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Building a Bristol Food City Region from the Grass Roots up: Food strategies, action plans and food policy councils

Matt Reed
Dan Keetch

FareShare bike. Photo by Matt Reed

The City of Bristol, in the southwest of England, is blazing a trail in trying to integrate sustainable and healthy food production within its vision as the 2015 European Green Capital. If the topic of food and urban agriculture is to form a part of Bristol's Green Capital programme and legacy, it will be as a result of a long and complex process of organising and lobbying within the city by networks of community food activists. In many ways the networks of food activists in the wider Bristol area are creating a food city region from the grass roots upwards. This article explores the problems perceived by Bristol activists in relation to "mainstream" agriculture and food as well as regarding the formation of their networks; it also highlights two case studies of innovative and multifunctional initiatives. In addition, the article analyses how grass-roots networks have attempted to influence food policy in the city.

The challenge for the authorities of Bristol City is to demonstrate that efforts by food activists are contributing to meaningful change in the city. After a polite, non-political and open round of lobbying, the activists have much invested in

the possibilities of change. However, recent protests between those trying to protect high-grade soil on the edge of the city on the one hand and on the other hand the City council that wants to build a low-carbon mass transit system on that land, reveal that reconciling competing environmental goals is not easy. After years of talking about possibilities, the year of the Green Capital signals for many the need for results.

The city region of Bristol is a concept with historical precedent: between 1974 and 1996 the cities of Bristol and Bath, including their rural districts, were administratively united within the County of Avon. Subsequently, the reorganisation of local government presented the possibility of continuing the two-tier county-district system or choosing unitary status in which district authorities assume full responsibility for the provision and organisation of public services. In the case of Avon the latter option prevailed, leading to the establishment of four new single-tier authorities: Bristol City, Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire. Furthermore, in the international SUPURBFOOD research project, the University of Gloucestershire has explored how a city region perspective aids the understanding of efforts to support sustainable environmental flows and short chain food systems in the Bristol city region corresponding to the four administrative areas described.

"Mainstream" food and activism in Bristol

Bristol has a population of about 435,000, with an economy historically founded on global colonial trade. Today its commercial importance lies in aerospace technology, finance and creative industries and it is well known for its

FareShare challenges food poverty

FareShare South West is among several initiatives in Bristol city region to address food poverty. FareShare is a national charity, and the Bristol branch is the headquarters of its south-western region. FareShare redistributes perfectly edible food that might, due to standardised supply chain practices, otherwise go to waste in the food chain, including products with superficial damage to packaging, surplus orders or foods nearing their recommended sell-by dates. By donating such products, food companies avoid waste disposal levies and contribute to corporate social responsibility. FareShare arranges for this food to be

delivered to their warehouse, where their staff and volunteers re-allocate it to a wide range of local charities for below-market prices. Clients include homeless charities, community kitchens and youth centres. A key feature of the FareShare franchise model, which currently has 20 depots across the UK, is that volunteers support a team of core staff. These are people from a wide range of backgrounds including environmental activists, welfare recipients and those seeking to enter the labour market. FareShare supports them with formal and systematic training and vocational accreditation.

vibrant, bohemian culture and diverse population. Bristol is home to early works by the famous street artist Banksy, supports many forms of urban music and has a thriving arts scene. The city sits at the gateway to the rural southwest, the English region most economically reliant on agriculture. Food and agriculture are, however, largely outside of the control of local politics. The regulation of food is principally influenced de facto by the multiple retailers that supply about 80% of UK groceries. In terms of spatial planning the food system has a profound impact on the urban landscape, defining not only the built edges of the city but also the streetscape. Local authorities have limited powers to control the development or location of individual stores. All of this has led to site-specific tensions but also a wider context for the way in which people experience cities.

Much of the criticism against the dominant food system (dramatically so in the case of Bristol, where violent riots accompanied fierce opposition at the opening of a super-market branch) emerged from an increased awareness in Bristol about its reliance on fossil fuels. This became especially evident during fuel distribution boycotts in 2001 resulting in tangible food shortage threats. Concerns about the food system are also associated with the CO₂ emissions of agriculture, food transport, refrigeration and post-retail consumer practices, all of which exacerbate global warming. Recent flooding in or near the cities of Gloucester and Bath demonstrates how vulnerable the area can be to increasingly extreme weather patterns. The sharp oil price rise during the recession, followed in 2014/15 by a dramatic drop, reinforced the link between volatile oil prices and the price of food in a very direct way. Despite food price falls, many vulnerable households have inadequate family budgets to meet nutritional standards and, consequently, are in need of food support. This widespread food security challenge, affecting people in work as much as those who are jobless, is new in the UK and underlines another type of food system vulnerability.

The intersection of the environmental, social and community factors has provided the driving force for a diverse

network of civic food initiatives in the city region. To describe, or even map, food initiatives in the city region is challenging in terms of number, scale and scope, but we estimate that there are more than 200 groups. In scale they range from those involving hundreds of people, such as *The Community Farm* (see box), to those focused on neighbourhoods, such as shared gardens. In scope they range from initiatives to fight obesity through operations such as food waste cafes and food banks to those attempting to resurrect artisan food skills. Without central coordination there are areas of overlap and even redundancy; some initiatives are well organised and networked, others fizzle out quickly. Most organisations are no- or low budget and rely on finding points of leverage to create change.

An important civil-society intervention was the formation of the *Bristol Food Network* (BFN) in 2009, registered as community interest company in 2014, to promote a set of key goals, including:

- Encourage people to cook from scratch, grow their own and eat more fresh, seasonal, local, organically grown food.
- Champion the use of local, independent food shops.
- Encourage the use of good-quality land in and near the city for food production.
- Promote and encourage the redistribution, recycling and composting of food waste.
- Advance nutritional education and social cohesion.
- Promote community-led food trade.

This wide platform has become one around which a wide range of groups can gather, and includes those concerned with radical social transformation of the food system, those advocating diet changes, and locals who wish to cultivate a patch of ground in their neighbourhood.

Food strategies, action plans and the Bristol Food Policy Council

In 2009, BFN wrote a *Sustainable Food Strategy* for Bristol, which stimulated the City Council to develop its own ten-point food charter. This effectively became an unofficial food strategy to support public-sector food procurement. The

charter was a significant step forward and improved communication between staff from different sections of the Council in a Food Initiative Group.

Another key resource in further developing the food network was the publication of the report *Who Feeds Bristol?* written by experienced and influential food campaigner Joy Carey and commissioned by the local National Health Service (NHS). The report, which has become an exemplar for other cities, was “*primarily a descriptive analysis of the food system serving Bristol*” but, for the first time, provided a wide range of information about the operation of the food system in the southwest region. This ranged from the number of independent food shops (140), through an exploration of the concentration of supermarkets in Bristol, to a description of food infrastructure (wholesale markets, abattoirs) in the wider southwest of England. Apart from secondary data sources, it included some interviews and “snapshot surveys” with selected food businesses. Despite its constraints, the report provided a key resource for discussing Bristol’s food system and how a closer integration might be created between the productive rural areas and the consumer markets of the city region.

A further development, in March 2011, was the formation of the *Bristol Food Policy Council* (BFPC), modelled on precedents in North America, notably Toronto, Canada. BFPC’s establishment followed some earlier experiments in the UK to coordinate food policy within municipal government, such as Greater London Food Policy Council in 1984, London Food in 2004, and Sandwell Healthy Urban Development Unit in 2008. With members drawn from a wide range of stakeholders including local food industry, Bristol City Council, Bristol Food Network, universities and grass-roots bodies, it set itself the goal of promoting “Good Food”, defined as being “*vital to the quality of people’s lives in Bristol. As well as being*

tasty, healthy and affordable the food we eat should be good for nature, good for workers, good for local businesses and good for animal welfare”.

The recommendations from the *Who Feeds Bristol* report have now become the basis for the *Bristol Good Food Plan* framework, launched in November 2013. The next step in 2015 is to develop a more detailed action plan with clear commitments, outcomes and success measures. The Food Plan aims to help different actors to participate in an integrated, sustainable food vision for the city, and represents a mechanism for people to coordinate discussion and work. Although not formally part of Bristol City Council, the BFPC and its *Good Food Plan* gained the official support of Bristol’s Mayor. Other achievements of the BFPC include a City Council review of food in relation to strategic development. Despite these encouraging developments, activists still face challenges, including the City Council’s approval to develop land adjacent to the M32 motorway for public transport infrastructure development. Campaigners had long argued that this high-quality land should be dedicated to meeting some of Bristol’s food needs.

Food activism, innovation and system change

The networks of Bristol food activists have been able to lever considerable change with well-timed and well-executed *discursive* interventions. The Bristol Food Policy Council holds a seat open for a representative of the multiple retailers, and that symbolic space captures the food network’s struggle to influence mass consumers and producers. As yet the city region has limited powers over the food system, and it is unlikely that quick or deep changes to that system can be made.

However, as the examples of *FareShare* and *The Community Farm* (see boxes) demonstrate, there are niches available in

FareShare challenges food poverty

The Community Farm (CF) is a community-supported and cooperatively owned farm on the periurban fringe of Bristol, about 11 km from the city centre. The CF seeks to combine producing sustainable food with the development of a social community linked to the farm. The CF was founded in 2011, initially growing organic vegetables on nearly 9 hectares. Initially run as a private enterprise, the CF had a voluntary steering group that gradually solidified the organisation of the CF, attracting a donation of £20,000, and a part-time organiser who re-established the CF as a Community Interest Company. Thereafter, over 400 individual cooperative investors raised a further £126,000 to finance CF’s development. The CF’s main commercial activities are a box scheme for organic vegetables, retailing at farmers’ markets in Bath and Bristol, and a wholesale

business that supplies local caterers and restaurants. While the CF employs professional growers, volunteering is a key element to develop a community around the farm. Such unpaid labour comes in the form of regular weekly workers, monthly family groups or one-off visitors, and fee-paying corporate team-building parties. CF also runs formal horticultural apprenticeships in collaboration with the Bristol Drugs and Alcohol Project (BDAP) which is funded through the National Health Service. The various working opportunities fulfil a range of different operational, horticultural and social functions, as well as offering city residents a hands-on opportunity to learn skills, make friends, enjoy the open air and learn about the source of their food. In 2014 the CF was a runner in the BBC TV “Farmer of the Year” competition.



Tractor at The Community Farm. Photo by Matt Reed

the food system for *practical* interventions. Both cases demonstrate a high degree of operational effectiveness; in the former case, to lessen the wastefulness of mainstream food distribution and, in the latter, to create a multifunctional agricultural concept. Nevertheless, they also face limitations. *FareShare* relies on the food system's wastefulness to further its social goals, while *The Community Farm*, in providing several non-commercial functions, tries to fund these through its trading enterprise, albeit with voluntary work and solidarity investments. Both cases thus demonstrate the capacity for the network to create alternatives – although these are not disrupting the dominant food system, but operate in parallel to it. By demonstrating that an alternative is viable, these projects provide an important service not just to those who directly benefit from each initiative, but also to the wider collective imagination of the food network. In this way the practical initiatives represent forms of discursive intervention, demonstrating viability and providing inspiration for further action.

Conclusions

The Bristol example shows that citizens' activism has been highly influential in several ways. Firstly, the ability of people to organise themselves into formal and inclusive networks, particularly BFN and BFPC, has inspired policy engagement with sustainable food within the City Council, particularly under the championship of an elected, independent Mayor and with opportunities linked to Bristol Green Capital. Secondly, the effective communications of these networks and their expertise has generated a wealth of food-related knowledge and goodwill with positive implications across

public, private and voluntary sectors. This, in turn, encourages further localised actions which underscore the multiple values and social/environmental functions of urban food production and also present compelling arguments for a more diversified food economy. Thirdly, the nature of Bristol's food initiatives, which include new financial, organisational and retailing methods, have led the city to become a place for food innovation in the southwest.

These achievements, however, face a number of persistent challenges, including the continuing absence of a food strategy for Bristol, in contrast to the publication of a food strategy, in March 2015, in neighbouring Bath and North East Somerset. The strategic review of Bristol's development policies in 2016 offers new hope in this respect. However, it is noteworthy that the *Who Feeds Bristol?* report was initially encouraged by the public health service, which has limited influence over urban land use, retailer profiles and peri-urban agricultural policies. All of these are ingredients which BFN identifies as key for a systemic sustainable food approach.

The city region concept has undoubtedly helped cast Bristol within, and not separate from, its productive hinterland. Experiments leading to the delegation of central government funds to city regions have begun to raise the prospect of a Bristol-Cardiff-Newport "super city region" which would further expand the productive area from which food can be drawn. This could benefit from Welsh government attempts to support local food in public procurement and regulate the carbon impact of development. If Bristol's grass-roots networks can successfully recreate helpful political and financial supports, things could be looking up.

With the status of European Green Capital, the expectations for demonstrable change have grown. The network of food activists has demonstrated that they can deliver new ideas, policy contributions and practical examples of change. Many key resources to creating wider and more systemic food-system change lie within the control of the local state. The challenge for those in local government is to match the constructive and civically minded contribution of the food activist network. The next eighteen months will see if Bristol develops into the beacon it has frequently suggested it could become.

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