

How can local initiatives help accelerate progress to sustainability in a socially inclusive manner?

A case study of the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

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About this research brief

Research suggests that there are at least five ways that local initiatives can help to accelerate progress towards sustainability across city-regions. Progress towards sustainability in Brighton and Hove has been quite uneven across domains (food, energy, transport, waste, and so on). However, the greatest progress has been in the domain of food, largely facilitated by the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership.

This briefing paper provides an overview of the ways in which the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP) has driven progress towards sustainability within the city region. The findings aim to:

- Inform and further the future work of BHFP
- Enable similar organisations to make more of a difference
- Facilitate local government policy makers to work with local organisations to deliver meaningful change
- Provide a model for EU policy makers working on social innovation.



Why the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership?

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP) has been particularly successful in helping to accelerate progress towards sustainability across the city-region, and in a way that is socially inclusive. It provides a great case study for others seeking to understand how sustainability-focused local initiatives can help to accelerate progress towards sustainability in ways that are socially inclusive.

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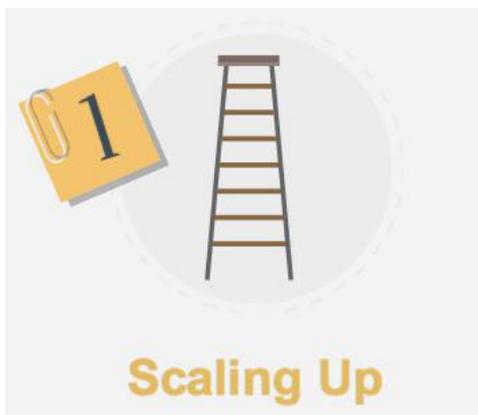
Introduction to the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

BHFP was set up in 2003 by a number of individuals who felt that there was a need to achieve greater co-ordination of activities relating to food in Brighton and Hove (food growing, cooking, nutrition, food provision in social care contexts, food education, research, and so on). More than ten years on, the BHFP has achieved this by working in formal partnership with the City Council, public health, the two local universities, local businesses and the community and voluntary sector, as lead actor and co-ordinator of the City Food Strategy. In addition to this high-level working, BHFP delivers a range of services within local communities and provides advice to smaller local organisations. As well as pioneering new approaches for local food, BHFP also influences the development of policies and strategies in other domains by holding seats on a number of strategic boards in the city.

BHFP as a case study

BHFP is hailed as an exemplar for other UK cities that are enrolled on a programme known as the Sustainable Food Cities Network, and these cities are being encouraged to emulate its best achievements.

BHFP is breaking new ground both locally and in the wider national context by accelerating progress to sustainability in the ways outlined below.



Since 2008 the number of individual people signed up as members of BHFP has grown from around 200 to more than 4,000 (i.e. it has grown 20-fold), which has largely been in the last few years. BHFP believes that its '**broad church approach**' (i.e. being inclusive in their communications / not being too 'worthy') has allowed it to bring lots of different people on board. It also believes that it is able to inspire more people than other initiatives because the focus is on positive projects and solutions, rather than problems. Moreover, membership growth has had a positive feedback effect, as BHFP has found that its most important '**champions**' are

often identified from within the membership base.

Champions are single individuals **that are very effective at promoting the initiative to a large number of people**, such as an individual working on maternal obesity at the hospital who advises midwives and passes on information about BHFP's healthy weight management service.

As well as growing its membership, in 2008 BHFP grew from being volunteer-led and running on very low levels of resource, to acquiring six or so members of staff and an office, which amounted to a big **cultural change**, requiring many new policies and procedures.

Then, in 2009, BHFP again grew to around 20 staff, partly as a result of taking on funding from the Big Lottery's Local Food Fund to deliver the Harvest project (on community food growing). However, BHFP has resisted growing its operations much more than this, as it has now achieved a more-or-less

'optimal' size – i.e. big enough to make a difference but small enough to be effective and efficient.

For BHFP, **successful upscaling has relied on the credibility of its team**, and their mix of skill sets. In particular, these include **expertise around project delivery and policy development**, as well as good professional networks with business and the local political elite. In particular, its early growth was enabled by funding from the local Primary Care Trust (PCT), which paid for a **director who had the skills** not only to deliver the PCT's programme on healthy weight management, nutrition and cookery services, but also to raise further funding for city-wide environmental food projects.



Despite the fact that initiatives in Brighton are generally reluctant to copy the approach of others working within the city-region, BHFP has **helped to spread good ideas** and approaches in this way. By acting as an **umbrella organisation**, it has enabled smaller initiatives to start up new projects.

For instance, from 2009-2013 BHFP **catalysed** and supported the development of 50 new community growing projects in the city, from an initial 25 or so. Furthermore, BHFP plays a leading role within the UK-wide network of Sustainable Food City initiatives, within which it has been used as a model of good practice for groups starting up in other cities.

BHFP also draws inspiration from other city food initiatives within the network – such as those in Plymouth and Bournemouth, which have made great strides in connecting community food to tourism – thereby importing good ideas and approaches from elsewhere.



Over its lifetime BHFP has actively pursued relationships with other sustainability-focussed local initiatives in the city region and co-ordinated activities between and across other initiatives in a range of ways. For instance, BHFP participates in a number of virtual and informal networks, umbrella bodies and local governance partnerships (e.g. the City Sustainability Partnership, the Financial Inclusion Partnership, the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Downland Advisory Board). BHFP also attends other initiatives' events, is represented on their boards, shares resources and co-delivers projects with them. In this sense, it is truly a **'connector'** organisation **that creates links between and across initiatives**.

"Any organisation in the city that has got a member of staff, we probably work with them. It just is an endless list."

But BHFP is also a **'hub' organisation**, in that it creates space and a platform for community-level initiatives (e.g. community gardens, community cafes, cooking projects, food banks etc.) to raise their profile and extend their reach. These smaller food projects, which are unable to engage in city-level policy debates, **entrust BHFP to**

work on their behalf.

BHFP did not always get along easily with the grassroots activists running these smaller groups, and has worked hard to develop the "absolutely incredible relationship" (external commentator) that they now enjoy. Moreover, in order to maintain this good relationship, BHFP feels that it is important to demonstrate its own capacity to work at the grassroots level – for example, by running its own demonstration garden in a local park.

Going forward, BHFP has identified potential for **working with local initiatives that operate in other domains** – a prospect that could offer strong potential for accelerating progress towards sustainability across the city-region. For instance, it is looking to work with other initiatives tackling transport, on the issue of food distribution within the city, and with initiatives working on energy, to tackle food and fuel poverty. It is also currently investigating a possible joint project with local waste/recycling and energy groups, including Brighton Paper Round and the Brighton and Hove Energy Services Company (BHESCO), to set up a local anaerobic digester plant.



For BHFP, normalising sustainable food in the city-region means ensuring that all aspects of the local food system (nutrition/cooking, growing, procurement, poverty/access, waste, distribution, retail, etc.) are transforming – BHFP is not happy with uneven progress. It also believes that normalising requires chronic issues, such as poverty, to be addressed with **long-term solutions**, which can only be achieved by **working at different levels of the system** (i.e. with individuals, communities and with policies) simultaneously.

An example of this kind of approach is BHFP's **integrated community nutrition service** that takes referrals from a range of health services (GPs, hospitals, midwives, care providers), within which BHFP brings in sustainability messages. BHFP has also recently linked this range of services into their community food growing and composting initiatives, within which they provide care and training for vulnerable adults. It has achieved this in practice by establishing cross-referral from one service to the other.

Over the past few years, BHFP also **successfully lobbied** Brighton & Hove City Council to include sustainable food procurement standards within its catering contracts - a

change that has had **far-reaching consequences due to the number and range of public services affected** (social services, health, education, public events, and so on) and the systemic nature of the standards adopted.

For this to happen certain developments were crucial, including BHFP obtaining funding to run a **workshop** that brought together all the different catering contract managers within BHCC and the large caterers within the city; the decision to include mandatory standards as a key aim of BHCC's One Planet Living Plan (which BHFP argued for, through its role as a partner within the CSP); and support from officers within BHCC who engaged in **internal advocacy** to get approval from the relevant committees, legal and finance departments. The result is that all contracts worth over £75,000 now require caterers to adhere to the new standard and to achieve external accreditation through the Food for Life catering mark.

"There are areas where it's been really difficult to make change. It's taken 10 years to encourage the procurement department to make the commitment to adopting minimum standards. This was achieved in the end by making a convincing case that it could be achieved viably. So some things take more input, in this case it took consistent pressure and a bit of opportunism, but finally persistence won out".

In terms of key lessons from their experiences of **normalising sustainable food within local government**, BHFP has had to accept that the Council's timeframes are much

slower than their own, and to **find ways of making the jobs of Council officers easier by showing them solutions.**

Indeed, having support from within the Council is very useful for BHFP, both in terms of finding out how things work, and getting tip-offs about upcoming opportunities for influence. **Supportive officers** at the Council have also **engaged in sustained internal advocacy on BHFP's behalf and won cross-party support for its strategic aims** – a crucial factor in the context of a council where there is no overall majority. Hence, despite a volatile political backdrop, BHFP has been a critical friend and a **trusted partner** to all parties and all council administrations, which has enabled it to weather political changes fairly smoothly. What's more, BHFP has also been able to help the Council by facilitating a complete turnaround in the previously antagonistic relations between the Council and the local community food sector, to a point where **the Council can now deliver projects with a host of community food initiatives** that would have refused to work with them in the past.

In the words of a Council officer:

"That relationship has totally been healed by this work... so tangible projects have been delivered because our relationship has improved through the Food Partnership, which has been a bridge as well as an umbrella".



For many initiatives, their sensitivity to developments from outside the city-region – e.g. their reliance on charitable funding for carrying out projects, financial incentives for developing green technologies, and/or regulations imposed on business for delivering environmental services – makes them vulnerable to changes in these external contexts.

Indeed, in the case of BHFP, national level policy developments – including fiscal austerity measures, changes to the planning framework, benefit levels, regulations on multiple retail, procurement policies, and so on – constitute some of the biggest influences on its work. However, BHFP has a good track record of **seeing these kinds of developments as opportunities**, and of harnessing them to strengthen progress towards sustainable food systems within Brighton and Hove. For instance, it views the School Food Plan, which was introduced by the Con-Lib Coalition Government in 2013, as a “far-reaching policy” that creates an institutional space for them to work within as they pursue ever better environmental standards for food served in schools. Likewise, BHFP has made the most of opportunities presented by the move (nationally) towards competitive

outsourcing and commissioning of some public sector services. Nonetheless, BHFP does not directly seek to influence national policy, but instead **engages with national-level bodies in order to feed into and support their work** – e.g. BHFPs support for Sustain’s current Campaign for Better Hospital Food.

Moreover, BHFP has also **capitalised on various national level funding agendas**, such as the current focus on protecting vulnerable adults, which has emerged in response to public sector funding cuts, and previous agendas around tackling childhood obesity and responding to concerns about food security.

Specifically, BHFP has **secured funds** from the local Primary Care Trust, the local Council, UK Government’s Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), the National Lottery (BIG), the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the European Cross-border Cooperation Programme INTERREG IV A, the European Regional Development Fund, and the European Social Fund Community Grants – and believes that it has managed to weather the “endless funding cycles” (**without losing its focus**) by having a **clear overarching strategy, planning ahead, and submitting bids in plenty of time**. Furthermore, BHFP recognises that when new opportunities for funding or public contracts come up they have to respond very quickly, especially if they are going to form partnerships for delivery of larger schemes.

As an example of this, when the local Primary Care Trust was replaced by Public Health, BHFP had to re-tender for its work on community nutrition, at which point it partnered with another well-connected local community-based organisation to deliver a more competitive service, and won.

On the other hand, BHFP finds that the channelling of funds towards particular groups or issues – which is often framed at a national level – can be counterproductive to delivering the most benefit at a local level. For instance, BHFP believes that activities like community gardening work best when the user base is most diverse, whereas the current policy focus on vulnerable adults makes this hard to facilitate. In fact, one of the biggest challenges faced by BHFP in the period before this, when the obesity agenda was attracting the most resource, was working across the other (non-health-related) areas of its food strategy.

In summary, BHFP experiences developments from outside the city-region as both challenging and promising in equal measures, with many specific developments having aspects of both opportunity and threat. What is of note is the way that BHFP **proactively responds** to these developments, continuously positioning itself in ways that allows it to harness them in order to strengthen its existing progress and drive forward in new directions.



Unlike some local sustainability-focussed initiatives, which pay no specific attention to social inclusion and have mainly engaged with well-educated, middle class people so far, BHFP is an **active promoter of social inclusion** and dedicates considerable time and effort to this end. In fact, BHFP responds to challenges of inclusion by attempting to both **'reach out'** to potentially excluded groups and **'reach in'** towards their existing constituencies (i.e. staff, core membership, user groups, target groups, and so on). Hence, its commitment to inclusivity determines not only the range of 'outreach' activities that it engages in, but also its choice of activities, projects and campaigns, the methods it adopts in its work, its staffing policy, its choice of locations to work in, and its decisions about which partners to work with. BHFP also **invests significant effort into monitoring, evaluating** and seeking to continuously improve its impact on social inclusion, e.g. by commissioning and conducting surveys and focus groups, as well as accessing data on service use and referrals, and then using this data to improve its outreach strategies so that it can engage more productively with the most **'hard-to-reach'** groups.

"To make the biggest wholesale change in what happens you have got to take lots of people with you"

In practice, BHFP is "very cautious to make sure that we are not preaching". Thus, its philosophy is to meet people "where they are", rather than asking them to achieve a particular level of sustainability in their lifestyle, and to **focus on "what can people do"**, rather than asking them to do things that are unachievable for them.

In this way BHFP believes it can reach the largest number and diversity of people – an ambition that explains why it has worked on procurement and school meals – "it is because that is where lots and lots of people go to eat. Actually lots of people from more deprived backgrounds". Likewise, BHFP has a major funded project that is targeted at providing access to community gardens for 'vulnerable adults' (including people who have a mental health issue or are long term unemployed), because this broad group has been found to benefit more than other groups from being involved in community gardening, but also faces issues in terms of access and needing support.

Brighton and Hove: a frontrunner in sustainability

Brighton and Hove is a particular place politically when it comes to sustainability. It was the first city in the UK to elect the Green Party into power in May 2011 and is still the only city in the country that is represented by a Green MP in Parliament (Caroline Lucas). Moreover, there is a healthy competition for the environmental sustainability agenda across all political parties. The city of Brighton and Hove also became the world's first designated One Planet Living City in 2013, and the wider city-region became the world's first designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to encompass a large urban area in 2014. In addition in 2014, the city was awarded the CIVITAS City of the year for sustainable transport with the judges commenting that "Brighton and Hove has made huge strides towards becoming a more sustainable city".

Furthermore, there is a wide variety of bottom-up, mainly third sector-led activity going on within the city that is targeted at sustainability issues. In total there are 80-100 local initiatives with activities such as coordinated eco-houses open days, community cookery projects, bike trains, city 'nature wardens', community gardening, an eco- technology show, business greening programmes, communal recycling projects... and much more. Brighton and Hove is therefore considered one of the frontrunner city-regions within Europe in terms of sustainability, which provides a good case study of how progress towards sustainability in European city-regions might be accelerated.



Ways that the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership has facilitated progress towards sustainability across the city-region

Scaling up



Increases size of membership using 'broad-church' approach, creates 'champions' who promote the initiative to a large number of people

Copying



Acts as an umbrella organisation, enables smaller initiatives to start new projects

Scaling up



Changes from volunteer-led to staffed organisation, enables acquisition of funding for product delivery and development of policies

Co-ordinating



Works as a hub organisation, leads to engaging in policy debates on behalf of smaller organisations

Normalising



Works at different levels of the system simultaneously with an integrated community approach, leads to far-reaching consequences as all aspects of the system are addressed

Harnessing



Develops a clear strategy and forward planning, enables proactive response to developments to capitalise on opportunities

Normalising



Engages at local level and helps councillors, who respond with cross-party support

Promoting social inclusion



Reaches out and reaches in towards existing constituencies, promotes initiative to greatest number and diversity of people

Conclusion

BHFP's decade of co-ordinating progress towards more sustainable food within Brighton and Hove provides a great case study for the ARTS project and for others seeking to understand how sustainability-focussed local initiatives can help to accelerate progress towards sustainability in ways that are socially inclusive. Of particular note is the way that BHFP has managed to keep extending its work to encompass a wider range of issues and reach a broader spectrum of people, whilst always finding ways of linking new work streams back into its established activities.

Background to the ARTS project

Researchers based in the SPRU - Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex have been working on the ARTS project (Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability) since January 2014. As part of this, Dr Rachael Durrant, Dr Florian Kern, and Professor Gordon Mackerron have been investigating what makes Brighton a frontrunner city-region and how progress to sustainability is being achieved by local initiatives. The principal objects of their enquiry are:

- (1) the 80-100 local sustainability-focussed initiatives currently operating within the city-region of Brighton and Hove
- (2) the broader sustainability scene in Brighton and Hove, including local government, the business sector and other important players
- (3) the UK and European-level political landscape that sets limits on what can be achieved in Brighton and Hove.

Although local sustainability-focussed initiatives are the primary focus of the research, these other local and non-local influences are vital to understanding how initiatives can, and do, accelerate progress towards sustainability.

In order to learn about these different influences on sustainability in Brighton and Hove, the team conducted 28 interviews in connection to 11 local initiatives, including the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership. They have also reviewed existing academic research on relevant aspects of the local, UK and European political landscape, conducted desk-based research, participated in local meetings, and conducted informal interviews to find out about over 70 other local initiatives. As well as highlighting a number of lessons about the ways that local initiatives drive progress towards sustainability, the research has also uncovered some specific points about the 11 initiatives studied in depth.

In general, the research finds that progress towards sustainability in Brighton and Hove has been quite uneven across domains (i.e. across food, energy, transport, waste, and so on). However, the greatest progress has been in the domain of food, largely facilitated by the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (BHFP). BHFP stands out as being particularly successful both in terms of helping to accelerate progress towards sustainability across the city-region, and in terms of doing this in a way that is socially inclusive. This briefing introduces some of the general points and provides a case study of the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership.

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