

Towards a sustainable food city: The case of the Bournemouth and Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership

Food and drink are essential parts of everyday life, so it is important to recognise how our relationship with them has a major affect directly, personally and continually on our well-being (Whatmore, 2002) and the world around us through environmental, social and economic impacts. This has led to calls to encourage the development of sustainable food systems that ensure food is sustainably produced, food waste reduced, and the effects of an increasing population on the planet minimised (Defra, 2013; Lorenz & Veenhoff, 2013; Lubin & Esty, 2010). Increasing concerns around the environment, food security (Van Passel, 2013) and diet-related health have resulted in greater emphasis on developing sustainable food and drink systems which balance economic, social and environmental goals through supporting local and regional economies, delivering social benefits, and protecting an increasingly fragile environment (Marsden & Morley, 2014). Defined as “a method of food production and distribution that is geographically localized, rather than national and/or international” (Grace Communications Foundation, 2016), ‘local food systems’ along with locally sourced, locally produced, and organic food networks (e.g. Donald, 2008) have received interest as potential models of sustainable consumption (Watts et al., 2005).

In 2013, Bournemouth and Poole became one of six cities in the UK to be funded under the national Sustainable Food Cities Partnership Programme (Sustainable Food Cities, 2016). The key issues to be addressed by the programme include:

1. Promoting healthy and sustainable food to the UK public
2. Tackling food poverty, diet-related ill health and access to affordable healthy food
3. Building community food knowledge, skills, resources and projects
4. Promoting a vibrant and diverse sustainable UK food economy
5. Transforming catering and food procurement
6. Reducing waste and the ecological footprint of the UK food system

The Bournemouth and Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership comprises “local people, businesses, community groups and public sector organisations who have come together to revolutionise the way people across the region grow, buy, cook, eat, celebrate and dispose of their food” (Bournemouth and Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership, 2016). The activities of the partnership support the need for developing sustainable food and drink systems in Bournemouth and Poole which balance economic, social and environmental goals through supporting the local economy, delivering important social benefits (e.g. food poverty campaign, community growing, etc.), and protecting the environment (e.g. sustainable fish cities programme) (Marsden & Morley, 2014). In order to arrive at a prioritised agenda for the partnership based on a shared understanding of sustainable local food, a survey was developed by a working sub-committee focused on research and information needs and knowledge dissemination for the partnership and emailed to existing members. Thirty four members of the fledgling Bournemouth and Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership reported on their understanding of the term “sustainable food”, key issues and priorities around sustainable food, current understanding of sustainable food in the local area, appropriate media for informing people about sustainable food, and awareness of sustainable food schemes. As there were only 34 responses from the 120 strong membership, caution must be expressed as to the representativeness of the survey results; however the survey yielded some useful indicative findings for defining the direction of the partnership and for future research.

Thematic analysis uncovered central issues and associations around key terms. First, respondents were asked to list the three main things that came to mind when they heard the term “sustainable food”. Local was the predominant response, with sustainable fishing and environmental protection including responsibly sourced being the next key themes. The term “local” was frequently mentioned in connection with the term “sustainable food” - an interesting finding given sustainable food does not have to be local and local food may not be, in all instances, sustainable (Grace Communications Foundation, 2016). Lesser attention was given to organic, health and the absence of pesticides/chemical which tended to be mentioned second or third, along with issues related to effective use of resources, reduced food waste, food miles, Fairtrade and food security. Seasonality, taste and cost also tended to be mentioned second or third, along with ethical issues and animal welfare.

In terms of key issues and priorities around the sustainable food agenda, respondents focused again on the “local” theme, with education including the need to raise awareness and information on where to find sustainable food emerging as another important issue. The environment, together with sustainable fishing, was considered to be of key importance along with other issues including sourcing and availability, supply chains, and price and affordability. Mentioned less often were concerns related to the ability to grow food, equality including fair access to sustainable food for everyone, animal welfare, health, having sufficient resources and food poverty. While food waste was not mentioned as a key issue it was of secondary and third concerns to six of the 34 respondents.

Utilising a 7 point scale (7 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree), respondents tended to disagree that food in Bournemouth and Poole is sustainable (3.5), people in the area are aware of the need for sustainable food (3.4) or that it is easy to find sustainable food in the local area (3.4). A range of media was considered useful for informing people about sustainable food and encouraging them to make more sustainable food choices, with social media (91%) and local newspapers (71%) considered to be the most useful by respondents, followed by local radio (65%), word of mouth (65%), attendance at food fairs/events (65%), and then websites (38%). Television (38%), leaflets/flyers (35%) and posters (35%) were deemed to be less useful for providing the required information. Respondents were questioned on their awareness of various sustainable food schemes/logos. While all of the respondents had heard of Fairtrade, only three quarters (76%) had heard of the Rainforest Alliance, and two-thirds (65%) had heard about the Marine Stewardship Council. Despite being interested in local food, fewer still were aware of local initiatives including Dorset Local Food and Drink (59%), Real Local Flavour (41%) and Hampshire Fayre (18%). Next, respondents were asked how frequently they purchased various local food and drink products on a 5 point frequency scale from never (1) to daily (5). The most frequently purchased products were locally sourced vegetables (3.6), Fairtrade products (3.6), locally sourced fruit (3.0), locally sourced dairy products (2.8), locally sourced meat (2.8), bread from a local bakery (2.7) and finally locally sourced drinks (2.6).

Respondents were then asked to rank a set of possible priorities of the three year Bournemouth & Poole Sustainable Food City Partnership on a 10 point scale (1 = most important; 10 = least important). The most important priorities for the Partnership are minimising food waste and using food surplus more effectively (7.1) and campaigning to increase understanding of sustainable food within the community (7.1). Supporting local food producers (6.2), increasing sustainable food sourcing in business (5.9), and supporting sustainable food businesses (5.8) are also considered to be important priorities. Other key

priorities include community growing (5.4), tackling food poverty (5.2), increasing sustainable food sourcing in the public sector (5.0), teaching cookery and other food skills (4.4), and finally, improving individual health and well-being (3.0).

In terms of what the Partnership should be focusing on over the next 3-5 years, the predominant issue raised by respondents was education. Other areas of focus include improving the ability to grow such as community growing and best use of land, food poverty and food waste. The involvement of local government was raised for the first time, followed by issues around sourcing, availability, accessibility, supply chains/distribution and the need for appropriate business and marketing solutions. When asked what needed to happen to support the longer-term vision (ten years) to be a sustainable food city, members of the partnership considered education, business support and business and marketing solutions including campaigning and a “seismic shift” in changing perceptions and attitudes toward sustainable food to be critical. Ongoing local government involvement, managing sourcing and availability issues, as well as ongoing funding were deemed important along with efficiencies in the food distribution system. Once again, community growing and best use of land and addressing food poverty were considered important in becoming a sustainable food city.

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