

Brighton & Hove's Farmland Potentials for a more local and ecological food supply

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**SUSTAINABLE
ECOLOGICALLY
FARMED
FOOD**

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Summary

The City of Brighton & Hove has made impressive progress toward improving access to healthy and sustainable food for its residents. Recent research and consultations have indicated a great potential for farmland surrounding Brighton & Hove to be used to further this progress. Much of the farmland surrounding the city is owned by the City Council. This land, referred to as the Downland Estate, comprises 10,000 acres of farmland. While the Downland Estate is providing multiple benefits, with improving farming practices in many areas, there is scope for the Estate to better contribute to the City Council priorities of supporting economies, jobs and homes, children and young people, health and wellbeing, community activity and environmental sustainability.

In particular, agroecological farming demonstrates strong potential to meet soil and water conservation objectives while also meeting objectives for sustainable farm livelihoods, local food, outdoor access and education and protection of water supplies and biodiversity.

This paper discusses the current farmland usage around Brighton & Hove and provides information about other ways in which the estate could be managed, drawing on examples from other council farmland estates in England and evidence from farms in and around Brighton & Hove.

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Background

This discussion paper has been prepared as part of an initiative which has been exploring Transformative Pathways to Sustainable Food Systems in Brighton & Hove, as part of a larger international networkⁱ. The original scope of the UK work was defined during a workshop in January 2015 which brought together farmers, civil society organisations and academics to discuss the challenges of creating more sustainable food systems for Brighton & Hove, which included a focus on food that is both ecologically produced and locally supplied.¹ During this workshop, a collective decision was made to focus on the potential of small and medium-sized farmers around the city, as previous work had already placed a significant emphasis on micro-scale, urban producers.²

From 2015 to 2016, the project conducted interviews with small and medium-scaleⁱⁱ agroecological³ farmers within a 50km radius of the city to learn about their agricultural practices and the constraints they face in supplying sustainably-produced food into Brighton & Hove. The interviews indicated that the majority of agroecological farmers in the area supply even more locally (e.g. to local villages) than to Brighton & Hove. As such, there remains a gap between supply and demand for locally and sustainably produced food in the city of Brighton & Hove. While Brighton & Hove is surrounded by farmland, the majority of this land is not used for agroecological agriculture and the products are not sold to local markets but instead to traders for markets further afield.

ⁱ This project is part of the ISSC-funded 'Pathways' Transformative Knowledge Network (<http://steps-centre.org/project/pathways-network/>)

ⁱⁱ Farm size was primarily 20Ha or less (a similar scope to that used by Laughton et al 2017)

The preliminary findings of this research were presented back to stakeholders during a 'transformation lab' ('T-lab') workshop in December 2016. This workshop drew upon earlier interviews and entailed the participation of local farmers, retailers, civil society organisations, citizens, the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership, academics and (inter)national organisations such as the Gaia Foundation.

In discussing the findings of the research and also the lived experiences of the participants (such as those of retailers and producers), the group identified 'access to land for sustainable agriculture' as a key issue to investigate. Given that the Brighton & Hove City

Council (BHCC) owns a substantive area of farmland – approximately 10,000 acres - the group at the December 2016 T-lab determined that more knowledge was needed about the potential for this land to be used to contribute to sustainably feeding the city, not only on the basis of what is happening locally, but also based on experiences elsewhere in the UK. There is also a great deal of farmland not owned by the council in the area surrounding the city, with questions about the possibilities for the council to shape its use to contribute to the generation of public benefits in the city. The South Downs National Park to the north is of particular significance.



- South Downs National Park
- Brighton and Lewes Downs biosphere
- Sussex county borders

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Overview of current food context of Brighton & Hove

Brighton & Hove is recognised for its pioneering work to support healthy and sustainable food for its residents. Examples are the development of strong partnerships and alliances for healthy and sustainable food (such as the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership's close collaboration with the Brighton & Hove City Council and the Brighton and Lewes Downs Biosphere Partnership); improvements in public procurement standards (as evidenced by the Soil Association Silver 'Sustainable Food Cities' award); support for food growing allotments in planning decisions (such as through adopting the food growing and development planning advice note in 2011); efforts to reduce food waste (e.g. through Love Food Hate Waste); and many other endeavours of the City Council, civil society organisations and dedicated individuals. In 2017, Brighton & Hove was the first city to adopt the bronze 'Food for Life' minimum buying standards for public catering contracts.⁴

Securing a supply of sustainably and locally produced food remains a key challenge. An estimated 26% of the

city's current ecological footprint relates to food, taking into account land, oil, water and greenhouse gas emissions.⁵ Food uses relatively more of these resources when it is produced in a non-ecological way, when it is highly processed, and when it travels long distances to reach the city.

Interviews with farmers and workshops with producers, retailers and caterers, suggested that there is a higher demand for local and ecologically produced food in Brighton & Hove than the current supply.

In considering the consumption of local and agroecological food, it is important to consider accessibility. While a subset of the Brighton & Hove population has access to agroecologically and locally produced food through retail shops such as Infinity Foods and hiSbe, or through vegetable box schemes such as Ashurst Organics and Hankham Organics, there are many local people who do not have access to such foods. Diet-related mortality rates are higher in B&H compared to the regional average⁶. This reflects the overall inequalities within Brighton & Hove—17 neighbourhoods of Brighton & Hove are in the 10% most deprived areas of England.⁷ There is a need—but also a potential—to address this disparity.

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Farming practices around Brighton & Hove

Agricultural production in the area is significant, and in 2010 the area sown to crops and fallow in the South Downs National Park was approximately 80% higher than 1940 levels.⁸ However, the number of farmers has declined rapidly in recent years, leading to a consolidation of farmland. The crops produced on farmland around Brighton are primarily spring barley and winter wheat, with the addition of oilseed rape

depending on market trends. These crops are not sold locally but almost entirely feed into larger national and international markets.

In addition to arable agriculture, conservation grazing is prevalent around the city, with up to 500 sheep on the hills around Brighton & Hove at the peak of the season. Such grazing is more ecological than mowing, as it allows insects to move away, protects structures such as ant hills, and saves petrol. As with crops, most of the sheep products from such grazing (meat and wool) are not consumed locally.⁹

The majority of farmers in the area are part of the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Their inclusion is based primarily on the preservation of national monuments and other archaeological features, including chalk grasslands, as well as the monitoring of birds, which benefit from grain cultivation. However, it is possible to farm intensively while also meeting HLS requirements.

A recent study¹⁰ indicated that arable farms in Sussex use around 20 pesticides per field, which is damaging to multiple parts of the ecosystem, including but not limited to insects and birds, both of which serve as pollinators.

An excess of nitrates (inorganic fertiliser) is applied to the majority of arable farmland around Brighton & Hove, and 45% of nitrate applications leach into the groundwater. This has an effect on ecosystem health in the area, as well as economic and energy costs for Brighton & Hove's water supply.¹¹ Because of concern over the economic and environmental implications of nitrate runoff from farms in the water catchment area, Southern Water is collaborating with Natural England and the South Downs National Park to address the issue. The Chalk Management Partnership (ChaMP) aims to work with farmers to use a measuring system that will enable them to use lesser quantities of nitrates and ensure less leaching.

Cover crops are typically not used by farmers in the area.¹² Without cover crops, soil erosion occurs at high levels, with implications for land fertility and for contamination of water supplies by both organic and inorganic matter.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are exceptions to these farm practices. A number of agroecological (including organic) farms exist in and around Brighton & Hove. Agroecological farming is an approach to farming which explicitly aims to reduce dependence on external inputs – such as fertilisers and pesticides – and leverage, or enhance diverse ecosystems. Further, such farming systems rebuild, rather than deplete, the structure, micronutrient content and microbiology of the soil.¹³

Agroecological farming can refer to horticulture (vegetable cultivation) or can commonly entail a combination of animal rearing and crop production. Because of its focus on ecological sustainability and biodiversity, it tends to be more labour intensive than conventional farming. For example, weed control might be undertaken by hand, rather than through heavy machinery or herbicides.

An example of an agroecological farm within city limits is 'Fork & Dig It', a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative at Stanmer Organics which produces a wide range of crops without the use of inorganic fertilisers or pesticides. In order to comply with Soil Association requirements, Fork and Dig It use agricultural techniques which maintain humus levels, biological activity and microbial activity.¹⁴

In terms of employment and livelihoods, the number of farmers is declining rapidly in the South East of England, with attrition rates even higher than the alarming national average. Across the UK, the number of farmers has dropped by 20% between 2000 and 2010, and continues to decline as one quarter of farm holders are over 65 years old.¹⁵ Farmers have been delaying their retirement, which is having an effect on the rate of new entry. As older farmers hold onto their farmland, there is less available on the market for new entrants. With fewer people working on larger farms, there has been a decline of rural and peri-urban communities, making it less attractive for young people to enter farming.¹⁶

As farmers leave the business, land also becomes consolidated into larger farm holdings, through either purchase or tenancy.

Changes are on the horizon as the area-based payments as part of the EU's Basic Payment System (BPS) are expected to be removed after Brexit.¹⁷ At an EU level, it is expected that these payments would be significantly reformed regardless.¹⁸ Preliminary studies in the South East of England have suggested that this could lead to a further intensification of farming (following a productivist approach) and/or further attrition amongst farmers.¹⁹

ⁱⁱⁱ Some farmers plant cover crops in order to use them as forage for their animals. However, in this case, farmers apply nitrates to fertilise the crops, which further adds to the problem of nitrification of the water supply and nearby ecosystems.



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Brighton & Hove's Council Farmland Estate

The Brighton & Hove City Council's Downland Estate includes 4,109 hectares (10,153 acres) of farmland²⁰. The Council purchased the Downland Estate with support from the Brighton Corporation Acts of 1913 and 1931 in order to protect its water source.²¹ The management of the estate is now guided by the Downland Initiative policy, which includes a number of objectives beyond water supply, as discussed later in this paper. Management itself is undertaken by Savills (and previously by Smiths-Gore, which was acquired by the former in 2015). According to Savills, approximately 2/3 of council-owned farmland is subject to tenancies which fall under the Agricultural Holdings Act (AHA) of 1948. There are 15 AHA tenancies which cover 2,799 ha (68%) of the estate. These tenancies can be passed down for up to three generations. Therefore, it is not possible to evoke immediate change to the farmland under these tenancies, though there will be opportunity to do so in the future. However, the remaining third of the land is subject to Farm Business Tenancies (FBTs) which range from 3 to 15 years in length. For council farmland

under FBTs (16 tenancies over 1,210.2 ha), it is theoretically possible that the BHCC could stipulate changes to tenancy agreements in the near future to better meet council objectives for the farmland. A total of 3,229 ha of the Estate is controlled by a core of 15 tenant farmers (with a mixture of AHA and FBT tenancies).

Like many local authorities, Brighton and Hove faces increasing pressures due to decreases in central government funds for public services. In 2014, the Council announced its intention to sell a limited amount of land (approximately 1% of its Downland Estate) to fund the redevelopment of a local heritage site at Stanmer, in line with the Corporate Property Strategy and Asset Management Plan 2014 – 2018.²² The sites identified for sale were at Poynings and Plumpton Hill. After a concerted campaign by local stakeholders²³, a cross-party panel review of the city's Urban and Rural Asset Management Policy concluded to halt the sale of the council sites. The panel considered views from local stakeholders and informants. It was agreed that 'the circumstances under which land can be considered for release should be reviewed in general' as part of the Asset Management Board's Terms of Reference.²⁴

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National Context of Council-Owned Farmland Estates

At a national level, 64,791 ha of farmland are owned by county councils across England.²⁵ The Council Farms Estate was established following the Smallholdings & Allotment Act 1908 under which Councils had a statutory duty to meet the demand of applications by young persons to enter into farming. Funding for the purchase of estates was initially provided by the Ministry of Agriculture.^{iv}

Farms owned by councils and rented out under short-to medium-term leases have long been a key point of entry for new farmers. A 2008 review of the County Farm Service by Sir Donald Curry, chair of the Sustainable Farming and Food Delivery Group states that:

- 'Farms owned and managed by Local Authorities are an important, strategic, national asset that should be retained.'
- These farms assist Local Authorities in meeting wider regional economic, countryside and environmental objectives and provide an essential route into farming for new entrants.²⁶

The Agriculture Act of 1970 provided a legal framework for smallholdings authorities 'to make it their general aim to provide opportunities for persons with sufficient experience to be farmers on their own account.' Under the 1970 Act, every county council in England is a smallholdings authority. However, the government does not have any power to prevent councils from disposing of their farmland estates.

On average across England, council farms generated an operational income of £18.1 million against a total operational expenditure of £7.4 million, providing an operational surplus of £10.7 million, or £173 per ha held.²⁷ Some councils in the UK, such as Somerset, Gloucestershire and North Yorkshire County Councils, have decided to sell off their estate to raise capital. Other councils report that their farmland estates generate substantive revenue. Cambridgeshire County Council generates a £2.5mn annual surplus

from its farmland estate and in 2013, Cambridgeshire provided farm tenancies to 80 new entrants.²⁸

A number of councils have seen the potential for their farmland to meet other public objectives beyond revenue alone. The ability of farmland to meet council objectives may vary based on the unique situation of local authorities and the farmland estates themselves, but can include public health (related to both diet and mental health), ecological restoration (including groundwater protection and protection of biodiversity), education (including access to countryside and knowledge of food production), climate change (through reduction of greenhouse gas emissions), and employment (through farm-based livelihoods).²⁹ Councils which have invested in their farmland estates include Suffolk, Norfolk, and Pembrokeshire.

Suffolk County Councillor James Finch explains the council's rationale as follows: 'The council believed that more people needed to benefit from its farm asset, and that while the use of the land needed to be worked out on a commercial basis, it should be tied in to its core policies...We want to link council farms to the objectives of the county council. We are not a charitable organisation just to look after a niche set of the community. We have the council farms to help us with our objectives.'

In response to the question of income, the councillor goes on to explain, 'We kept the land because we had to decide what was in the best interests of Suffolk. If we had sold the land, the capital realisation would be probably half the freehold value (because they were tenanted). They all had various different lengths of tenancy to run, and we decided we didn't want to sell.'³⁰

Suffolk County split their farmland estate into smaller tenancy units (numbering 94), to try to encourage new rural businesses. The council is creating units of between 10 and 50 acres in size, some with residential accommodation. The leases are a term of 10-15 years, to serve as a stepping stone for new entrant farmers. The council is also providing support and knowledge to the new entrants.

^{iv} <http://landworkersalliance.org.uk/2016/04/public-land-for-public-good/>

Table 1. Local Authority Approaches to Using Council Land for Small Tenancies

| | Brighton & Hove City Council Downland Estate | Suffolk County Council County Farm Estate | Norfolk County Council County Farms Estate |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Size of farmland estate | 10,153 acres | 12,947 acres | 16,061 acres |
| No. of farmer tenants | 29 tenants | 90 tenants | 145 tenants |
| Uses of farmland estate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Farm-related businesses ✓ Community woodlands ✓ Allotments ✓ Footpaths ✗ Affordable housing^v | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Farm-related businesses ✓ Community woodlands ✓ Allotments ✓ Footpaths ✓ Affordable housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Farm-related businesses ✓ Community woodlands ✓ Allotments ✓ Footpaths ✓ Affordable housing |

Norfolk County Council has an estate of just over 16,000 acres, with 145 holdings. The Council emphasises that the estate contributes to its commitments to sustainable development by:

- Providing a framework for local produce, goods and services
- Sustaining and creating rural employment
- Developing business opportunities throughout the County
- Improving and developing access for recreation and education
- Creating and improving biodiversity
- Providing land for affordable housing.³¹

Pembrokeshire County Council has also reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining a portfolio of farms, which at October 2016 consisted of 45 equipped holdings of 30-150 acres and totalling 4,500 acres.

The Councils' long-term plan is to downsize the larger holdings as existing tenants leave, and use their resources to create more entry-level holdings. This plan has been praised by the Tenant Farmers Association, though with some reservations regarding the halving of the farms' maintenance budget.

^v Whilst the City Downland Estate is not seen as fulfilling this role, BHCC in its wider form is a major supplier of affordable housing in the city and on the urban fringes.





The City Council Downland Estate Management

The BHCC farmland is governed by the City Downland Estate policy. The aim of the policy is to 'reconnect the people of Brighton & Hove to a more diverse Downland with better education, improved access and better sense of connection to the land'³². The City Downland Estate Policy was based on the **Downland Initiative**, which was developed in 2005 by the BHCC to deliver greater social and environmental benefits from its farmland estate. The Downland initiative comprises four broad themes: agriculture and land use, access, wildlife and landscape and education and interpretation.³³

The Downland Initiative was appraised by Smiths Gore and the University of Reading in 2006 for its feasibility and to provide guidance on aims, objectives and achievability. The study concluded that the initiative was feasible.

The Downland Initiative's objective in relation to agriculture is to, 'Establish a sustainable agricultural system on the Downs, with a greater emphasis on local, healthy food production, diversification and farming practices that are sympathetic to wider downland objectives.'

During consultations on the Downland Initiative, a recurrent message was that the Downland estate must be farmed in a sustainable way, with a focus on economic sustainability of tenant farmers. 'The production of food that could be consumed by the local population' was another recurring theme, and it was noted that the land at present does not do this. A wide range of products from lamb and beef to fruit and vegetables were mentioned as having potential local markets; however, as with the majority of farmers in the area, most food produced on council farmland is not sold locally.

The Downland Initiative suggested the 'creation of a retail outlet for tenants to sell lamb, beef, flour and other products to the public'. Whilst this has not moved forward, there have been efforts to enhance the brand image of locally-farmed produce such as 'South Downs Lamb'.

Another objective of the Downland Initiative was to encourage all farm tenants to enter into Higher Level Stewardship within the next five years. As of 2018, Savills report that 100% of tenants are now either HLS or Entry-Level Stewardship (ELS), representing a success. However, as discussed earlier in this report, HLS does not necessarily translate to farming practices which are ecologically sustainable, as significant usage of pesticides and inorganic fertilisers are still permissible. Key informants consulted for this study indicated no notable difference between farming practices of council farm tenants as compared to other farmers in the area.

The Downland Initiative also aims to 'reconnect the people of Brighton and Hove to a more biodiverse downland with better education, improved access and a better sense of connection with the land'. In the consultations for the Downland Initiative, 'connection' has been framed as both physical and intellectual³⁴ (page 29). Connecting children and disadvantaged groups in particular to where their food comes from was noted as a priority, as was the idea that 'people should feel able to walk on 'their' land.' The creation of footpaths through farms has been one way in which farmland in the Estate have contributed to this objective.

An additional aim of the Downland Initiative was to support the conversion of arable land to chalk grassland, though in the consultations there was a lack of consensus about the amount and type of land to be converted. While the extent to which land has been converted is unclear at the time of writing, there are questions about the extent to which conversion of arable to grassland would adequately meet the wide range of objectives of the initiative.

Converting land use from conventional arable agriculture (i.e. the production of crops) to grassland would likely yield improvements in terms of soil conservation and water protection, but would yield fewer benefits in terms of local and healthy food production and livelihoods. It may also have negative effects on certain wildlife species. Some species of birds, for example, can benefit from the food sources and nesting habitats provided in arable cropping systems.³⁴ Agroecological practices which both produce healthy food for local consumption, while also conserving or enhancing ecosystems, might be a beneficial third option to either grassland or intensive arable farming.

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Potential of the Downland Estate to support healthy diets

Currently, the farmland surrounding Brighton & Hove does not contribute significantly to healthy diets for Brighton & Hove's residents. Tenants on council-owned farmland tend to produce crops for national or export markets, such as spring barley, winter wheat and oilseed rape. These are not sold into local markets, with the exception of barley used for brewing. Animal products from the Downs are primarily from rearing sheep and cattle. While some animal products are sold locally through Community-Supported Agriculture schemes, the majority of lamb reared on BHCC farmland is not sold as South Downs lamb and is distributed elsewhere. The cattle is primarily suckling cows which are sold to other parts of the UK for fattening.³⁵

A common concern expressed by informants for this study is that the soil in and around Brighton and Hove has limited potential for the production of vegetable crops, given acidity levels, the amount of chalk or the depth of soil. However, within a 50km radius of Brighton & Hove, our research identified 25 agroecological farms, which are producing a wide range of vegetables, fruits and even heritage grains. These farms are selling their products to nearby local communities, with a few also selling to Brighton & Hove.

Within Brighton & Hove itself, 'Fork & Dig It', a small-scale community agriculture project in Stanmer Park, produces a wide range of vegetables and fruits on about 3 acres of land. These include parsnips, celeriac, kales, cabbages, garden cress, chard, rocket, cos lettuce, coriander, garlic, spinach, oriental gooseberry, carrots, potatoes, rhubarb, aubergine, tomatoes, beetroot, courgette, redcurrants, raspberries and other berries.³⁶ The Whitehawk Community Food Project, a volunteer-based initiative on the outskirts of Brighton also produces an extensive range of tree fruits, herbs, vegetables and soft fruits, with up to 100 varieties growing at a given time.³⁷ In recent history, much of the land in and around Brighton & Hove was used for the production of various crops, from blackcurrant and beetroot to cauliflower³⁸.

Compared to conventional farming, agroecological farming has been shown to produce yields at similar levels for field scale vegetables in the UK, or at higher



Figure 1: A farm near Lewes and a farm in West Sussex are producing heritage grains for flour, currently sold in hiSbe and other local shops

levels for those crops such as runner beans which require more intricate care.³⁹ At an international level, a study covering 37 million hectares globally found that the introduction of agroecological approaches increased production by 79 percent whilst improving ecological resilience.⁴⁰

The British population as a whole consumes less than half of the recommended intake of vegetables and fruits, and this is leading to premature deaths and high costs for the NHS.^{41,42} There is a strong need for residents of Brighton & Hove to be consuming more vegetables and fruits. Beyond diet, food poverty is a significant problem.

The 2017 City Tracker survey indicated that 8% of the city's population 'strongly disagree' that they can meet their basic living costs, including food, water and heating. Often food banks are unable to provide sufficient vegetables and fruits in their parcels, and these are also the foods which are least accessible in council estates where they are not stocked by local shops. Using these figures to estimate the number of people in food poverty, and based on the productivity of farms such as Fork & Dig It, we can calculate the potential for Downland Estate land to address this shortfall. Table 2 below suggests that Brighton & Hove City Council could potentially meet the vegetable and fruit needs of the population experiencing food poverty by dedicating 13.5% of its farmland toward agroecological vegetable and fruit production. This is an approximate production-based calculation, rather than an economic assessment, however it demonstrates the potential contribution that council-owned land could make.

Table 2. Potentials of BHCC Farmland to Meet Food Poverty Needs

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>8% of Brighton and Hove population (2011 Census = 273,369) = estimated number of people in food poverty</p> |  | <p>21,870^{vi}</p> |
| <p>Equivalent number portions of vegetables produced per hectare per week by Brighton community farm, Fork & Dig It^{vii, 43}</p> |  | <p>6,759 adult portions / hectare or 10,814 child portions / hectare^{viii}</p> |
| <p>Number of vegetable and fruit portions recommended per week per person</p> |  | <p>49 portions per week</p> |
| <p>Number of people who could be provided with adequate vegetables and fruits per week from similar ecological and local sourcing</p> |  | <p>138 adults / hectare or 211 children / hectare (average = 179 people/ hectare)</p> |
| <p>Number of hectares of BHCC farmland</p> |  | <p>4,109 ha</p> |
| <p>Area of BHCC farmland which has the potential to meet the fruit and vegetable needs of people living in food poverty in Brighton and Hove</p> |  | <p>122 ha (approximates to 3% of BHCC-owned farmland)</p> |

^{vi} This table has been updated from an earlier version (July 2018) on the basis of more accurate figures received from Fork and Dig It that reflect the 2017-18 fruit and veg share scheme

^{vii} Based on an average share of 4.52kg produced and distributed over a 40 week period from approximately 0.2ha, with a total of 957 shares distributed. Calculations assume similar levels could continue over the full year. Continued distribution may depend on the use of storage crops (e.g. pumpkins, turnips) to supplement what is produced during the 'hungry gap', though exact figures over this period are not available at the time of writing.

^{viii} Based on 80g per portion for adults and 50g per portion for children, and government guidelines that we should eat 7 portions of vegetables and fruit per day. These assumptions are an over-simplification as different crops differ in weight and nutritional value. They also average production over the year, without taking seasonal differences into account.

Photo credits (top to bottom)

<http://fareshare.org.uk>

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Helen Clark, Whitehawk Community Food Project



Photo: Salads are one crop which can be grown well around Brighton, shown here planted amongst nutrient rich amaranth and purslane. Photo: Elise Wach, Whitehawk Community Food Project

9

Potentials of the Downland Estate to support communities and livelihoods

Many of the farmers on the Downland Estate are nearing the age of retirement and some do not have successors within the family. At a national level, the number of farmers is declining in the UK, with one third of farmers over the age of 65 without successors within the family. As these farmers retire, land becomes consolidated into larger farms, which reduces the ability for new entrants to farming to initiate enterprises.

At the same time, there is a growing demand amongst young people and other new entrants to engage in farming, particularly through using agroecological approaches. In 2015-16, there were 19,025 agricultural students, which was a 21% increase from 2006/7.⁴⁴

Access to land to rent or buy is a significant barrier for new entrants and also established agroecological farmers in the UK. Only 115 new tenancies were made available across England for council farmland in 2016⁴⁵ and only 2% of farm purchases in 2016 were attributed to new entrants.⁴⁶ Two recent studies of agroecological farming in England have confirmed that new entrants are prevented from farming because they cannot access or afford land for farming.^{47,28}

Within East Sussex specifically, the demand for farmland by new entrants has been evidenced by a recent case study undertaken by the Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC). The high costs of both bare land and land with buildings (but no residencies), combined with the high cost of housing has meant that access to land for agroecological farming in East Sussex is extremely difficult for people who want to farm. As of 2016, the Ecological Land Cooperative had a list of 125 individuals or families who are seeking affordable farmland in East Sussex.⁴⁸

Dedicating a portion of the Downland Estate to agroecological production could increase the number of jobs created from this council asset. Recent research has found that on average in the UK,

agroecological farm holdings employ 3.2 full time equivalent farm workers per hectare, compared with the national average of 0.028 per hectare – thus, a 100 fold difference in employment per hectare.⁴⁹ Estimates of land around Brighton and Hove suggest that a 30 acre site could easily support 3-5 households.⁵⁰ Further, farmers report that agroecological farming provides opportunities for skilled labour and more ‘meaningful’ work, which has been shown to lead to more stable rural communities.³⁹

Earnings per hectare are also higher on agroecological farms compared with conventional farms, on average. In a recent study of UK agroecological farmers³⁹, 78% of study participants were found to not receive any farm subsidies. For those that did receive subsidies, they represented 5% or less of their farm income. In contrast, approximately 80% of farm income is currently attributed to subsidies in the UK, on average.⁵¹ Given the uncertainty of continued area-based payments in future years, supporting the financial viability of farming on the Downs independent of subsidies will be important for securing vibrant and sustainable livelihoods on farmland in and around Brighton.

Small-scale and agroecological farms also have the potential to host visitors and to educate citizens about food production. Many Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms have open days for visitors and volunteers, and farms also host school and youth groups to expose young people to the outdoors. On agroecological farms, there is great potential to experience biodiversity of flora and fauna, given the explicit focus on biodiverse ecosystems on such farms. Support for agroecological farms on the Downland Estate could help to achieve the objective to ‘reconnect the people of Brighton and Hove to a more biodiverse downland with better education, improved access and a better sense of connection with the land’ as advocated in the Downland Initiative.

Finally, there is scope for the Brighton & Hove City Council Downland Estate to contribute to affordable housing for farm workers. Following the examples of Norfolk, Suffolk and Pembrokeshire County Councils, the BHCC could allow for farm dwellings (self-build, existing, or provided housing) to count toward the council’s affordable housing quota as well as providing much needed support for new entrants to farming.

10

Potential mechanisms for managing and supporting agroecological tenants on Council Farmland

Currently, the BHCC Downland Estate is managed by estate agent Savills. Savills offer important legal expertise and management capacities for the management of the multiple tenancies within the estate. Savills liaise with the BHCC to try to ensure that the management of the estate complies with the City Downland Estate Policy.

However, if the BHCC were to decide to support the creation of new agroecological farms on the Downland Estate, the expertise for ensuring agroecological production and providing support to such farmers might lie outside the area of expertise of Savills or other estate agents. In considering the kinds of functions and capabilities that might be needed to be developed within the Council or Savills or sought elsewhere, it is informative to look at the work of land trusts.

Land trusts – such as the Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC) and the Biodynamic Land Trust – have experience in managing their agroecological tenants

to ensure the alignment of farming practices with social and agroecological principles (and some of the objectives of the Downland Estate). As community benefit societies with an explicit aim of supporting ecological farming, they ensure that the land is used for ecological and social benefit in perpetuity, regardless of any turnover of tenants.

The ELC in particular focuses on small-scale agroecological production and provides support to its new entrant farmers. Such support might include helping with market linkages and connecting farmers to networks for technical advice, for example. Because the ELC is a registered charity and community benefit society, it is able to attract donations of infrastructure or equipment which can then be provided to new entrants.

The ELC has also been able to attain attractive loan opportunities for its farmers. Given that access to capital is another key barrier for new entrants, support in the form of finance, equipment or infrastructure could help ensure that new entrants have a higher chance of viability.

Through their contacts and database, the ELC is well-placed to match potential new tenants to available land parcels, ensuring a good fit of qualifications, capabilities and motivations.

11

Summary and Potential Options and Strategies for the future of the Downland Estate

The Brighton & Hove City Downland Estate is a valuable asset for the city. Currently, the estate provides a multitude of benefits for its citizens. However, there is potential for the Downland Estate to better contribute to the City Council's multiple priorities of supporting economies, jobs and homes, children and young people, health and wellbeing, community activity and environmental sustainability.

In particular, agroecological farming demonstrates strong potential to meet soil and water conservation objectives while also meeting objectives for sustainable farm livelihoods, local food, for outdoor access and education and protection of water supplies and biodiversity.

Given these potentials, and the current social and ecological challenges faced in conventional arable farming, **converting a portion of existing conventional arable farmland** into agroecological farmland could help to meet more of the objectives of the BHCC Downland Estate. This could also contribute to outcomes for the Sustainable Food Cities Award, including 'Promoting a vibrant and diverse sustainable food economy' and 'Reducing the ecological footprint of the food system'.⁵² To date, the achievement of local, ecological food production for local consumption on the City Council Downland Estate has been limited.

Supporting agroecological farming on the Downland Estate does not necessarily have to undermine the livelihoods of current farmers on the estate. Converting just a small proportion of the current estate to agroecological farming could make a significant impact to ecologies, livelihoods and food production while having minimal effect on the existing cohort of downland farmers.

In terms of creating new agroecological farms, one option suggested by informants to this study was to **dedicate an upcoming tenancy** toward agroecological production. Another option suggested was to **survey existing farms** to ascertain whether there are portions that might be suitable for a handover to a new agroecological tenant. In some cases existing tenants may be keen to make some of their land available for new entrants, depending on the financial arrangements for such a transfer.

Over a decade since the Downland Initiative report, the context of farming in the UK is entering a time of turbulence and change, as Brexit is likely to have a disruptive effect on food issues and policies at local and national levels.⁵³ Given the multitude of both interests and possibilities for managing the Brighton & Hove Downland Estate within this changing context, it is suggested that stakeholders, including existing farmers, individuals with relevant farming and ecological expertise, people working to improve access to food and diets in the city, and council representatives **come together to discuss the current situation and possible futures.**

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