



Production, retail and catering are essential elements of an urban food system. (Photos: U. Bayr / NIBIO (left), S. Eiter / NIBIO (centre), D. Keech / CCRI (right))

Diverse business models support urban farming and food marketing in Bristol

The City of Bristol has a long history and well-established practices in urban farming and city food system planning. Farms apply different urban business models that take advantage of the proximity to the city by providing food to city dwellers. Dedicated retailers and restaurants specialize in local food, and a variety of organisations facilitate and promote a resilient and sustainable urban food system.

Norwegian farmers with urban business models from the Oslo and Bergen regions, and researchers from NIBIO, the Norwegian Centre for Organic Agriculture (NORSØK) and the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) at the University of Gloucestershire, had three days of meetings with urban food producers, processors, retailers, activists and planners in Bristol. They exchanged knowledge and experiences, in particular on market opportunities and challenges, and on farm sustainability.

URBAN FARMS: FAMILY, CARE AND CSA

Visits to four urban farms were part of the programme. Two farms are family farms with mainly livestock production, employing six and 28 full-time staff, respectively. One of these farms has a broad range of livestock-related products including different meats, eggs and honey, while the second is a

dairy farm. The third farm is an urban care farm of almost 5 hectares (50 daa), employing 20 part-time and full-time staff and with a workforce of 70 people who experience learning difficulties. The fourth farm is situated on the edge of a rural market town 50 km from Bristol. It is one of the oldest and largest Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms in the UK, established in 2002 and now has 340 shareholders and operates over 20 hectares (200 daa) in four different locations around the town.

Direct sales, self-processing and cooperation with processors and retailers are essential

Both family farms concentrate on direct sales of their products, and farmers' markets are an important sales channel for them. The family farm with a broad range of products purchases butchery services prior to on-farm sales, including in a small

café, and sales at farmers markets mainly in Bristol. In addition to meat products, eggs and honey, the farmer harvests and processes fruit and berries for sale. The dairy farm runs an on-site plant for cheese production and a café including a farm shop, as separate businesses. Sales are diversified into on-site (cheese and fresh milk), specialized retailers, and farmers' markets both regionally and in the London area, 185 km away, as well as an online sales and delivery service. The care farm runs a farm shop and a small number of vegetable boxes, while the CSA offers vegetables as part of shares, and livestock products for supplementary purchase by the shareholders.

Marketing reflects multifunctionality: biodiversity, social engagement, personality and brand

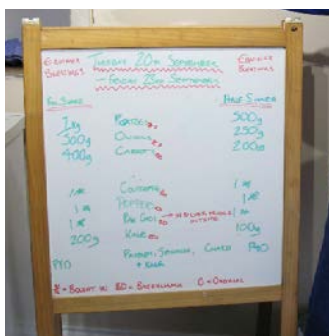
All four farms produce organically certified products, and several are explicitly promoting biodiversity, through cultivars or breeds, or through dedicated measures for wildlife such as habitat conservation. The care farm has a strong social focus, of course, and the CSA farm team is naturally concerned about shareholder involvement and enterprise 'ownership'. A significant difference between the family farms is that one farmer reported strong personal involvement at the point of sale, whereas the other focused on their brand visibility, such as on their own delivery

trucks, including driving to and from and being present at farmers' markets over a much larger area.

Land insecurity and limited access to workforce are critical

An important challenge for all farms is land tenure. They lease all or a large share of their farmland, and contract periods are short-term, mostly one or two years with options for renewal. This appears particularly precarious for a family farm where the land is under consideration for residential development. In contrast, lease contracts in Norway have a legal minimum duration of ten years. However, development pressure is a very familiar challenge for urban and peri-urban farmers in Norway, too.

Three farms reported restricted access to workers as a challenge, although for different reasons. The care farm lost the majority of its workforce as a consequence of the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The farm had to rebuild its team of workers from care institutions once restrictions were lifted. A member of the CSA farm team explained that shareholders' labour contribution was an important way to assist with production tasks, and to strengthen the social network of the CSA. As the CSA has grown, labour demand has risen, but so has the challenge of



Different marketing models: Farmer in personal dialogue (with foreign fellows and researchers in this case), branding "on the road", handwritten information to shareholders, and local posters. (Photos: U. Bayr / NIBIO (upper left), S. Eiter / NIBIO)



Challenges due to short-term lease contracts for farmland were among the topics discussed at the CSA farm. (Photo: S. Eiter / NIBIO)

promoting members' responsibility for participation in farm activities. Furthermore, despite the shareholder size, salaries for employed CSA staff are not regarded competitive with alternative career opportunities and fall short of regional cost of living requirements. The manager at the dairy farm highlighted Brexit as a challenge in recruiting employees, who previously included EU citizens, access to whom has now been restricted.

Idealism vs. pragmatism

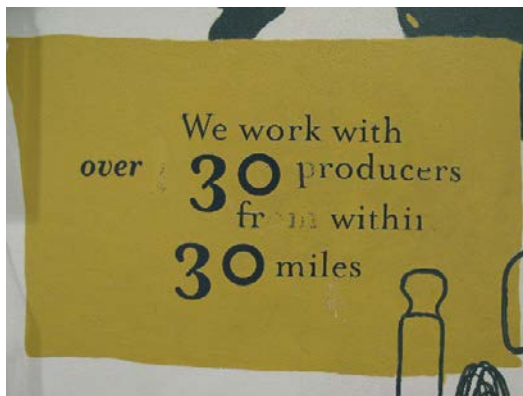
A strong sense of needing to change the prevailing food system was sometimes encountered in Bristol. Concern for social justice and environmental sustainability was notable in its impact on business arrangements and marketing strategies. The structure of the

CSA ensures that production is carefully matched to shareholders' demand, thereby minimising waste and sharing risk. As a consequence, there is usually no produce surplus that could be profitably sold elsewhere, for example at an innovative motorway service station 20 km away, which specialises in local sourcing.

The dairy producer was weighing up the benefits of remaining certified organic after more than 20 years, now that some of the rented agricultural land is to be used for other environmental initiatives, such as tree planting. The consequent reduction of grazing area may make it harder to feed cattle organically, while local branding is successfully creating a high demand for the product.



Encounters between Norwegian and English farmers turned out to be informative for both and were characterised by a deep mutual understanding – quite interesting to observe for attending researchers! (Photo: S. Eiter / NIBIO)



Explicit support of local producers in a grocery store, at a motorway service station, and through pick-up offers for veg boxes. (Photos: S. Eiter / NIBIO)

ORGANIC, LOCAL AND ETHICAL RETAIL AND RESTAURANTS

A local chain of grocery stores and a farm shop included in a motorway service station both offer a wide variety of products with a strong focus on local producers. The companies operate with a definition of “local” as distances up to 80 km and 50 km, respectively. However, the farm shop has many suppliers from within a radius of just 16 km. To offer an attractive and broad range of stock to customers, both companies offer some non-local products where no local alternative exists. In such cases, the grocery store then uses local wholesalers or importers (for exotic fruit), or domestic producers (for certain meats). Remarkably, the largest suppliers of the grocery stores are community farms, and all suppliers must undergo a rigorous assessment, according to a dedicated questionnaire comprising 38 questions on company, products, packaging, etc.

The grocery store includes a café, and the motorway service station includes both a take-away and a restaurant with a clear focus on locally produced food. Moreover, we visited a restaurant in Bristol city specializing in dishes including a regional heritage pig

breed, thus promoting genetic biodiversity. And finally, we visited Wapping Wharf, an area with dedicated facilities for local businesses, not least start-ups, as part of a city food system, situated in a former harbour area of the city.

BRISTOL'S CITY FOOD SYSTEM

In 2011 a report called ‘Who Feeds Bristol?’ suggested that 800 ha (8000 daa) of the city’s land – about 7% – had the potential to be used to grow fruits and vegetables. In the same year, the Bristol Food Policy Council was established as a multi-stakeholder network to promote a sustainable food system in the city. Since then, civil society organisations, food businesses, and the City Council have collaborated to develop a ‘whole food system approach’ which advocates a holistic pathway to improving Bristol’s food system. This includes identifying infrastructure needs, support for consumer behaviour change and applying IT innovations to make public procurement of local food more efficient.



Piglet of a regional heritage breed at a CSA farm, and branding of the breed at a local restaurant. (Photos: U. Bayr / NIBIO (left), S. Eiter / NIBIO (right))



The professionalism and range of local stock at the motorway service station was perceived as impressive. Its prices seem not to discourage customers seeking food quality or stories about supplier farms. (Photo: S. Eiter / NIBIO)

FACILITATING A SUSTAINABLE CITY FOOD SYSTEM NEEDS POLICY AND PRACTICE

Many diverse, innovative and pioneering urban food initiatives are creating inspiring changes at a local level. However, if a city wants to really create step-change in the food system – addressing the harmful aspects and also issues like social inclusion, climate change, and elements of a local green economy – then this requires a joint effort and clear shared goals. To learn more about this, the research team hosted a workshop attended by representatives of the Bristol Food Network, Bristol City Council’s sustainability team, a food procurement expert from neighbouring Bath and North-East Somerset Council (BANES), and a regional NGO: the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South-West (FWAG).

Bristol Council outlined how it had successfully attained a gold-level award from the *Sustainable Food Places* network, the second only city to achieve this in the UK. The expansion of urban growing spaces, the reduction of food waste, enhancing cooking and growing skills and tackling food poverty all formed part of the ‘Going For Gold’ application, which had been co-ordinated by Bristol Food Network, the Council and Bristol Green Capital, and is now in the implementation phase.

Following the attainment of the Gold award in 2021, Bristol Food Network has been continuing the work of building a city food partnership, a city good food movement and developing action pathways towards shared goals by 2030, all aimed at making Bristol’s food system better for communities, climate and nature.

A new IT innovation called Dynamic Food Procurement, which BANES has successfully piloted, makes it possible to source food from local producers in an efficient logistical and administrative process that matches seasonal supply with the demands of school caterers.

FWAG is involved in new approaches to agricultural land mapping, which capture habitats, ecosystem services such as flood risk management and other non-food public goods. Identifying these multiple functions of farmland, which clearly benefit city-dwellers, is designed to create opportunities for enhanced farmer incomes under the emerging post-CAP agricultural subsidy scheme.

URBAN FARMING INTO THE FUTURE: EIGHT INSIGHTS AND LEARNING POINTS

The Norwegian visitors found a lot of common ground with their English colleagues, despite a few national differences. The latter included for example land tenure durations, the small average size of Norwegian (25 ha – NIBIO 2018¹) compared to UK farms (68 ha in the South West – DEFRA 2021²), and the less pronounced rural-urban divide in Norway, where most of the best agricultural land is near towns and cities. Some key insights from the trip are given below.

1 <https://www.nibio.no/en/news/nine-facts-about-norwegian-agriculture>
 2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972103/regionalstatistics_overview_23mar21.pdf

Marketing

- On-farm retailing and catering seems to work well. Customers seek out farms even in peri-urban and rural places as daytrip destinations.
- Restaurants can offer interesting opportunities for high-margin sales, but may not buy large quantities per order.
- Retailers that try to support local producers may prove loyal: shops do not de-list producers unless they cannot meet the sourcing criteria.
- Organic and local are complementary concepts but there has been a resurgence of interest in local since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the costs of organic production are rising. Moreover, the complexities of organic certification can clash with investment or growth strategies.
- Cities offer distinctive market opportunities including diversity in market channels and a dense customer pool, and existing food infrastructures such as wholesale markets and good transport links.

Policy

- Local councils have limited power in the food chain. But some are trying hard to use their public buying power to support regional producers; and urban food and farming issues cover many aspects of well-being and sustainability which are being acknowledged in city-level policy-making, including care farming.
- Support for new financial instruments such as private sector payments for ecosystem services, and loans to small-scale, organic or unconventional business models, may be helpful for the expansion of diverse and innovative urban food enterprises.

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<https://www.nibio.no/en/projects/urbanfarms>

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- Going for Gold – Bristol Bites Back Better: <https://www.goingforgoldbristol.co.uk/>
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- Wapping Wharf – an exciting new neighbourhood in the heart of Bristol: <http://wappingwharf.co.uk/>
- Yew Tree Farm – Bristol’s last working farm: <https://www.yewtreefarmbristol.com/>

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