The Bristol Method

how to encourage food production in the city

In it for good

BRISTOL 2015 EUROPEAN GREEN CAPITAL
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Introduction

Good food is fundamental to our quality of life and wellbeing and should also be a source of pleasure. ‘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’ (Bristol good food charter).

From the perspective of the city, we want to make sure that our food system is sustainable with positive impacts on the environment – as well as on the people who grow, make or sell it. Building on Bristol’s rich food history and culture, the vision of the Bristol good food charter is designed to celebrate good food and to bring individuals and institutions together to increase the demand and supply of fresh, seasonal, local and organic food throughout the city. By 2020, we want Bristol to be Britain’s Sustainable Food Capital.

This module covers the work that Bristol City Council has done to promote food growing specifically on allotments and in parks and green spaces as well as case studies of groups that are helping to promote urban food production. (For more information on Bristol’s wider work on food, see the module on how to become a more sustainable food city.)

‘Bristol’s allotment plots could produce between 4% and 5% of the city’s fruit and veg needs.’

‘Who Feeds Bristol? Towards a resilient food plan’, 2011
What’s the history of food production in Bristol?

Bristol has long been a pioneer of urban food production, and is home to a great many local growing initiatives. The first major community initiative was Windmill City Farm founded in 1976, the first urban farm to exist outside London.

A team of local people sought the council’s agreement to convert a derelict piece of land into a community food growing project with volunteers creating organic allotments and raising livestock. As well as providing a source of local food and a green space for people to enjoy, the farm also helped create community cohesion and provide training and educational opportunities. The Windmill City Farm inspired a movement in Bristol and Hartcliffe, St Werburghs and Lawrence Weston City Farms soon followed, along with a number of other community gardens. Bristol is now home to the Head Office of the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, and to the Soil Association.

Permaculture – sustainable and self-sufficient agriculture – is an underpinning value for many of Bristol’s food schemes. The Bristol Permaculture Group was set up in 1999 and has helped to establish or catalyse community growing projects on unused pieces of land all over the city. Bristol has become a centre of expertise for Permaculture, and is home to Shift Bristol, which has developed an innovative year-long Practical Sustainability Course with a specific urban focus.

Most recently, groups have been lobbying to protect a stretch of land along the M32, known as the ‘Bluefinger’ (named after the blue colour-coding for Grade 1 agricultural land on soil maps). Historically, this area was home to the market gardens that fed the city. Campaigners want to preserve this best-quality soil for food growing in perpetuity. (See p.8 for more on the conflicts between food growing and development.)

One of the managers of Windmill Hill City Farm, Phil Haughton, went on to found the Better Food Company which began as a box scheme in 1984, delivering local produce to homes and businesses and now runs two successful stores selling local and organic products (winner of Soil Association’s Best Independent Retailer Award in 2013). Phil was also involved with others in helping to establish the Community Farm, now one of the Better Food Company suppliers of fresh seasonal organic produce.

The Community Farm in Chew Magna, 9 miles south of Bristol, was established in 2010/11. It is a community-owned social enterprise on 22 acres, growing and selling organic food through a box delivery service. The aim is to help people learn about and reconnect with where their food comes from and how it is grown. More than 500 people share ownership of the farm and have a say in how it is run; many of the members live in Bristol and are involved as volunteer community farmers.

(For a timeline history of Bristol’s local food movement see further reading below.)
What is Bristol City Council doing to help people grow their own food?

As well as enabling people to produce low cost food locally and sustainably, allotments have long been viewed as leisure and recreational facilities which bring benefits to communities by creating green spaces and improving health and well-being. Not only is gardening a form of exercise but the fresh produce grown provides obvious nutritional benefits too. Allotments are also good for local wildlife.

Bristol City Council’s Allotments Service sits within the Parks service. Its Allotment Strategy has been reviewed a number of times since its inception in 1999, the latest iteration being a ten year strategy up to 2019. The main objective of the strategy is to maximise participation in allotment gardening. It was initially developed as a way to improve the management of the Allotments Service, following criticism by both District and Internal Audit of the way allotments were managed.

The Allotment Service, a team of just two, is tasked with increasing the amount of land used for local food growing projects, and improving the quality of allotments and smallholdings. The team works hard to promote allotments by letting Bristol’s citizens know where they are, and connecting eager gardeners with available plots. They also keep an eye out for disused land that could turned over to food growing – often scoring a double win by enabling local residents or community groups to tidy up dumping grounds or scrubland and turning it into land which they are proud to take care of.

The council’s current focus is on utilising more empty land to enable other groups and organisations to take on land to grow local food and teach others to do so. As well as investing in new sites, part of the council’s strategy has been selling off poorly maintained or derelict allotment sites and using a portion of the capital to invest in projects that let more people take on plots.

Bristol City Council Cabinet has approved The Allotment Strategy, and also agreed that 50% of capital receipts from allotment disposals will be re-invested in the Allotments Capital Investment programme – providing vital funding.
Who are the key players?

Bristol City Council has been a crucial facilitator of Bristol’s urban food production by acting as a central hub for information and advice, and by centralising the way in which allotment sites are rented out.

It consults the various local allotment associations through the Allotments Panel, which meets once or twice a year to discuss issues. It also has regular interactions and discussions with the numerous organisations active in this space, both via one-to-one relationships and as part of wider networks such as the monthly meetings of the Green Capital Partnership Food Action Group (these were held through 2014, and have been replaced by bi-monthly Bristol Food Networking sessions in 2015).

Key non-council organisations involved in supporting urban food production include:

- Bristol Food Producers
- Avon Wildlife Trust
- Beacon Farms
- Bristol Food Network
- Blue Finger Alliance
- Incredible Edible Bristol

When discussing key players in urban food production, it goes without saying that it’s the growers who are critical. Beyond the allotment holders, there are numerous groups and organisations involved with growing fresh produce in the city, most at a relatively small scale but with a few larger exceptions. The pioneering Severn Project is the largest urban salad producer in Bristol. (See case studies below).

Photo credit: Severn Project
What does the council’s allotment scheme mean for local people?

For as little as £25 a year, a Bristol resident can apply to rent a space in an existing allotment. The council’s website (http://www.bristol.gov.uk/allotmentviewer) helps people to find one nearby, and gives people an idea of what’s available.

Discounts and concessions are available for people with low incomes or on benefits and the rents are reduced for plots that are overgrown, or for people who are prepared to commit to looking after the land for a long time period. If you have already been growing veg for 25 years, you can enjoy a 50% discount on rent.

Likewise, reductions are offered to people who would like to help run the sites, and manage the plot letting process. So a passionate local resident who is prepared to take a lead may find they can grow veg on a council allotment completely free.

It is a common misperception that allotments are hard to come by and that waiting lists are long. In actual fact, in most parts of Bristol there is land available, or only a short wait to get an allotment. The centralised role the council plays in publicising available land is highly valuable.

Community food growing groups and social enterprises also have an important role to play. These groups help introduce new people to gardening by educating and supporting beginners. Being part of a community growing group also allows people to become involved who have less time to offer, or who prefer to garden without the responsibility of managing a whole plot on their own.
What obstacles have there been to establishing allotments?

The local council reports encountering three main barriers when executing their Allotment Strategy. The first of these is conflicts of interest, where different groups are seeking different outcomes for open spaces. For instance, land that is being cleared for food growing could as easily be turned into parkland which more people could ultimately enjoy.

However, one of the main benefits of turning land into allotments is that it reduces the cost burden on the council to maintain the land, since the community act as caretakers.

The second challenge has been opposition to the disposal of allotment land. When allotments have fallen into disuse or are poorly maintained, the council sometimes chooses to sell the land to developers and use part of the capital raised to invest in other allotments.

However, it’s not always as simple as that. In 2016, the £200m MetroBus scheme will come into service, designed to improve Bristol’s public transport and contribute to reducing harmful CO2 traffic emissions. This partnership between the council and TravelWest requires the construction of a new bridge and slip road on the M32 which will impact the Stapleton Allotments site. The Allotments Service team have worked with their colleagues in the transport team to reduce the impact by narrowing the bridge and scrapping plans for a park and ride scheme but this area of grade 1 agricultural land will still be reduced by 60%. This is a difficult example of one environmental aspiration conflicting with another, and a reminder of the contradictory needs a council often faces.

The third obstacle the council has encountered is with public perception of particular projects. When a piece of land is first identified as suitable for an allotment, local residents occasionally resist the idea of change, fearing that it will be filled with strangers who disrupt the peace, and change the way the area looks. The council has found that public consultation and engagement typically allays such fears and, once allotments are up and running, residents’ concerns have rarely been realised. Consulting the public means that proposed projects serve the community well making it more likely to succeed.

A further challenge has been in finding suitable land to turn into allotments. There are various reasons why a plot may not be right for food growing, ranging from soil contamination or excess shade to poor quality topsoil or lack of access to water. In addition, the Allotments Service occasionally faces planning issues such as the rejection of a ‘change of use’ request.

The Council is currently working on a policy and procedures to enable further land to be brought into food production, subject to internal and external consultations. This will include a process for assessing i) the suitability of land and ii) the suitability of applicants to match them with land. Draft procedures will be tested on some small areas of Housing land and Grazing land.

Groups wishing to grow food in parks are supported by the Edible Parks and Open Spaces Policy, for which there is a specially designed tenancy agreement.

The Council is also signposting applicants for growing land to the Bristol Food Producers ‘land seekers survey’ to match up land requests from potential food growing businesses and individuals and social enterprises with disused council-owned land. This is in its early stages but some pilot sites are being tested as part of this process.
How would I go about replicating what Bristol has done?

1. **SET TARGETS**
   - Agree a minimum standard of allotment provision in each neighbourhood. In Bristol, there are a minimum of seven plots per 1,000 people and all residential areas are within ¾ mile of an allotment site.
   - Identify neighbourhoods that do not come up to this standard, or where demand is high, and identify land that can be repurposed for allotments in these areas.

2. **KNOW WHAT LAND YOU HAVE, AND MAKE SURE OTHERS KNOW TOO**
   - Identify and map areas of empty allotment, smallholding and other council-owned land that can be promoted to groups for food growing. Ideally make this publically available.
   - Identify open space land that could be transferred to food growing use and work with colleagues in other departments that also deal with land issues eg Housing and Property.
   - Promote sites that are under-used through available communications channels such as websites, leaflets or attending relevant shows and events.
   - Actively seek tenants for larger sites; provide longer-term leases and set up agreements with peppercorn rent; put them in touch with other departments if relevant eg Planning.
   - Create model tenancy agreements for groups growing food in Parks and public spaces.

3. **INVEST IN EXISTING SITES**
   - Identify work required on existing sites to bring them up to an acceptable standard.
   - Prioritise sites for improvement works and then allocate available funding.
   - In Bristol, minor work is sometimes done through the local site reps, while the landscape team handles bigger jobs. If a job is particularly large or requires specialised skills (such as plot clearance or fencing) the council uses external contractors on its approved suppliers list.

4. **RAISE FUNDS FROM UNUSED ALLOTMENTS**
   - Identify disused allotments that can be sold off to fund improvements to other sites.
   - Agree with purse holders (likely to be the council or central government) that a proportion of the funds raised in this way can be reinvested in other food growing sites. In Bristol, this is 50% of all proceeds.

“My advice to others is to first find out how much land you have under your control and then identify what is desirable and possible on it. You’ll need the support of your colleagues in the council, and the councillors themselves. And you should ensure that you work closely with the local community and food growing networks and community growing projects.”

Stephen Clampin, Senior Allotments Officer, Bristol City Council
Below are a few case studies that illustrate the wider benefits of community food growing and ways in which councils can provide practical support.

**Sims Hill Shared Harvest**
A member-owned, co-operatively run farm that grows fruit and veg using natural farming methods. It is run as a cooperative, meaning it is owned and run by its members with each member having one share and one vote. Monthly fees, agreed annually by members, cover the cost of the scheme. Each member shares in the running of the farm and receives a portion of the seasonal harvest.

The Allotments department actively sought a community supported agriculture (CSA)-type tenant for the Sims Hill site, and arranged a 10-year business lease with an early years peppercorn rent set up agreement. Bristol City Council also paid for mains water to be brought onto the site – essential for this to be a workable venture. (Sims Hill and Feed Bristol have been affected by the Metrobus scheme, see p.8) [http://simshill.co.uk/](http://simshill.co.uk/)

**Feed Bristol**
A community food-growing project set up by Avon Wildlife Trust to enable a wide diversity of people across Bristol to access and value the natural world through learning how to grow food using wildlife-friendly methods. In the first 3 years (2012–14) it engaged with 27,000 people (8,000 of which were disadvantaged groups). It has supported 12 business set-ups on the land and supported 40 people back into employment.

BCC provided Avon Wildlife Trust with a 10-year lease on 8 acres with initial peppercorn rent that has enabled the establishment of Feed Bristol. Project Coordinator Matt Cracknell says: “Without the Council’s support it would not have been possible to initiate such a large-scale community food growing project. Initial ‘seedcorn’ funding of c.£264,000, and approximately £560,000 of volunteer time, is estimated to have generated a social return on investment to the community of c.£6.7 million.”

The project was set up with a Big Lottery grant and secure tenancy was a key requisite for funding. Matt adds: “Projects like Feed Bristol illustrate the critical issue facing urban food production - long-term leases on land. This enables people to invest in the future without the uncertainty of being moved off land after a short set up period.”

BCC has allowed the project to become a business incubator site under the terms of the lease, in the acknowledgement that food growing projects have high levels of food production and community engagement but not necessarily high income potential.

In addition, BCC supported the project by providing £45,000 to help Feed Bristol make the transition to establish a sustainable business and reduce the reliance on external funding. Embedding the business plan has been successful and enabled Feed Bristol to employ 4 additional part time staff.

[http://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/feedbristol](http://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/feedbristol)

“The main way that we have supported projects like Feed Bristol and Sims Hill was by finding them land and giving them letters of support for funding/planning applications, reduced/peppercorn rent during the set up period; essentially a ‘set-up agreement’. We are very keen for these projects to continue as examples of helping people to learn about growing, which then helps them to go on to grow elsewhere, whether as allotment holders, home gardeners, or on a larger scale.”

Stephen Clampin, Senior Allotments Officer, Bristol City Council
Castle Park
One of the few open green spaces in the city centre, a haven for people and wildlife and a ‘green lung’ at the heart of Bristol. The Castle Park veg bed was established in 2010 as a way to promote food growing in parks and open spaces. The Allotments team initiated the planting and established the first edible bed within a Bristol park. Raised vegetable beds were added next to the cycle path, and all produce grown is free for anyone to harvest when ripe. Incredible Edible Bristol took over the bed in April 2014 and is working with volunteers from all across the city to continue to grow food in the bed, as well as teach people about food growing through those volunteering opportunities. Bristol City Council have established a model agreement for groups who want to start growing in public spaces, as this type of project raises issues not covered by standard tenancy agreements. The Council has extended their own use of edibles within public planting schemes, with City Hall seasonally approached by decorative displays of corn, chard, kale and colourful lettuces.

ediblebristol.org.uk/events
http://www.castlepark.org.uk/

The Bristol Somali Resource Centre
A community based organisation which supports people who are socially and economically disadvantaged in particular but not limited to people of Somali origin and heritage living and/or working within Bristol. Their allotment project is designed to give people space and support to grow vegetables. The centre runs horticultural sessions led by an experienced horticulturist for people who would like to develop gardening skills or gain knowledge about community gardening in general.

http://www.somalicentre.co.uk/allotment-project

The Severn Project
By far the largest commercial producer of salad leaves in the city. Originally based on two different temporary non-allotment sites, it is now on a large allotment site of 5.5 acres in Whitchurch, South Bristol. In the last 12 months Severn Project has supplied over 80 businesses with a total of 31 tons of salad. It provides employment to people many of who would struggle in the mainstream job market. The Council granted planning permission for a total of 1250m of polytunnels, and a number of farm buildings. The project now has a tenancy agreement with the Council for 10 years at a peppercorn rate. On a previous temporary site (property of Homes and Community Agency) the Council was instrumental in activating a local development order to allow swift development of polytunnels, office and packing area; and in extending the lease beyond the period owned by HCA. They were also supportive in allowing Severn Project to licence the temporary use of the site to other organisations (Bristol Water) bringing in a revenue stream of over £12k, very useful when the project had to move to the new site.

http://www.thesevenproject.org/

**Grow Bristol**

A new urban farming enterprise developing innovative and sustainable ways of growing food in the city. Using aquaponic and vertical farming systems, Grow Bristol are creating a new kind of market gardening with vegetable and fish production in city spaces not normally suited to agriculture. In summer 2015 they moved onto their new site on Feeder Road, having negotiated a two-year meanwhile lease with the Homes & Communities Agency who own the land. They are transforming this former industrial site into productive farm and space for training and public engagement. This development is based around the ‘Grow Box Project’, which takes a recycled shipping container and transforms it into an optimised food production system growing fresh and sustainable produce (salad leaves, herbs and fish) for the local market and which can be located in a variety of sites around the city. Grow Bristol’s recent scaling-up has been made possible thanks to a £50K Green Capital strategic grant awarded to the Urban Growing Trail. This has established a trail of city centre edible plots between Bristol Temple Meads and At-Bristol science centre.

[http://growbristol.co.uk](http://growbristol.co.uk)/

**Bristol Food Producers**

is a endeavour, funded through a £50K Bristol Green Capital strategic grant, to help support the scaling-up of urban agriculture in Bristol. The project involves 15 food producers and 10 strategic partners. It builds on previous work done in the city, which brought urban growers together to try and identify the barriers to setting-up, expansion and commercial success, and to look at how growers might work better together. The project has identified four major strands of work: Increasing productive land; Improving fairness and inefficiencies for smaller food producers; Improving access to markets; and Collaborating on learning. Amongst other things, Bristol Food Producers are investigating a shared branding for Bristol-grown produce, and are developing ‘The Bristol Certificate’ – a qualification for urban growers that gives them a solid grounding in skills they will need to run their own food enterprises – from business plans to first aid, marketing and leadership. It is also developing a land matching service for both landowners and land seekers.

[www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/bristol-food-producers](http://www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/bristol-food-producers)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT BRISTOL 2015

European Green Capital is a prestigious annual award designed to promote and reward the efforts of cities to improve the environment. Bristol is the first ever UK city to win the award.

European Green Capital is run by The European Commission, recognising that Europe’s urban societies face many environmental challenges – and that sustainable, low-carbon living is vital to the future of our cities and our people.

The award was first won by Stockholm in 2010. Since then, Hamburg, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Nantes and Copenhagen have carried the torch. Bristol will hand over to Ljubljana at the end of the year.

THE BRISTOL METHOD

The Bristol Method is a knowledge-transfer programme aimed at helping people in other cities understand and apply the lessons that Bristol has learned in becoming a more sustainable city, not just in 2015 but in the last decade.

Each module of the Bristol Method is presented as an easy-to-digest ‘how to’ guide on a particular topic, which use Bristol’s experiences as a case study. The modules contain generic advice and recommendations that each reader can tailor to their own circumstances.

The Bristol Method modules are published on the Bristol 2015 website at www.bristol2015.co.uk/method

Further reading

The allotments section of Bristol City Council’s website:
https://www.bristol.gov.uk/museums-parks-sports-culture/getting-an-allotment

Who Feeds Bristol?
http://bristolfoodpolicycouncil.org/who-feeds-bristol/

History of the Bristol food movement
http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/433370/Bristols-Local-Food-Movement-Important-Moments/

Bristol’s Urban Growing Survey: Enjoying, learning, eating, connecting, 2014
www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/2015/05/bristols-urban-growing-survey/

Bristol’s annual Get Growing Trail and map and information on local growing
http://www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/get-growing-map/
http://www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/topics/growlocal/

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