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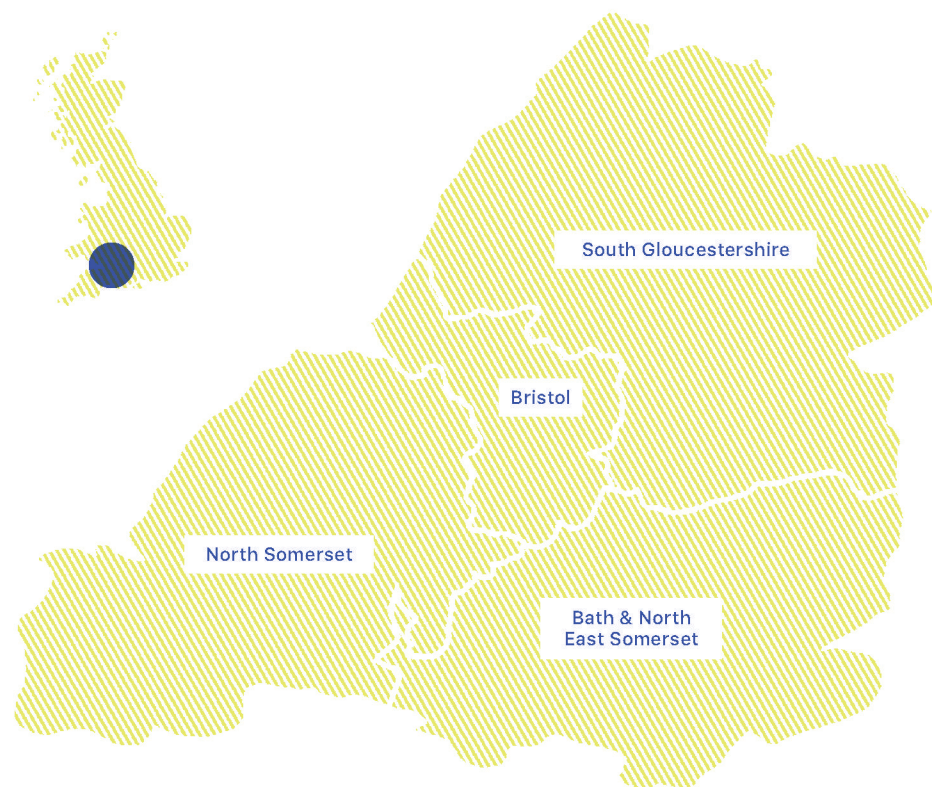
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BUILDING THE  
BRISTOL CITY-  
REGION FOOD  
SYSTEM

CITY-REGION  
PERSPECTIVE



## Introduction

Bristol is located in England's geographical southwest. It has a population of about 455,000, 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 vibrant, bohemian culture, thriving arts scene, and diverse population. The West of England Combined Authority—which comprises the following local authorities: Bristol, Bath & North East Somerset, and South Gloucestershire—is generally seen as Bristol's city region. It has a population of about 910,000. Since May 2017, the Bristol city region (formally the West of England Combined Authority) is among the first of seven city regions in England with an elected 'metro-mayor', responsible for economic development, housing, and transport.

The city of Bristol sits at the gateway to the rural southwest, the part of England 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 by the multiple retailers that supply about 80% of UK groceries. Spatially, 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 multiple retailer stores.

Much of the criticism against the dominant food system 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 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of agriculture, food transport, refrigeration and post-retail consumer practices, all of which exacerbate global warming. Recent flooding in or near the Bristol city region 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.



### Civic Food Initiatives

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 to those focused on several persons sharing a garden in a neighbourhood. 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. There are areas of overlap and even redundancy; some initiatives are well organized and networked, others fizzle out quickly. Most organizations 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 a community interest company in 2014, to promote a set of key goals, such as: encouraging people to cook from scratch, grow their own produce and eat more fresh, seasonal, local, organically grown food; encouraging the use of good-quality land in and near the city for food production; promoting and encouraging the redistribution, recycling, and composting of food waste; and advancing nutritional education and social cohesion. 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. In 2009, BFN wrote a 'Sustainable Food Strategy' for Bristol, which stimulated the City Council to develop its own 10-point food charter. This internal charter effectively became an unofficial food strategy to support public-sector food procurement. The charter was a significant step forward and improved communication among 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? Towards a Resilient Food Plan', commissioned by National Health Service (NHS) Bristol. The study resulting in this report was shaped around the following questions:

- Who feeds Bristol and where does the food come from?
- How does Bristol city's food supply system fit into the wider region's food supply system?
- What are the strengths and vulnerabilities?
- To what extent is the current food supply system that serves Bristol city region resilient to shocks and unexpected circumstances in the longer term?
- Which areas of the city and which groups of Bristol residents would be most adversely affected by vulnerabilities in the food supply system?
- What role and powers do the city's decision makers and key stakeholders have in shaping the food system that serves the city and the city region?
- What are the priority areas that need to be addressed in order to develop a more resilient food supply system for the future?

To this end the study looked at the six key components of the food system: production, processing, distribution, retail, catering, and waste. It investigated the provision of basic staple food items; land use for current and potential food production; and the current food supply capacity from the surrounding region in relation to the food needs of Bristol. It also investigated which businesses were involved in preparing, distributing, selling, and recycling or disposing of food across the city region and within the city itself. Information was gathered from existing reports, databases, websites, surveys, and business interviews. The report was 'primarily a descriptive analysis of the food system serving Bristol' but, for the first time, provided a wide range of information about the op-





FareShare South West, Bristol, redistribution of surplus food to charities, photo: Saline Verhoeven



Vegetables for decoration at College Green, Bristol Cathedral, photo: Saline Verhoeven



eration of the food system in the south-west region. 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. The report advocates a 'Food Systems Planning' approach for Bristol in order to build a food culture for the city that has the health of people and planet at its heart.

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. 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 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 first elected Mayor (George Ferguson, 2012–2016).

The networks of Bristol food activists have been able to lever specific strategic changes with well-timed and well-executed discursive interventions (for example, the decision by North Bristol Health Trust to address the sustainability of their food procurement policy and catering operations, or the inclusion of a paragraph about the food system in Bristol City Council Planning Policy). 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.

### Conclusions

The Bristol example shows that citizens' activism has been highly influential in several ways. Firstly, the ability of people to organize themselves into formal and inclusive networks, particularly BFN and BFPC, has helped to improve strategic coordination and inspired policy engagement with sustainable food within the City Council. Secondly, the effective communications of these networks and their expertise have generated a wealth of food-related knowledge and goodwill with positive implications across public, private, and voluntary sectors. This, in turn, encourages further localized actions that 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, organizational and retailing methods, have led the city to become a place for food innovation in the south-west. And finally, Bristol has been very influential in the UK, encouraging other initiatives to emerge and grow.

The city region concept has undoubtedly helped cast Bristol within, and not separate from, its productive hinterland. However, a consideration of the food system is not included in the responsibility of the city region's metro-mayor. In the future this could be called for, given the links between the food systems and domains the metro-mayor is responsible for: transport, jobs, and economic development. If Bristol's grass-roots networks can successfully recreate helpful political and financial supports, things could be looking up. The network of food activists has demonstrated that they can deliver new ideas, strategic/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.

