholders. These sections are  
30 followed by concluding remarks and suggestions for future research. Throughout the paper, we  
31 contend that while UA projects can often be seen to provide positive impacts on participants  
32 and surrounding communities (e.g. increased access to food (McClintock & Simpson, 2018),  
33 health benefits (Alaimo, Beavers, Crawford, Snyder, & Litt, 2016; Bellows, Brown, & Smit,  
34 2003), community cohesion (Armstrong, 2000) and skills acquisition (Okvat & Zautra, 2011)),  
35 their ability to collectively upscale is currently compromised by a competitive funding  
36 environment that is exacerbated by successive years of austerity policies in the UK.  
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#### 50 Critical conceptualisations of UA

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52 UA can be broadly described as the practice of “food cultivation and animal husbandry on urban  
53 and peri-urban land” (Tornaghi, 2014, p. 551). While private and allotment gardening in towns  
54 and cities is a familiar phenomenon to many in the UK, the commercial cultivation of crops in  
55 urban areas remains a relatively novel concept (Hardman & Larkham, 2014). Community UA  
56 schemes are becoming increasingly popular in the UK, and demand for urban land for food  
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3 production is rising (Church, Mitchell, Ravenscroft, & Stapleton, 2015). The recent surge in  
4 the popularity of UA activities has led to a more critical assessment of the impacts and  
5 implications of the practice, largely from a social and an environmental justice perspective.  
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9 While proponents cite the benefits and potential of UA (Mougeot, 2010; Smit & Nasr, 1992),  
10 critical scholars also acknowledge its tendency to further the entrenchment of neoliberal  
11 structures by inadvertently providing alternatives to services traditionally offered by the state  
12 (McClintock, 2014; Pudup, 2008; Tornaghi, 2014). UA activities such as community gardening  
13 are thought to hold the capacity to both critique and provide alternatives to “traditional state-  
14 provided open spaces” (Rosol, 2012, p. 240), while inadvertently entrenching neoliberalism or  
15 exacerbating forms of social injustice and exclusion by softening the blow of financial crises  
16 and by default supporting the retraction of state welfare provision (McClintock, 2014; Pudup,  
17 2008). There is therefore a need to critically analyse “processes of neoliberalisation in the  
18 practice of urban development” and to explore the development of “soft [outsourcing]  
19 strategies” such as the involvement of NGOs and volunteers in the process of governance  
20 (Rosol, 2012, p. 239).  
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31 The expanding literature base in the North American context of UA suggests that community  
32 growing projects are often politically motivated, developing in response to or in conjunction  
33 with a variety of stimuli. These include natural disasters, the retraction of state welfare  
34 provisions, civil rights movements, a rejection of the corporate nature of our food system, and  
35 the emergence of food deserts following industrial decline and urban decay (see, for example:  
36 Baker, 2004; Colasanti, Hamm, & Litjens, 2012; Draus, Roddy, & McDuffie, 2014; Ferris,  
37 Norman, & Sempik, 2001; Kato, Passidomo, & Harvey, 2014)). Milbourne (2012) and more  
38 recently St. Clair, Hardman, Armitage, and Sherriff (2017) have questioned the applicability  
39 of this narrative in the UK, finding little evidence that community growing group members are  
40 explicitly driven to act in protest to the systematic diminishment of state intervention or for  
41 political change. From this perspective, the emergence of neglected public spaces can be  
42 viewed as a double-edged sword that while symptomatic of a shrinking state, also gives  
43 residents the opportunity to “wrestle back control of local space” and to engage in the  
44 development of a more democratic community, forming new spaces of social justice  
45 (Milbourne, 2012, p. 955). In this regard, the absence of state intervention concerning the  
46 maintenance of public spaces may represent an opportunity to generate engaged, inclusive  
47 communities from the grassroots.  
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3 In an attempt to move beyond the somewhat dichotomous framing of UA as either an  
4 accomplice in the neoliberal project or as an instrument of revolt, Crossan, Cumbers,  
5 McMaster, and Shaw (2016, p. 5) have applied the term “Do It Yourself (DIY) Citizenship” to  
6 the actions of community gardeners in a Glasgow-based study. They describe the term as:  
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11 A form of citizenship that is generative of collaborative social relations and new  
12 urban places, while also being disruptive, in unsettling neoliberalism’s penchant for  
13 atomized individuals and reversing its frequently wasteful spatial practices.  
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17 This portrayal of urban growing avoids labelling the activity as necessarily radical or as a  
18 mechanism by which participants unwittingly entrench neoliberal structures and give a tacit  
19 approval of the dominant political hegemony. Implicit in this description is also an acceptance  
20 that while the actions of UA practitioners may not exclusively be politically driven, the  
21 outcomes of such practices may resemble unintentional subversion, generating new practices  
22 that lead to incremental political reorganisation from the ground-up (St. Clair et al., 2017).  
23 Moreover, DIY citizenship perhaps provides a window through which scholars can begin to  
24 view UA activities in a manner that theoretically disentangles the practice from these  
25 contradictions, hitherto detailed by McClintock (2014).  
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33 While academic attention has been paid to health, horticulture and allotments, literature on  
34 community food initiatives has so far largely failed to critically engage with the question of  
35 their ability to tackle food injustices and as yet, it is still unclear who the overall beneficiaries  
36 of urban community food growing projects really are (Franklin, Kovách, & Csurgó, 2016;  
37 Horst, McClintock, & Hoey, 2017). Bell and Cerulli (2012) question the ability of community  
38 UA projects to contribute to social justice and sustainability and are critical of the practice’s  
39 overall potential impact on urban food systems, while Tornaghi (2017) has more recently  
40 questioned the extent to which urban growing results in the production and harvesting of  
41 healthy food for the purpose of consumption. Indeed, while food-growing initiatives in the UK  
42 often seek to bring people together, reduce social isolation and to teach and inspire people to  
43 cultivate vegetables, in some cases the focus on preparation, planting and tending stops short  
44 of harvesting, sharing and consuming. This somewhat troubling dislocation between the  
45 production and consumption of food is surprising given UA’s frequent employment as a tool  
46 to bridge the perceptual gap between farm and fork for urban dwellers.  
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3 In an attempt to strengthen the association between community food initiatives and justice,  
4 Kneafsey, Owen, Bos, Broughton, and Lennartsson (2017, p. 2) call for narratives to be situated  
5 in a “social, environmental or food justice framework”. They claim that in efforts to retain  
6 political neutrality, charities avoid “the politicised language of “food justice”” in the  
7 knowledge that they operate within challenging funding environments where like-minded  
8 organisations can be forced to compete for survival (Kneafsey et al., 2017, p. 11). Moreover,  
9 while describing the community gardens of Glasgow as a collective movement, Cumbers,  
10 Shaw, Crossan, and McMaster (2018) acknowledge that financial tensions brought about by  
11 local authority budget cuts and loss of employment can place additional strain on third sector  
12 organisations and lead to the development of competitive environments.  
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21 The inter-organisational inclination towards competition somehow jars with the increasingly  
22 accepted view that UA activities such as community growing groups and allotments can  
23 provide fertile environments for a “shared politics of space” (Corcoran & Kettle, 2015, p.  
24 1215). This suggests that while UA activities may have the power to “create and sustain *civil*  
25 *interfaces* – dismantling barriers, exchanging knowledge, challenging stereotypes [and]  
26 generating empathy” (Corcoran & Kettle, 2015, p. 1215), the existing overarching political  
27 environment hinders the development, growth and integration of these supportive niches,  
28 instead compelling them to exist predominantly as isolated endeavours.  
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36 Influenced by Holloway (2010), Tornaghi (2017, p. 783) describes the piecemeal nature of UA  
37 initiatives as “cracks”, chipping away at the injustices of the capitalist system and calls for “a  
38 confluence of the cracks” whereby actions promoting food justice can multiply, bind together  
39 and expand. To analyse the potential for this gathering of cracks, we must also understand how  
40 (and if) groups are able function as a collective within the existing neoliberal framework. This  
41 paper aims to shed light on how community growing groups in a shared space can experience  
42 difficulties fostering a supportive environment and calls for a renewed consideration of the  
43 ways in which efforts of UA initiatives can be strengthened and encouraged to act collectively.  
44 Our research also highlights that once partnerships are established, their maintenance depends  
45 on continued and effective communication in addition to mutual benefit for each party. These  
46 issues are explored through a focus on an institution-led UA project in Wythenshawe, South  
47 Manchester, which is introduced and described in the following section.  
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## The Research Focus: Real Food Wythenshawe and Wythenshawe Farm

RFW<sup>1</sup> is a UA project operated by staff based at the offices of the project's lead partner, a local social housing provider. The initiative was awarded £1 million by the Big Lottery in 2012 as part of the Communities Living Sustainably (CLS) funding stream, and commenced activities in early 2013 following the appointment of a project manager and three coordinators. The project has since been awarded additional funding to continue to deliver specific elements of their work, however the research forming the basis of this paper was conducted between 2015 and 2017 and concentrates on the initial period of funding and project implementation.

Wythenshawe experiences high levels of deprivation, particularly in relation to health and employment and the district contains very few retail outlets selling fresh, local food (Open Data Communities, 2015; St. Clair et al., 2017). RFW seeks to help residents to learn to grow and cook healthy food by focusing on three themes: growing, cooking and learning, encompassed within five flagship areas. One flagship specifically concerns growing activities at an urban farm in Wythenshawe, which acts as the case study for this research. Urban farming is a type of UA activity defined by the European Federation of City Farms as:

Agricultural projects, where visitors of all ages and backgrounds can get in touch with animals, nature, their environment and each other. City farms offer training and information, a social and cultural meeting point, recreation, therapy or fulfilling day care activities... City farms are green spaces in the middle of a busy, fast and urbanised world.

(European Federation of City Farms, n.d. para. 1)

Wythenshawe Farm is home to a variety of animals including sheep, goats, pigs, ducks, hens, horses and a herd of Hereford cattle. A large walled garden within the farm offers space for community groups to cultivate vegetables. The farm - which is situated within Wythenshawe Park, 109 hectares of open parkland owned and managed by the local authority - is open to the public free of charge.

RFW organises a weekly growing session at the farm and a number of other growing groups meet at the park independently of the RFW project, having done so since before the project began. During the time of research, produce grown at the farm by RFW was used in a number

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.realfoodwythenshawe.com/>



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3 of ways including for display at horticultural shows, or as ingredients in cookery  
4 demonstrations. Due to the somewhat sporadic nature of volunteer attendance, the uneven  
5 production of crops could not reliably supply the farm shop; however, produce was  
6 occasionally sold in the shop when available. Since RFW began in 2013, the project staff  
7 members have assisted with the redecoration of the farm shop and have helped to identify local  
8 suppliers for certain products. RFW also provided funding for one part-time employee for the  
9 shop on a temporary basis until 2017.

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16 The site is of interest from a research perspective as although there is a growing body of  
17 literature on community gardening, there has been a lack of critical engagement specifically  
18 with urban farms as spaces of food production, community growing and knowledge exchange  
19 (Hardman, Chipungu, et al., 2018). As the site is based within a large area of land and has an  
20 associated commercial outlet, the farm may also have more scope to upscale operations than  
21 smaller UA sites such as community gardens, which often lack the capacity to expand their  
22 activities. Furthermore, as Franklin et al. (2016) observe, while there exists a burgeoning  
23 literature on the functionality of common land, the governance and use of publicly-owned  
24 spaces and their potential for community food growing has thus far been under examined.

## 31 32 33 **Methods**

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36 The findings in this paper are based on observations and interviews conducted over a two-year  
37 period in Wythenshawe. The process of gaining access to the RFW project began with the  
38 identification of key actors and gatekeepers. Early observations were conducted in the offices  
39 of the local housing association where the RFW team was based, and through attending  
40 meetings and events. Researcher (corresponding author) participation at the urban farm  
41 growing sessions began with visits facilitated by the RFW growing coordinator, who acted as  
42 the group leader, organising sessions on a weekly basis. Once contact had been made with the  
43 study site, regular engagement allowed for rapport to be built with the group members and for  
44 a more in-depth understanding of the growing activities and group dynamics. Through  
45 continued attendance at RFW events and activities, a familiarity was established between the  
46 researcher and the project staff and participants.

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49 Participant observation was used throughout the duration of the fieldwork to allow the  
50 researcher to integrate with and observe participants, adopting the role of “observer as  
51 participant” (Gold, 1958). This level of integration was deemed appropriate as it allowed for a  
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3 comprehensive understanding of the group and their activities while ensuring that members of  
4 the group were aware of the researcher's role from the outset. Spradley (2016, p. 39) identifies  
5 three significant aspects of social situations as "place, actor, and activities", which can act as a  
6 guide when observing social phenomena. While accepting the assertion that the "researcher's  
7 tacit knowledge and expectations often play a major role in determining which observations  
8 are worthy of annotation" (Wolfinger, 2002, p. 85), the three factors highlighted by Spradley  
9 provide a helpful starting point for the focus of field notes. Accordingly, field notes were  
10 composed detailing information regarding the location of the fieldwork, the names of people  
11 present, the dates of the activities, the types of activities carried out and conversations that took  
12 place.  
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21 In-depth semi-structured interviews (n=16) were held with the RFW project manager,  
22 coordinators, authors of the funding bid, and farm staff and volunteers, building upon initial  
23 and ongoing observations. Interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and transcribed  
24 by the corresponding author. Field notes were collected throughout the duration of the research,  
25 and were read and reflected upon continuously in order to inform interview questions and frame  
26 discussions. In this sense, the analysis was an ongoing process from the beginning of the data  
27 collection period and employed a constructivist-grounded theory approach. As per Charmaz's  
28 description of grounded theory coding, transcripts were analysed through a process of initial  
29 or open coding followed by the development of categories through intermediate or axial coding  
30 (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). NVivo 11 was used to develop the thematic coding  
31 framework and the emerging themes form the basis of the paper. As per the conditions of  
32 consent, interviewee's names have been changed to retain anonymity. Interview data is drawn  
33 upon in the following two sections to illustrate the project's experience of working in  
34 collaboration with others, initially at a grassroots level, and subsequently at the partnership  
35 level.  
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48 UA in public spaces: Conflict at the expense of cooperation at the grassroots level  
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51 Wythenshawe Park is an example of a local authority-managed public space, where the  
52 quantity of paid staff members has been in decline for a number of years. This coincides with  
53 the recent trend of cuts by local authorities in England, whose spending powers were reduced  
54 in real terms by 27% between 2010/11 and 2015/16 (Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, Gannon, &  
55 Watkins, 2015). In Manchester, the City Council (MCC) has made overall savings of £357  
56 million since 2010/11, with a reduction of staff (full time equivalent) from 9,310 in 2010/11 to  
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3 6,100 in 2017/18 (Hindle, 2018). As the RFW manager recalled, “In the 1980s, when [the park]  
4 was probably in its heyday, there was 24 gardeners at Wythenshawe Park and now there are  
5 none” (RFW project manager). The dwindling number of paid employees responsible for  
6 maintenance has left the park and farm heavily reliant on volunteers, a development recognised  
7 in MCC’s 10-year action plan for parks, which emphasises the need for “effective resourcing  
8 for volunteers, Friends groups, community groups and third sector organisations” (MCC, 2017,  
9 p. 18). While MCC seeks to support volunteer groups who assist in the maintenance of parks,  
10 there is currently no policy that facilitates gardening on available or “meanwhile” spaces within  
11 parks (Cassidy, 2018).  
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20 During an interview, the farm assistant revealed that the farm employs just two full-time paid  
21 members of staff in addition to the part-time farm shop assistant employed by RFW. The farm  
22 also has approximately 50 registered volunteers, without whom it may struggle to carry out  
23 day-to-day operations. The unpaid workforce in the park also includes workers from  
24 government-organised work schemes such as Seetec, which aims to encourage the long-term  
25 unemployed back into work. As the farm assistant explained, Seetec volunteers work at the  
26 farm “five days a week and it gets them into the habit of getting up and getting ready and going  
27 to work, and going home again. It just gets them back into that routine” (Wythenshawe farm  
28 assistant). A regular sight at the park was a team of community payback recruits (a community  
29 sentencing scheme in the UK), who could be seen helping with planting, landscaping and  
30 general maintenance around the park.  
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40 Rosol (2012, p. 250) makes the important distinction between “voluntarism and workfare”,  
41 with the former represented by citizens who occupy a position of privilege, having spare time  
42 to pursue hobbies and interests; and the latter functioning as an instrument of government, used  
43 to “control the unemployed and discipline the lower classes”. This essentially professionalised  
44 volunteer workforce functions within a managerial and often competitive environment, which  
45 may in turn make collaboration and cooperation more difficult to foster among groups working  
46 towards similar goals (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003; MacKinnon, 2000; Rosol, 2012). The teams of  
47 Community Payback and Seetec workers, who were frequently visible assisting with manual  
48 labour within Wythenshawe Park, signalled a shift towards the outsourcing of public service  
49 provision within a publicly managed space.  
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58 A dependence on voluntary labour (as distinct from workfare) is a feature of UA initiatives that  
59 has been the subject of recent attention from academics, particularly focusing on the potential  
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3 implications this may have for social justice and the entrenchment of inequalities (Ghose &  
4 Pettygrove, 2014; Rosol, 2012). This is, in part, due to the preconditions for volunteering,  
5 which tend to demand that individuals have the free time and resources to dedicate their efforts  
6 to a cause without payment, a privilege to which not all people have access. As Alkon and  
7 Agyeman (2011, p. 2) note, the people involved in local food activism are very often “white  
8 and middle class”, making the sustainable food movement “something of a monoculture”. The  
9 dominant representation of affluent individuals is particularly problematic when the associated  
10 activities are based in areas of high deprivation or are striving for societal change, as it affords  
11 a higher level of political agency to those who arguably need it less. Similarly, in a recent  
12 review of the literature on planning, UA and food justice, Horst et al. (2017) comment that UA  
13 initiatives tend to disproportionately benefit less deprived communities.  
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23 The capacity of volunteer-led community projects to fill gaps in provision has been the subject  
24 of debate for some years (Alexander, Nank, & Stivers, 1999) and while the farm has a large  
25 number of registered volunteers, it is nevertheless subject to the sporadic nature of volunteer  
26 attendance. The farm assistant recognised that this is “the nature of volunteering, because  
27 people come in as and when... it’s not top priority” (Wythenshawe farm assistant). This  
28 sentiment was echoed by one of the RFW volunteers, who felt that growing projects’  
29 characteristically heavy reliance on flexible and unregulated voluntary labour is impractical  
30 “[as] volunteers can be time limited” and may decide after attending once or twice that “they  
31 don’t want to come again” (Amy, RFW volunteer). Amy felt that it was particularly unfair for  
32 retired volunteers to be expected to fill the labour gap created by a lack of paid opportunities  
33 and irregular volunteer attendance, adding, “I haven’t retired and gone into this for that” (Amy,  
34 RFW volunteer). As Milligan (2000, p. 195) observes, “voluntary sector development... is  
35 often piecemeal and sporadic, owing as much to the availability of resources as it does to any  
36 planned action based on an identified need”. This observation raises questions regarding the  
37 ability of UA schemes to sustain coordinated actions with the potential to alleviate food  
38 insecurity through the production of local, affordable food.  
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51 In Wythenshawe, budget cuts have also caused the local authority to fill gaps in service  
52 provision by expanding the roles of employees and combining interdepartmental labour. In  
53 2011/12 the MCC Parks team joined with Libraries and Culture to form Community and  
54 Cultural Services until 2016 when Parks once again became a standalone service (Cassidy,  
55 2018). During this period, the departmental merging meant that staff who previously felt secure  
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3 in their employment were assigned roles for which they may have lacked the relevant  
4 experience or expertise. As Isabel, RFW's farm shop assistant, and an ex-council employee  
5 explained:  
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9 I worked in libraries for 38 years, and then four years ago, libraries and parks  
10 merged... Because they didn't have a lot of park staff to look after the parks, the  
11 library staff then became responsible for putting jobs on for repairs to the  
12 playgrounds and various things... but that's all changing now. So libraries and  
13 parks are now splitting again, so the library staff won't be responsible for that...  
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18 There's only going to be one manager over three parks now.  
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21 (Isabel, farm shop assistant)  
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24 The precariousness of the situation appeared to create a fertile environment for suspicion and  
25 resentment between users of the space. Prior to the establishment of the RFW weekly growing  
26 sessions, Wythenshawe Park already hosted a number of growing groups in different areas of  
27 the park and farm run by various organisations and serving a range of needs. The RFW  
28 coordinators spoke of the difficulties they experienced in their attempts to share the space with  
29 other growing groups, with the project manager observing that staffing cuts made collaborative  
30 work particularly difficult to negotiate as "people just go into siege mentality". She suspected  
31 that the situation would not improve over the coming years, fearing that further cuts were yet  
32 to be made:  
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40 The staff that have been there [for a long time]... [are] probably on the third  
41 restructure where... they've had to be interviewed three times for their own jobs  
42 over the last four or five years, they've just become very cynical about everything.  
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46 (RFW project manager)  
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49 RFW's first growing coordinator, who left the project during its second year of funding,  
50 observed conflict between various actors at Wythenshawe Park early in the project,  
51 hypothesising that these tensions were frequently exacerbated by staff cuts and job changes  
52 among local authority employees:  
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57 There has been... a lot of tension between the various user groups in the park, i.e.  
58 the grassroots community groups that are using the space and doing a lot of the  
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3 growing... versus the council staff and the pressures they're under with cuts. And  
4 people doing jobs that they didn't originally have, being put into positions that they  
5 feel probably very overwhelmed by.  
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9 (RFW growing coordinator 1)  
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12 In an environment where staff are overstretched and periodically asked to compete for their  
13 positions, it should perhaps come as little surprise that affected individuals can seem reluctant  
14 to welcome external initiatives such as RFW that appeared to be perceived as superfluous  
15 interventions requiring time and effort to organise. In the early stages of the project, the RFW  
16 growing coordinator was informed that a member of park staff would coordinate the various  
17 growing groups, as a level of collaboration was deemed necessary in order to support the needs  
18 of the groups and to make best use of the space. In reality, observations suggested that there  
19 was little overarching management of growing space from within the park for individual  
20 groups, possibly due to a lack of management capacity. This effectively made it impossible for  
21 the various growing groups to work as a collective, potentially diminishing the efforts of the  
22 individuals who volunteered their time.  
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32 The lack of coordination also led to confusion among volunteers regarding allocated growing  
33 areas and responsibilities. One RFW volunteer felt that there were “too many growing groups”  
34 working on different projects in a shared space and that cultivating such a large area frequented  
35 by numerous people led to doubts over which areas were being used by which organisations.  
36 He recalled an occasion when plants were wasted due to a misunderstanding over the allocation  
37 of space in the park:  
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43 We took one of the patches and we put a load of peas in, and then the next week  
44 when we come in on the Wednesday... it had all been dug out and someone had put  
45 potatoes in with the peas... So, it was kind of like, last Wednesday was a waste of  
46 time coming in.  
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51 (Dean, RFW volunteer)  
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54 The coordination shortcomings that this example implies resulted in participants struggling to  
55 understand their role and rather than building confidence in their growing skills, the uncertainty  
56 left participants feeling unsure of whether their actions were a help or a hindrance. Another  
57 volunteer viewed the diversity and multitude of growing groups as a potentially positive feature  
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3 of the park, acknowledging that the situation could be improved if the various projects were  
4 able to work together rather than duplicating work and wasting produce (Dylan, RFW  
5 volunteer). Dean also noted that the competition between groups was curious given that the  
6 growers all had a common goal, but questioned RFW's ability to integrate with other groups  
7 due to the nature of its funding:  
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13 There's so much division in here because everyone is trying to outdo everyone...  
14 and they're all just focused on their own things instead of thinking, "We're all  
15 growing veggies".... You need a bit of give and take between them. But then Real  
16 Food is Lottery based so it has got to have its shield around it.  
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21 (Dean, RFW volunteer)  
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23 This comment raises questions regarding the mechanisms by which fixed-term externally  
24 funded projects can fit into existing foodscapes and the ways in which they are viewed by other  
25 organisations. This is of particular interest during a time of austerity where volunteer groups  
26 are assuming higher levels of responsibility for the management of public spaces and  
27 competition for resources and funding between groups is high (Rosol, 2012).  
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33 During observations at the park, there was clearly tension between the existing growing  
34 community, the park staff and RFW volunteers, with the project manager noting that following  
35 the winter of the second year of the project, the staff at the park had "regrouped and blocked  
36 [RFW] out again" (RFW project manager). Subsequently, RFW experienced difficulties  
37 accessing space within the park for growing and storing plants. According to the RFW growing  
38 coordinator, the act of producing a large crop of vegetables caused concern among other  
39 growing groups:  
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46 Last year... that glasshouse was absolutely full... While the other glasshouses  
47 didn't have anything in. I would've happily spread out into another glasshouse, but  
48 that wasn't an option... that affects the relationships in the park. [The other groups  
49 think], "Oh you're doing all that and we've hardly got anything. It makes us look  
50 bad".  
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55 (RFW coordinator 2)  
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3 This was a source of frustration for the growing coordinator, who stated, “It shouldn’t be like  
4 that. It’s just about using the available space... It’s not in competition with each other, we’re  
5 doing this together!” (RFW growing coordinator 2). RFW eventually decided that attempts  
6 towards collaboration at the park were futile:  
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11 All I know is that there are only two [paid members of park staff]; it's a very big  
12 park... That is totally infeasible... I'm not willing to do this fitting in with people  
13 who haven't got the time for the partnership work... It's nonsense, that's not what  
14 my role's about.  
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19 (RFW growing coordinator 2)  
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22 Conflicts made the experience more stressful for RFW volunteers, who felt that they were  
23 constantly at risk of planting vegetables in the wrong patch or using another group’s plant pots.  
24 At this time, the RFW volunteers were sharing the use of one of the glasshouses in the  
25 horticultural centre with another growing group, with a clear divide between the two sides of  
26 the room. One volunteer, expressed frustration over the division within the park, seeing the  
27 opposition as unnecessary. She suggested that it was the responsibility of the park management  
28 to ensure that all the various groups treated the park as a shared space, stating, “I like a joke  
29 with everyone, so I find it quite hard to even comprehend that adults are like this” (Amy, RFW  
30 volunteer).  
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39 Similar behaviour has previously been associated with community growing projects, with  
40 Schmelzkopf (1995, p. 376) recalling “not-uncommon” occurrences of “power struggles and  
41 backbiting” among community gardeners in New York City, describing this simply as “garden  
42 politics”. The somewhat hostile environment created within the park perhaps reflects the  
43 uncertainty felt by voluntary groups given the existing financial climate where funding is  
44 difficult to secure, leaving organisations to compete against one another in order to survive.  
45 The need to compete can prove debilitating when it results in groups with similar goals, such  
46 as providing vegetables for the local community, feeling unable to cooperate with one another  
47 and consequently duplicating work or nullifying progress. Difficulties in collaboration were  
48 experienced elsewhere within the project, with the following section reflecting on some early  
49 problems RFW encountered in partnership work with external organisations at a more  
50 structural level.  
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### Inter-organisational collaboration at a partnership level

The obstacles to collaboration were not confined to grassroots-level activities at the project's growing sites, they also affected the initiative on a structural level between partnering organisations. One of the strengths of the funding bid was the involvement of two large housing associations, which later merged, acting as the project's lead partner. The housing association had the responsibility of managing the project's budget with the remaining partners acting as steering groups, working in an advisory capacity. A theme that emerged strongly through interviews with staff members and bid authors related to project partnerships and the ways in which these had been arranged, maintained or in some cases, lost or terminated.

Drawing on management literature, it is clear that coordinating inter-organisational collaboration is a reliably difficult task requiring active management in order to generate successful partnerships (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Huxham and Vangen (1996, p. 6) note that "many collaborative arrangements which begin with the best of intentions and goodwill nevertheless turn out to be frustrating affairs and it is not uncommon for them to dwindle away into non-existence." Indeed, RFW originally had a diversity of partners with expertise in a number of areas from health and mental wellbeing to communications and innovative design; however, several organisations withdrew from the project in its early stages. This had the effect of narrowing the project's reach and potentially the level of impact the initiative was able to have on the resident population.

An author of the RFW funding bid observed that while the partners were initially positive about the idea of a food-based intervention in Wythenshawe, the bidding process did not allow sufficient time to establish the appropriate actors within organisations to ensure their continued commitment throughout the project implementation phase:

[A] challenge... was the level of buy-in at this stage from the partners... because of the speed that the bid had to be submitted. Although all the Wythenshawe partners in particular were very committed to the big idea... the people round the table in the first phases... might not have been the right people within that organisation to grasp what was needed.

(Bid author 1)

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3 An interesting aspect of RFW was that the manager and coordinators played no part in the  
4 design or submission of the funding application. During the early stages of the project delivery,  
5 another author of the bid felt that there was a lack of understanding among the partners and  
6 project coordinators regarding the vision and aims of the project. The project's initial growing  
7 coordinator attributed some of the tensions between project partners to "politics, people's  
8 agendas and the understanding of the bid" and regretted the lack of collaboration concerning a  
9 common vision for the project among the partnering organisations. She suggested that planning  
10 "strategic visioning" would be a "valuable activity into the future", highlighting the importance  
11 of partnering organisations moving "in the same direction" and having "similar perspectives"  
12 on what the project was attempting to achieve (RFW growing coordinator 1).

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21 As Hardy and Phillips (1998) have observed, given that partnering organisations often have  
22 differing understandings of their role and represent contrasting priorities and values, it seems  
23 reasonable to question whether collaboration is always a productive endeavour. The RFW  
24 project manager acknowledged that managing partnerships and ensuring continued  
25 commitment was a considerable task:

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31 Initially the partners came along, in the first year we got good attendance at  
32 meetings [whereas now]... I think they think "well actually, they're doing it, we  
33 don't really need to go to the steering meeting"... And lots of the partners have  
34 changed... Some have fallen by the wayside so it is frustrating that they... don't get  
35 involved.

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41 (RFW project manager)

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43 The departure of a number of the original partners appears to be linked to the distribution and  
44 control of the budget. The project manager noted that when partners attended meetings, they  
45 often began by asking ""what's in it for me?" [and] "how much money can you give me?", "we  
46 want a slice of the cake"" (RFW project manager). If UA projects rely on charitable or  
47 voluntary involvement, it may be difficult for organisations to commit to their roles,  
48 particularly given the likelihood of changing priorities and structures. This leads to the question  
49 of how to ensure commitment from partners that cannot sustain themselves without a financial  
50 return. A representative from the housing association suspected that the work of partnering  
51 organisations "has to have budget attached", adding that:

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3 The problem comes when the whole budget is held with one team. The great  
4 advantage [is that the coordinators]... get a really good amount of control over what  
5 they're allowed to do... the downside... is that that doesn't lend itself to partnership  
6 working... If you've got money flowing between the partners, then they have  
7 permission... to get involved and stay involved.  
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13 (Housing association representative)  
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15 The decision for the RFW lead partner to maintain control of the budget was in some ways a  
16 deviation from the project design. As one author of the bid observed, RFW “needed a core of  
17 staff, but the idea was never that those staff would be the delivery agents... It would be the  
18 different organisations who were leading on it” (Bid author 2). She believed that a more even  
19 distribution of budget and responsibility would have augmented the scope and effectiveness of  
20 the project.  
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26 Huxham and Vangen (1996) observed that collaborations with an imbalance in the resources  
27 available or in the sizes of organisations involved may lead to smaller organisations feeling  
28 “very vulnerable”, making tensions more likely to arise in collaborations where only one  
29 organisation has control of the financial resources (Huxham & Vangen, 1996, p. 14). This  
30 suggests that holding the project’s entire budget within one central organisation can lead to a  
31 dynamic whereby the partnering organisations do not feel that they have sufficient control over  
32 relevant aspects of the project and lack the autonomy to use their particular expertise to its full  
33 potential. Findings suggest that by relinquishing responsibility for some project activities and  
34 by decentralising control of relevant portions of the project budget, RFW may have been better  
35 placed to strengthen partnerships and collaboration throughout the project delivery stage.  
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## 45 **Conclusion**

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48 In recent years, a growing number of authors, notably those concerned with food justice, have  
49 adopted a critical lens to analyse some of the more problematic attributes of UA (Rosol, 2012;  
50 Tornaghi, 2014). This paper has raised the issue of collaboration in UA projects, beginning by  
51 acknowledging the challenging funding environment within local authorities and between  
52 charitable organisations that can lead to groups with similar goals competing with one another  
53 at the expense of cooperation. Conflict was evident during observations and interviews at  
54 Wythenshawe Park, where a number of growing groups competed for space and resources, and  
55 were unreceptive to new groups using the area as a base for operations. This behaviour reflects  
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3 the need for organisational self-preservation within a competitive funding environment, but  
4 results in groups with similar goals and often complementary ideologies working against one  
5 another rather than in cooperation. As a result, RFW found the park to be a challenging  
6 environment in which to integrate.  
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11 It has been observed that withdrawal of state support and the institutionalisation of volunteering  
12 can lead to competition between third sector organisations, frequently at the expense of  
13 collaboration, which could have a detrimental impact on their ability to sustain or upscale  
14 potentially beneficial activities (Rosol, 2012). In the case of RFW, these conflicts served to  
15 provide distractions and potentially compromised the levels of progress achieved. The  
16 experience of the growing groups based in Wythenshawe Park would suggest that this inhibited  
17 groups' ability to work together in order to become more than the sum of their parts. While  
18 Tornaghi (2017, p. 783) calls for a "confluence of the cracks", evidence from Wythenshawe  
19 suggests that an environment depleted by nearly a decade of austerity measures, has led to the  
20 isolation rather than the convergence of individual cracks.  
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30 The expanding critical literature on UA has begun to acknowledge the practice's tendency to  
31 further the entrenchment of neoliberalism by inadvertently providing alternatives to services  
32 traditionally offered by the state. This shift describes a process of retraction of central  
33 government, and an attempt by civil society to fill gaps in provision. Rosol (2012) views the  
34 rise of volunteering as an important part of this process, aspects of which were visible in  
35 Wythenshawe. The voluntary and frequently piecemeal nature of many urban growing projects  
36 invites questions regarding UA's ability to upscale and address food justice issues effectively.  
37 While we would not argue in favour of the further institutionalisation of unpaid labour, this  
38 aspect of UA projects is at the heart of an instability that appears to exacerbate inefficiencies  
39 of supply and does very little to combat social injustice. In the case of the urban farm in  
40 Wythenshawe, the irregular supply of food generated from an unstable, unpaid workforce was  
41 not sufficient to provide the farm outlet with reliable levels of stock. A limited or unpredictable  
42 supply was accompanied by an uncertain demand, occasionally resulting in a proportion of the  
43 harvests being fed to livestock or going to waste.  
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55 On a broader scale, a number of the partnerships formed in the early stages of the RFW project  
56 development proved difficult to maintain. It appears that these difficulties were primarily due  
57 to a lack of financial distribution to partnering organisations and the concentration of control  
58 of budget and project activities within the initiative's lead partner. While this approach afforded  
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3 the project coordinators a greater level of autonomy over the project implementation, it may  
4 have limited the scope and reach of the initiative.  
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7 We do not dispute the numerous beneficial aspects of UA, however its ability to assist in the  
8 reconfiguration of a more just and sustainable food system and to make significant changes to  
9 the ways in which urban dwellers conceive of, access and value their food is still unclear  
10 (Hardman, St. Clair, et al., 2018). We agree with Tornaghi (2017) that the production of food  
11 as a specific and deliberate outcome of UA initiatives, particularly in the UK, is still an area  
12 that deserves further attention (Hardman, St. Clair, et al., 2018). Given recent interest in the  
13 potential for the upscaling of UA activities, this is an important consideration for future  
14 investors. In light of the findings detailed in this paper, we call for researchers embedded in  
15 UA projects, particularly in the UK, to offer examples of productive collaborations between  
16 local organisations devoted to food justice and UA. We also perceive a continued need for  
17 researchers and practitioners to differentiate between varying forms of UA projects such as  
18 community gardens and urban farms and to highlight not only where initiatives succeed, but  
19 also where they encounter obstacles and, if possible, how barriers are overcome.  
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31 It is important to note, as Kato et al. (2014) also have, the type of research conducted here is  
32 limited to a particular location and timeframe and covers only a snapshot of the project's  
33 development. We hope that the observations described here will be informative for other UA  
34 projects embarking on a comparable journey. We would also like to acknowledge and celebrate  
35 the existence of a great number of beneficial attributes of community growing and UA projects.  
36 In this spirit, this paper has sought to draw attention to the constraints placed upon the ability  
37 to upscale, expand and progress these positive impacts due to a political landscape that appears  
38 to foster competition at the expense of collaboration.  
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