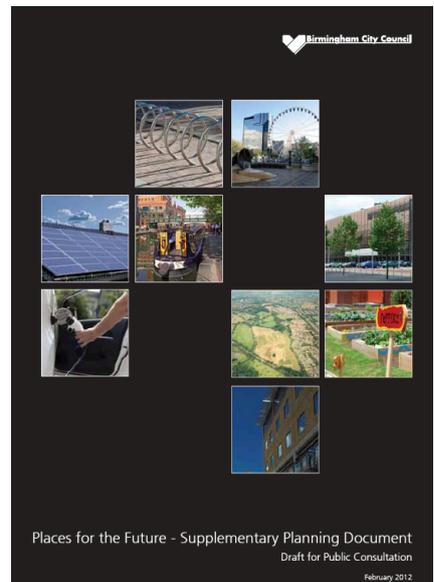




the new  
**optimists**forum  
response

to  
Places for the Future - Supplementary Planning Document  
Draft for Public Consultation

compiled by  
Kate Cooper &  
Matthew Green for  
Birmingham City Council



# Foreword

## Who we are: The New Optimists

The New Optimists Forum brings together scientists from universities across the West Midlands to give their informed perspective on the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century.

It all began in 2010 with our publication of an essay collection by over 80 West Midlands scientists, *The New Optimists: Scientists View Tomorrow's World & What It Means to Us*.<sup>1</sup> Each essay written in response to the simple question "What are you optimistic about?" the book uncovered the wealth of scientific knowledge within the region.

We believe scientists have a vitally important, informed contribution to make in 'seeing' how we can build a sustainable future. Where those scientists are citizens of our region, it seems only right we should harness their knowledge in the service of the place we all call home.

Humanity is facing huge challenges — climate change, resource depletion, population pressures. These are challenges that all too often appear overwhelmingly difficult. Yet to quote Sir John Lawton in his 2006 Lunar Society Annual Lecture, *doing nothing is not an option*.

Here in Birmingham and its environs we have many scientists whose expertise ranges from stem cells to fuel cells, from nutrition to agricultural and horticultural practice to spatial planning, all able and willing to share their knowledge in helping us meet these challenges.

Hence **The New Optimists Forum**.

Through a series of facilitated events with live social media reporting, local scientists have, since autumn 2011, been bending their minds on a year-long scenario planning process considering food futures for Birmingham in 2050. It looks likely to culminate in a large scale consultative event in the spring of 2013 when the scenarios created towards the end of this year will be put forward for discussion by a wide range of stakeholders.

The Forum events are already generating ideas and spin-off activities about how we can accommodate issues of population growth, resource depletion, climate change and geopolitical uncertainty, and continue to adequately and equitably feed the population of the city.

There is more about The New Optimists at [www.newoptimists.com](http://www.newoptimists.com) where you can find out about our activities, our not-for-profit legal structure and brief biographies of the 100 or so scientists now involved. You can also find regular updates on our blog: the [newoptimists.com/blog](http://newoptimists.com/blog). The following organisations are supporting the New Optimists Forum:



The work of the New Optimists Forum on food futures for Birmingham is central to informing our response to *Places for the Future*.

**Kate Cooper & Matthew Green**

**March 2012**

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<sup>1</sup> RICHARDS, K. (ed) 2010 *The New Optimists: Scientists View Tomorrow's World & What It Means To Us*. Birmingham: Linus Publishing Company

## The challenge

The world faces three profound challenges over the coming decades; coping with the effects of climate change, managing population growth and competition for scarce resources notably land, water, energy and fertiliser. Food security is impacted independently and collectively by each of these challenges.

If we think that these issues are concerns for the developing world only, or for that cities with their power and their networks will be immune, then we should think again.

Between 2006 to 2008, global food prices rose rapidly, reflecting increases in the cost of oil and exacerbated by the diversion of grain crops into biofuel productions. Social and political unrest at the cost and scarcity of staple foods followed in 14 countries worldwide — from ‘tortilla riots’ in Mexico to protests over the price of pasta in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

A 2008 Cabinet Office Strategy Unit analysis of food issues, the first review commissioned by Gordon Brown on becoming Prime Minister, concluded that “existing patterns of food production are not fit for a low-carbon, more resource-constrained future.”<sup>3</sup>

In May 2007 a major demographic milestone was passed as, for the first time, the earth’s population became more urban than rural. This process of urbanisation will accelerate over the coming decades as most of the growth in the world population — reaching 9 billion people by 2050 — takes place in urban areas.

By 2050, the urban population will be approximately twice the size of the rural population.<sup>4</sup> At this point cities will come to depend more on their peri-urban and rural hinterlands to provide them with the food and water they need each day, yet population growth and the expansion of city boundaries will mean these productive hinterlands are further and further away.

International networks of food production and distribution will remain an important source of food (as they have in the UK for many centuries), but at an uncertain financial and geopolitical cost. Economics and risk politics will mean that local food production, including urban agriculture, will take on a significance unseen since the Second World War.

On an individual level the intimacy and complexity of our relationship with food hampers our ability to consider the prospect of any food future which does not broadly resemble our food present. The idea of having a relationship with food which is not navigated by today’s familiar waypoints of supermarkets, restaurants, cafes is, for many, unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> Yet in many parts of the world today, and in the UK only a few decades ago, food production, distribution and consumption were very different.

Today’s city leaders in the UK have *never* had to think about food supplies in the way their forebears did, and in the way their successors must.

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<sup>2</sup> SOIL ASSOCIATION (2008). An inconvenient truth about food: Neither secure nor resilient. Bristol: The Soil Association. Available at: <http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=EttWlupviYA%3D&tabid=387>

<sup>3</sup> CABINET OFFICE (2008). Food: An analysis of the issues. London: Cabinet Office. Available at: [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/food\\_food\\_analysis.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/food_food_analysis.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.agricultureinurbanizingsociety.com/UK/Conference+theme/>

<sup>5</sup> Matthew wrote the first draft of this document. His original text read: *The idea of having a relationship with food which is not navigated by the familiar waypoints of supermarkets, restaurants and cafes is, at first, unthinkable. Unthinkable? I’ve added in “for many” — which doesn’t include myself!*

Matthew was a child in the 1980s, only a few years after I (Kate) saw and tasted my first fresh peach. My 1950s childhood was pre-supermarket, very much the market garden, the milkman wringing the hen’s neck, the local grocer weighing and putting butter in greaseproof paper, rabbits and hares hanging outside the butcher, scarce eye-wateringly priced chicken, the prevalence of mutton and tripe . . . oh, and wizened apples and lots *and lots* of carrots and cabbage!

What Matthew’s first draft excellently illustrates is how difficult humans find it to imagine a world outside their experience. Maybe we should take from this that food supply and distribution in 2050 is unimaginable today . . . And, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we need do now what we can to ensure it is robust.

Today's institutions, including national and local government, rarely consider food supply issues and, if they do, struggle to conceptualise the sprawling scale and scope of current systems of food production and distribution, let alone imagine the qualitatively different systems we will need to feed our cities in the 21st century.

## Responding to the challenge locally

The New Optimists recommend that food policy should be core to Birmingham's long-term strategic interests.

At present the city does not have a single coherent statement of food policy. Instead food issues (or more accurately 'healthy eating' issues) are addressed to some extent by public health specialists and environmental health specialists. No-one in the world of local public policy is taking a rounded view.

In broader, medium-term strategies, such as the Sustainable Community Strategy,<sup>6</sup> food only receives a cursory mention and then only from the point of view of healthy eating and access.

We were pleased to find the draft SPD, though its remit is limited to planning and then only to new developments, is thoughtful and well-informed on food issues. Planning and the local planning system will be critical to food futures and the the SPD tacitly acknowledges this, discussing the importance of green infrastructure and local food productions in the context of long-run sustainability challenges.

## Working within the current paradigm

Though we support the broad thrust of the draft SPD we are ambitious, indeed we are anxious, for the city to go further. We recommend that:

- ◆ We make better use of the green infrastructure that exists within our city.
- ◆ We establish an expectation that green infrastructure should be productive and not passive.
- ◆ The planting of fruit bearing hedges and trees should be encouraged as part of the city's green infrastructure management strategy.
- ◆ We use communal agriculture and growing as an active policy to build community cohesion, to improve health and wellbeing and to spur community economic development.
- ◆ We explore opportunities to transfer unwanted publicly owned land into community land trusts with covenants to guarantee its use as productive green infrastructure.
- ◆ We map Birmingham's food flows so that we have an informed understanding of the food that comes into the city each day, and how it is distributed and consumed across the city.
- ◆ We identify, access and share data on local food supply chains to open up distribution networks so that locally produced food can make it into existing mainstream food supply chain, and enable Birmingham citizens to take advantage of any radical changes in food supply systems when emerging or nascent technologies, such as the semantic web, create new opportunities for growers, distributors and consumers.

In addition:

- ◆ There is a compelling case — both productive and economic — to replacing annuals and hybrids in public planting with perennial edibles like artichokes, asparagus, rhubarb, brassicas and onions. Similarly replacing rye grass with ornamental pollinators and wild

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<sup>6</sup> BE BIRMINGHAM (2008). *Birmingham 2026: Our vision for the future*. Birmingham: Birmingham City Council., pp. 43. Available at: <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/2026>

flowers offers a double dividend of reduced maintenance costs and a more productive ecosystem.

- ◆ There is scope to capitalise on the urban heat island effect by cultivating delicate high value crops such as herbs which at present are generally airfreighted into the UK and transported to Birmingham by road.

## A paradigm shift?

All of the ideas we have described are possible within our current techno-economic paradigm. Over the life of the SPD though, and certainly over the duration of the period up to 2050 that the New Optimists Forum are considering, new technologies will develop.

Some of them will be “game changers” as far as food production and localised food production are concerned. One such game-changer already on the horizon is bioenergy reactors such as the new £16.5m European Bioenergy Research Institute at Aston University.

The promise of this technology is a distributed carbon-negative energy generation system using biowaste to produce electricity and heat, with two useful by-products: hydrogen (for fuel cells) and biochar (a nitrogen and phosphate ‘fixer’ in some local soils).

Access to such a plentiful and clean source of energy would make food production systems which are currently prohibitively costly in energy terms, systems such as greenhouse cultivation and intensive hydroponic and aquaponic “vertical farming”, viable.

The viability of this type of energy generation at a small scale would also present significant opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses to become shareholders in their own power supply system.

The current draft SPD, whilst discussing future renewables in some detail, does not make any link between these renewables and the food production possibilities they offer.

It would seem to us to be very important to consider this from a planning perspective. Modifications to the planning policies will almost certainly be needed in order to permit such developments within the city boundaries.

## Responses to specific questions in the SPD consultation

(these responses have also been submitted online)

SPD Section 1 Do you have any comments for the SPD, Section 1?

Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ The vision for the SPD is a compelling one. (b)
- ◆ Whilst we appreciate that the SPD is written for a specific audience with specific professional skills and knowledge of the planning system, we, as non-planners, found it difficult to situate the SPD within the wider context of legislation, planning policy statements and policy statements from other domains. A diagrammatic rendering of the relationships between the SPD and other policy instruments would, we believe, aid those without a planning background to gain a clearer understanding of the role and scope of the SPD. (a)

SPD Section 2 Do you have any comments for the SPD, Section 2?

Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ We have some concerns around the extent to which planning professional, developers and architects are aware of the issues of future food security and sustainability facing cities like Birmingham, or indeed the positive social, educational, health, environmental and economic externalities which can accrue from producing food within the urban environment. Most of all we are concerned that these professionals may not readily identify the steps which they can take to promote food production in the urban environment. We would like to encourage the development of training and CPD for development professionals in these areas (c)
- ◆ Whilst we recognise that SPD is a planning document and that, as such, has a limited remit we would urge the Council to explore the viability of using other levers which it controls such as conditions imposed on Business Improvement Districts or discretionary Non-Domestic Rates reliefs to encourage the objectives of sustainability including sustainability and security of food production and supply. (c)
- ◆ We will not be able to make Birmingham a sustainable city through the diligent implementation and management of any policy or any single policy domain. To make meaningful progress there is a need for a genuinely city-wide approach to sustainability; led by the City Council but including health bodies, businesses, community groups and - frankly - anyone else who wants to be involved. Key to the delivery of an effective, change-making city-wide approach to sustainability (including food sustainability) will be the ability to identify, access and combine data on the supplies of energy and other resources, including food, that come into the city versus their consumption. An ambition on this scale will only be achievable through open, linked data. It would be very good to see the Birmingham Civic Dashboard project resourced to begin this work. (c)

SPD Section 3 Do you have any comments for the SPD, Section 3?

Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ In developing their design and access statements or sustainability statements, we believe that developers should be directed to make reference to the Sustainable Communities Strategy. (a)
- ◆ In addition to the six issues (site layout, building design, urban heat island, integration of green infrastructure, flood resilience) particular we would encourage the Council to direct developers to spell out clearly how they will ensure that the green infrastructure within their proposed developments is productive green infrastructure, making a specific contribution either in terms of food production, enhanced biodiversity or active (rather than passive) amenity space. (a)

- ◆ Whilst we understand the desire of the Council to direct developers to “reduce the urban heat island effect” we are also mindful that the mild growing climates induced by the urban heat island effect are particularly suited for the cultivation of delicate, high value produce such as basil and other culinary herbs. Not only would production of such crops within the urban heat island area constitute an efficient use of the productive capacity of this space in its own right it would also obviate the need to import these crops in such quantities. (c)
- ◆ When considering green infrastructure in their sustainability statements, developers should be obliged to consider the the whole-life costs of green infrastructure. (a)
- ◆ We would wish to see priority given to development schemes where green infrastructure investments actively increased the biodiversity and productivity of the urban environment. In particular we would wish to see, through green infrastructure investments, the cultivation of edible perennial crops such as artichokes, asparagus, rhubarb, brassicas, edible berries, herbs and onions.
- ◆ We would also wish to see green infrastructure investments emphasising the planting of pollinators and wild flowers in preference to grass. This offers a double sustainability dividend of reduced maintenance costs and a more productive ecosystem. (a)

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 1: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 1? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ A diagrammatic representation of the position of the SPD in the wider context of local planning policies and other local and national policy instruments would be valuable (a)

We have no further comments to offer on Section 1

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 2: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 2? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ Under the heading “Sense of place” we would like to see specific mention of the role that urban agriculture and communal food production can play in shaping a sense of place, community and belonging.<sup>7</sup> (a)
- ◆ Under the heading “Healthy Communities” we would like to see specific reference to the health and community benefits which have been shown to derive from involvement communal productive green infrastructure such as community gardens and allotments<sup>8</sup> (a).

We have no further comments to offer on Section 2

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 3: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 3? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ Under the heading “The issues,” the second sentence (beginning Climate change projections for Birmingham...) makes reference incorrectly to table 4.1. The correct reference is to table 3.1 (a)
- ◆ Under the heading “Integration of green infrastructure” we would very much like to see a presumption in favour of all new green infrastructure development being productive green infrastructure. This could be directly productive as in the case allotments or orchards, or indirectly productive as in the case of wildflower meadows or cultivated pollinators. Conversely we would like to see a presumption against green infrastructure which makes minimal contribution to the diversity or productivity of the urban environment e.g. grass verges (a).
- ◆ Under the heading “Food production” the second sentence states: “In appropriate parts of the city developers should consider the inclusion of small gardens to enable residents to carry out domestic food production.” We would appreciate clarification of what would constitute “appropriate” in this context (c). Similarly we would appreciate clarification on the circumstances under which the city would deem a communal garden space preferable to a series of small private gardens (c).
- ◆ Section 3, under the heading “Food production,” makes reference to the role of “edible landscapes”. Whilst we agree with the comments made in the SPD on the role of edible landscapes, we are mindful that not all citizens will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify edible produce in the urban environment. To this end we would encourage the developers and the city council to invest in educating people about the edible where they are planned (a).

We have no further comments to offer on Section 3.

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<sup>7</sup> DE VRIEZE, A. (2012). The politics of place making in urban farming: an essay. *Rural Sociology Group Wageningen Weblog*. Wageningen: University of Wageningen. Available at: <http://ruralsociologywageningen.wordpress.com/2012/01/09/politics-of-place-making-in-urban-farming-an-essay/> See also <http://farmingthecity.net/>

<sup>8</sup> There is evidence that food growing has beneficial impact on individuals and communities; e.g. London’s Capital Growth (<http://www.capitalgrowth.org/>), Todmorden’s Incredible Edible (<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/>) and DEFRA’s Food Growing in Schools Taskforce (<http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/organicgardening/food-growing-in-schools.php>). The majority of peer reviewed papers of the subject focus on US and developing world cases. There are, however, a number of papers studying UK examples, these include MILLIGAN, C., GATRELL, A., and BINGLEY, A. (2004). Cultivating health; therapeutic landscapes and older people in northern England. *Social Science & Medicine* 58 (2004); pp.1781–1793.

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 4: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 4? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

- ◆ The transportation of food and food products into Birmingham contributes significantly to the city's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and emissions of other pollutants and greenhouse gases. Whilst Birmingham is extremely unlikely ever to be self-sufficient in food production, we should challenge ourselves to deliver progressive reduction in the distance that food consumed within the city travels to reach us. Planners and developers have a role to play in ensuring that new sources of food production such as facilities for hydroponic and aquaponic cultivation can be located within the city. There is also a role for policy and partnerships in strengthening the city's relationship with its less intensely urbanised (and more agriculturally productive) hinterlands such that Birmingham sources more of its food more closely to home (c).

**We have no further comments to offer on Section 4.**

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 5: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 5? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

**We have no comments to offer on Section 5.**

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 6: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 6? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

**We have no comments to offer on Section 6.**

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Section 7: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Section 7? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

**We have no comments to offer on Section 6**

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Appendix A: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Appendix A? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

**We have no comments to offer on Appendix A**

Detailed SPD Policy Guidance Appendix B: Do you have any comments for the Detailed SPD Policy Guidance, Appendix B? Please clarify whether your comments are a) seeking a change b) an expression of support c) a general observation

**We have no comments to offer on Appendix B**

## Places for the Future SPD General Questions

Question 1: What other policies or policy detail would you like to see in the SPD? Please provide an explanation of any further policy or policy detail

We are heartened at the prominence given to discussions of green infrastructure and local food production in the Places for the Future SPD Guidance. Whilst we believe there is scope to strengthen these discussions and the expectations placed on developers, we also recognise that issues of food quality, supply and sustainability go far beyond the scope planning policy alone.

At present Birmingham, unlike many other Core Cities across the UK, does not have a dedicated statement of food policy. Whilst many of the policy statements promulgated by the Council and its partners, acknowledge the importance of healthy eating to wellbeing we take the view that the issues of quality, supply and sustainability of food are so fundamental to the future of the city and the wellbeing of its residents that there is a strong case for a city-wide food policy for Birmingham and its city region to be drafted. Such a policy, based on a mapping of flows of food into the city together with a mapping of local patterns of distribution and consumption would allow the city to take positive steps to integrate locally produced food into the wider food economy.

Question 2: What other case studies would you like to be included in the document?

All of the case studies which currently appear in the draft SPD guidance are drawn from Birmingham. Whilst we are keen to promote local practice we believe that there are also likely to be opportunities to learn from examples drawn from further afield. In terms of case studies of local approaches to food production, the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency [<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5890040>] has collated a valuable collection.

Question 3: What could be done to make the SPD more user-friendly?

As non-planners we found some initial difficulty in situating the SDP in the context of the wider local policy and planning policy 'ecosystem' and in understanding the dependencies and relationships between the SPD and other policy instruments. A diagrammatic representation of the relationships between the SPD and other policy instruments would be a valuable aid to understanding and user-friendliness.

We understand that the SPD is primarily concerned with shaping new developments. A statement on the way in which SPD would or could apply to re-development of existing constructions would be valuable.

Question 4: What additional information, assistance, tools and/or training would help developers with the process of writing the statements mentioned in the SPD?

We believe a clear mapping of the SPD and its relationships with other policy instruments, mentioned above, would help developers to more effectively reflect local policy priorities in their statements.

On the specific issues of food supply and sustainability as they relate to the the planning process and the SPD, we are concerned that planners and developers are may not currently have sufficient knowledge or awareness of the issues to reflect them adequately in their statements and other submissions. We would welcome a series of CPD-type seminars aimed at planners and developers to help them understand the importance of issues of food supply and sustainability as they affect Birmingham.

Question 5: How would you like to see the policies in the SPD promoted and communicated to: a) Professional groups b) Industry c) Communities

We have no comments to offer on Question 5.