

Peri-urban land in Bristol

the potential for food growing
and farming



Peri-urban land in Bristol: the potential for food growing and farming

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Agroecological market gardens¹ at the edge of cities can play an important role in a green economic recovery integrating targets on economic development, climate change, education, and health.

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Front cover credit: The Community Farm, Bristol

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¹ Agroecological farming - at the heart of this project - takes an integrated approach to producing food where ecological and social principles underpin regenerative systems that work with natural cycles, develop fair livelihoods and equitable land access, and value farmers' knowledge. The Food and Agriculture Organisation describes 10 elements of agroecology - <http://www.fao.org/3/I9037EN/i9037en.pdf>.

1. Introduction

This briefing gives an overview of the existing context of peri-urban growing² in Bristol and the surrounding area, provides inspiring case studies from around the world and closer to home, identifies data gaps, and suggests some potential ideas for further discussion. The 'Action Plan' and 'Key Asks for Bristol City Council' emerged from a meeting with farmers, researchers, campaigners, council representatives and officers on the 19th May 2021 informed by a pre-event briefing. The event highlighted that peri-urban land around Bristol is not being utilised to its full extent for food production. Smallholdings owned by Bristol City Council are an asset that is being significantly underutilised; land is vacant, people are not paying rent, people are still paying out of date rents, and agricultural land is being used for grazing horses.

The information in this briefing has been gathered by Shared Assets and Sustain with the support of Bristol Food Producers from a range of relevant documents on food policy and practice across a local to international scale (see references). The briefing sets out a strong business case for enabling 'fringe farming' to expand in the area, to become a mainstay of a sustainable, just, localised food economy, providing good jobs, education and training, better access to nature, and high quality, affordable food for all, contributing to greater resilience of the city region.

With a new generation of farmers and growers looking for suitable sites to meet increased demand (Wheeler, 2020) for healthy, ecological and culturally-appropriate foods, one of the key challenges to developing localised food systems is finding and accessing land to support equitable opportunities in the sector. Such land exists around cities, but is often hard to find information about, is underutilised as paddocks for grazing animals, or merely seen as 'waiting' for housing development, and could instead be secured for agroecological farming.

This briefing and action plan builds on previous initiatives in Bristol and has space to evolve, with the questions below listed for further food for thought and to spark imagination and discussion about ways to move things forward:

- What if Bristol's fringe could contribute to the revitalisation of the South West's historic horticultural sector?
- What if the region's strength in organic farming could be systematically harnessed to train the next generation of agroecological growers?
- What if fringe farming was prioritised so that all Bristolians have access to healthy food and environment on their doorstep?
- What if fringe farming could support racial justice and action around reparations in Bristol and increase opportunities for People of Colour in the food, farming and environment sectors?

² We use the terms 'fringe farming' and 'peri-urban growing/farming' interchangeably - they simply mean farming around the edge of cities

- What are the opportunities for procuring foods grown at Bristol's fringe into schools and health centres?
- What if a network of agroecological food hubs could be developed to bring together food producers, processors and distributors, create jobs, and support a vibrant local economy?
- What if a network of agroecological farms contributed to the fight against climate change by sequestering carbon in soils and reducing the greenhouse emissions associated with food production, transport and consumption in the city?

UK-wide Fringe Farming

This Bristol initiative is part of the Fringe Farming project which is a collaboration with partners across the UK (Sustain, Shared Assets, Landworkers' Alliance Bristol Food Producers, Glasgow Community Food Network, and ShefFood) to understand the barriers to, and identify opportunities for agroecological farming at the edge of urban areas. The project is working with local stakeholders in four Sustainable Food Places (Bristol, London, Sheffield and Glasgow) to identify land and develop local actions, and national policy recommendations to enable agroecological farming, as part of a green economic recovery, and to help address the impacts of the COVID pandemic, Brexit, and the climate and ecological emergencies.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Key Asks for Bristol City Council

- Provide clear aims and objectives for the asset of the council smallholdings that also take account of social and environmental factors.
- Resource the Smallholdings and Allotments team to be able to manage the BCC smallholdings in a way that will maximise the potential of these sites (in terms of food production but also income generation for the council), or outsource this to an external community organisation. This would include reviewing existing holdings and identifying underutilised land. We acknowledge this comes with a financial cost to the council but a huge potential for social, economic and environmental benefits.
- Implement a process for matching up available BCC land with new entrant farmers (potentially managed in partnership with BFP).
- Protect existing Bristol City Council owned agricultural land from development.
- Recognise horticultural training as a skills priority for Bristol, with a commitment to making this training accessible to everyone in the city.

2.2 Action Plan

Bristol Food Producers in collaboration with Sustain and Shared Assets will work to:

1. Build a group of stakeholders in the council and leverage political support for opening up access to council land.

- Build relationships with BCC teams such as Public Health and Sustainability, and make the link between their ambitions and the need for more local food with the need for access to land.
- Leverage support from city councillors, including connecting with new Green and Labour councillors, educating and engaging them in the issues of peri-urban land access and the underutilisation of the council smallholdings.
- Form stronger relationships with the West of England Combined Authority, specifically the new Labour mayor who has a keen interest in employment and biodiversity.
- Organise a meeting for stakeholders on a local farm, focusing on the need for both community scale growing and farms that are maximising production (and the potential different pieces of land that are needed for both).
- Build on the new Gold Sustainable Food Places award, and engage with the Food Equality Strategy, Climate Emergency, Ecological Emergency, and One City Plan.
- Continue pressure to have a chapter on food/land access in the upcoming Green Spaces Strategy, including the need for greater outreach and engagement to address the lack of diversity in food production.

2. Understand needs of land-seekers and pursue other avenues of land access

- Undertake interviews and follow up work with people who are looking for land to better understand their needs.
- Further integrate the learning from this with the City and Guilds training and Farmstart development that is part of Bristol Food Producer's longer term work to create a clear pathway for new entrants to farming in the city.
- Put out a call for land and try and match landseekers with available opportunities, including encouraging a wider pool of applicants from people currently underrepresented in food production through outreach and engagement.

3. Build an evidence base and create case studies

- Gather wider information about the impact of local food production on jobs/livelihoods/supply chains as well as mental and physical health/social impacts.
- Create case studies that look at employment, health, social impacts of existing local farms.

3. Key findings

- Climatic conditions, regional horticultural knowledge, opportunities for job creation and expanding current urban agriculture all point to a strong opportunity for developing fringe farming around Bristol, although this is limited by access to affordable, long-term leases and the threat of supermarkets to small, family businesses.
- Bristol and the surrounding area has a rich heritage of and favourable climatic conditions for horticultural production, as well as significant organic farming expertise to draw on for an expansion of peri-urban farming.
- There are many growing projects and farming enterprises in and around the city, and potential to expand these on a larger scale in the urban fringe.
- Small-scale agroecological farming could provide attractive jobs, particularly for young people affected by COVID-related unemployment, from a more diverse range of backgrounds than the mainstream farming sector, but further skills development may be required.
- Demand for veg boxes increased rapidly at the start of COVID-19, with sales doubling nationally in six weeks (Wheeler, 2020: 6). Expansion of dynamic public procurement processes could help provide markets for more small-scale food producers over the longer term and support community wealth building. The new DPS pilot on food procurement in the South West could be one avenue for this.
- Comprehensive land ownership and usage data is difficult to access.
- Any suitable land around Bristol which becomes available is expensive and in high demand, and secure tenancies are very difficult to come by
- Better land access, for example via freehold and leaseholds for public land for community growing schemes facilitated through Community Asset Transfers (Bristol City Council, n.d.a), and connection to growing projects could help work towards food justice within, as opposed to merely food aid for, low-income communities.
- Supermarkets pose a risk to independent retailers across Bristol, but are often the main source of fresh/healthier food options in wards of the city classed as 'food deserts.'

4. The current picture

4.1 Farming in the Bristol City Region⁴



Credit: Steph Wetherell

- According to a 2018 survey of 18 growers undertaken by Bristol Food Producers, ~287 acres of land is under production in and around the city of Bristol. Recent further mapping by Sara Venn as part of the 'Going for Gold' bid (for Bristol to become a Gold Sustainable Food City) also suggests a further four market gardens and six city farms in addition to those who completed the survey, as well as many community gardens and orchards. These are in addition to the many smallholdings that exist on council land, but unfortunately information on these sites is not easily publicly accessible.
- The South West has the highest proportion of organically farmed agricultural land in the UK - with 8% of the total agricultural area managed in this way as of June 2019 - and the greatest concentration of organic producers anywhere in the UK, at around 25% of the total (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2020: 12, 16). Around half of England's organic land falls in the South West region (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs et al., 2021: 122).
- The total farmed area in the South West is 1,789,000 hectares (4,420,715 acres), with grazing, cereal and dairy farms the predominant farm types (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021: 34-35). Meat and dairy produced within a 50-mile radius of Bristol was sufficient to meet the

⁴ In this briefing we have generally followed the example of Carey (2011: 13) and referred to the 'Bristol City Region', as a bioregion, which encompasses Bristol, Bath and the surrounding parts of Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire unitary authorities.

city's needs, however the area of land needed to supply the City of Bristol with food was estimated to extend well across the subregion and into Wales (Carey, 2011: 2).

- Land and climatic conditions in the South-West are favourable for fruit and vegetable growing and there is a strong historical tradition of horticulture in the region, but this type of agriculture has declined due to the rise of supermarkets and cheap imports from the 1970s (Carey, 2011: 48). However, research has shown that “foods associated with improved adult health [such as fruit and vegetables] also often have low environmental impacts, indicating that the same dietary transitions that would lower incidences of noncommunicable diseases would also help meet environmental sustainability targets.” Reviving the local horticultural industry could therefore support reaching targets around climate change mitigation and health and wellbeing (Clark et al., 2019: 23357).
- 77% of people who responded to the recent Your City Our Future citizen survey said that ‘More of our food to be produced locally’ was an issue of high or very high importance in Bristol’s recovery from COVID-19 (Bristol City Council, n.d.b: 34)

4.2 Land ownership and access

- Land ownership and usage data is fragmented and difficult to access across different local authorities, public and private owners in the Bristol City Region. This is a key barrier to taking a strategic approach to land for fringe farming. A series of maps exist which show parts of the picture (e.g. Bristol City Council Local Authority Assets, Bristol City Council Local Plan Policies, North Somerset Council Land and Buildings), but it is not always clear how they relate to each other. Further dedicated council staff capacity is needed to investigate this and make this information publicly accessible and understandable. The Who Feeds Bristol report of 2011 assumed that most of Bristol City Council’s agricultural holdings were farms on the outskirts of the city (Carey, 2011: 97).
- In Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, a combined total of 4,295 acres (1,960 hectares) of County Farms - local authority owned smallholdings - were let in 2018, declining from 8,354 acres (3,382 hectares) in 2010 (Shrubsole, 2019). Based on estimates from Carey (2011: 98), this lost land could have produced around 7,110 tonnes of vegetables, or around 12% of the city’s annual vegetable requirements.
- Where suitable land is available, it is expensive - 2019 land values for the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership suggest agricultural land costs £25,000/hectare - putting it in the second highest category of land values in England and the same as in and around London (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020). This cost barrier was reflected in comments from some growers in the 2018 Bristol Food Producers survey.
- A number of high-profile land struggles in recent years (Gleeson, 2015, Postans, 2019) have shown how at risk existing agricultural land around Bristol is from

infrastructural development. However, the business case for local food production is compelling (Going for Gold Bristol, 2021a) and arguably should be given better weighting in decision-making on strategic decisions about land use.

- Currently agriculture is the least diverse sector in the UK, with 98.6% of farm managers and owners identifying as white British (Asgarian, 2020). By linking opportunities in agroecology to racial justice and reparations, fringe farming could support a much greater range of people to connect to the land, and produce food which is familiar to the wide variety of communities living in Bristol (Bristol City Council, 2020).
- Carey (2011: 2) estimated 2,000 hectares (4,942 acres) of land in Bristol (including existing farmland and smallholdings, allotments, empty council-owned land, and parts of school grounds, private gardens and parks/green spaces) could be used for food growing, if made available, with the produce having a cash value of several million pounds, as well as significant educational and recreational benefits. There may also be additional land owned privately or by major institutions such as churches, universities, or the NHS, which could be used for fringe farming.
- Bristol Food Producers has run a land seekers' survey for several years, with 81 responses submitted since 2015, giving an indication of the unmet demand for farmland locally. Analysis of respondents done in 2016 suggests the majority are seeking small parcels of land (less than 2 acres), with fruit, vegetables and salad crops the most popular choices for crops they want to grow (Chan and Bristol Food Producers, 2016: 19).

4.3 Employment, training, and skills



Credit: Steph Wetherell

- In 2019, 7.7% of 16/17 year olds in Bristol were not in education, employment or training (or their current situation was unknown), above the national rate of 5.5%. The equivalent figure was 7.1% in Bath and North East Somerset, and 5.5% in South Gloucestershire (Department for Education, 2019). Unemployment amongst young people (aged 16-24) nationally has also increased by 13% due to the impact of the COVID pandemic (Powell, Francis-Devine and Foley, 2021). Bristol has been a hub for youth climate activism over the past few years via the School Strike for Climate movement, presenting an opportunity to engage young people into land work as a practical way to support a green recovery.
- Just under 65,000 people are employed in the agricultural sector in the South West, an average of 2.5 per farm, 46% of which are full-time (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021: 35). However, research on small farms has suggested that they provide more employment opportunities than larger farms (3.2 FTE per hectare, well above the UK average of 0.028 annual work units per hectare), and more meaningful and desirable work environments (Laughton and Kiss, 2017). By contrast, the pandemic has highlighted the poor working conditions across the industrial food sector with outbreaks in food processing plants / farms (Dutkiewicz, Taylor and Vettese, 2020, Davies, 2020)
- Whilst a majority of respondents to Bristol Food Producers' Land Seekers' survey already had some relevant growing experience, there are skills gaps remaining, particularly around business planning and marketing, and infrastructural barriers, such as lack of water or machinery access also prevent land seekers getting started (Chan and Bristol Food Producers, 2016). The lack of appropriate training for new entrants is recognised within the wider agroecological sector and lobbying of DEFRA is ongoing to tackle this (The Land Workers' Alliance, 2019). Locally, Bristol Food Producers are currently developing plans to bring accredited horticulture training to Bristol to help address this skills gap. This training will be made available across the city, making sure underrepresented groups are targeted and this training is accessible to all.

4.4 Food and retail

- In some parts of Bristol there are numerous independent food retailers (Bristol City Council, n.d.e), but Carey (2011: 58) highlighted the threat greengrocers locally felt from supermarkets opening 'express' or 'local' outlets on high streets.
- In other parts of town, the picture is quite different - 10 wards in Bristol (out of 35) have no greengrocer (Carey, 2011: 28), and two of the ten most deprived 'food deserts' in the UK are in Bristol - in parts of Hartcliffe and Withywood (Corfe, 2018: 27) - and poor diets and nutrition are estimated to cause 6.8% of premature deaths in the city. There is also evidence that people with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes are more vulnerable to severe COVID-19, and COVID-19 and NCDs share a set of risk factors, including deprivation and obesity (Sheldon and Wright, 2020), so there is increased

urgency to tackle these issues. In some of the most deprived wards, supermarkets are people's best chance of getting fresh food, as smaller convenience stores and takeaways which are more prevalent in these areas often lack healthier food options (Carey et al., 2019).

- Such disparities in access to good food are recognised by organisations such as Feeding Bristol (Asgarian, 2021) and are part of the Going for Gold Sustainable Food City campaign, which are supporting new initiatives to support a move away from food aid (e.g. through food banks), to food justice, where communities can exercise their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy and sustainable food (Holt-Giménez, 2010).
- The main regional distributor of fruit and vegetables - The Wholesale Fruit Centre in St Philips - which serves virtually the entire independent greengrocery sector across the South West and South Wales and employs some 500 people locally (Carey, 2011) - is in decline due to competition from in-house distribution networks of supermarkets (Carey, 2011: 3).
- There is a trial dynamic public procurement scheme planned for the South-West which could provide more market opportunities for small-scale agroecological growers selling into schools and hospitals (Soil Association, n.d.). This could be used as part of a broader community wealth building approach, to generate and retain income within the local area (Young, 2019).
- COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of food supply in urban areas, and farmer focused supply chains are able to create resilience with research published last April showing that sales of small farmer focused veg box schemes grew by 134% between end of February and mid-April (Wheeler, 2020: 3).

5. Sources of inspiration - case studies from Bristol and elsewhere

There are already numerous effective food-focused projects and organisations in Bristol, a few of which are highlighted below, but interesting approaches from elsewhere show the potential impact of fringe farming and might prompt ideas for creative ways to move forwards here.

Grow Wilder (formerly Feed Bristol) is a six-acre wildlife gardening hub, run by Avon Wildlife Trust, on Bristol City Council land. Members of the public can visit, volunteer, or join a course at the site to learn more about growing wildflower meadows (at their nursery and living seed bank), ecological land management, therapeutic wildlife gardening and organic food growing. A range of innovative community food growing businesses (including the two detailed below) are located onsite, rooms are available for hire, and seasonal celebrations are hosted to help the wider community engage with growing and the environment.

Edible Futures is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) market garden founded on the principles of food sovereignty, which grows salad, herbs and vegetables at the Grow Wilder site and supplies these to the local community, restaurants and shops. They don't use any chemicals in growing the food, and their farming system is designed to maximise biodiversity. As a response to rising food poverty associated with the COVID lockdowns, they started a Solidarity Veg Box scheme that distributed vegetables to destitute asylum seekers. They hope to continue with this model this year, funding permitting.

Sims Hill Shared Harvest started when a group of local people wanted to set up a growing operation and a local authority owned field just two miles from the city centre became available (with the caveat that it be used for the benefit of the community). They now supply 90 households with vegetables a year through a CSA model. They also run a schools programme, regular volunteer and member days on the land, and offer a work share. These wider community activities were important to the Council and helped secure a 10-year Farm Business Tenancy with a peppercorn rent, which ensures the project's viability (Access to Land, n.d.).

London, UK

OrganicLea is a workers' cooperative growing food on the edge of London. They have a veg box scheme, offer practical support to local community groups and schools which want to start growing food, and run a number of different accredited courses and traineeships on horticulture and other land-based skills. They have used the Farm Carbon Calculator toolkit to show their activities result in over 11 tonnes of carbon sequestration (OrganicLea, 2020). OrganicLea is also part of the Wolves Lane Consortium, stewarding a 3-acre former council plant nursery site in to become a thriving centre for growing and distributing wholesome food, a space for the local food economy to develop through education, enterprise, and events, and a community hub which makes good food accessible to all and builds a healthier, more sustainable food culture in the area. In 2020, the Consortium received £1.2 million as part of the Greater London Authority's 'Good Growth' regeneration fund to be split between the OrganicLea and Wolves Lane sites to help their vision of a 'market garden city' come to life (Wolves Lane Centre, 2020a).



Organiclea, Hawkwood Nursery, London. Credit: Shared Assets

Rosario's flagship Urban Agriculture Programme emerged from financial crisis in 2001, and since then has grown to preserve over 700 hectares (1,730 acres) of agricultural land, produce 25,000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables each year, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions for locally produced vegetables by 95%. With support from research institutions and the UN, the municipality began by mapping and then taking over vacant and underutilised land that could be used for farming, set up a Municipal Agricultural Land Bank, and offered tenancies to small-scale agroecological farmers. It also provided technical agricultural assistance and trained farmers in commercial skills such as food safety and quality control, and strengthened routes to market through home delivery schemes, setting up farmers' markets, and processing plants.

Today, over 2,400 families are practising agroecological growing in small plots making up 75 hectares (185 acres) across the city, helping reduce food insecurity and poverty. A number of 'Garden Parks' and Green Corridors have also been opened up, mainly in low-income neighbourhoods, to help manage flooding and extreme heat, as well as providing space for agriculture on the peri-urban fringe (World Resources Institute, 2020). Key to the programme's success has been a dedicated team of agronomists to support growers and innovate new technologies for agroecology, an accurate inventory of the municipality's land assets, and a joined-up approach across departments of the municipality, with supporting agroecological farmers seen as a way to tackle poverty, food insecurity and the climate crisis (Urban Sustainability Exchange. n.d.). The motivation to set up this transformative programme from a time of crisis provides an example of the sort of changes to UK local food and farming systems which could be achieved as part of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic if comprehensive support is offered to growers.

Further case studies are included at the end of this document.

6. Existing commitments

The next decade is set to be one of transformation for Bristol, and a number of key strategies have goals that either explicitly refer to more sustainable food production and consumption, or could be supported through the expansion of fringe farming:

1. The City of Bristol declared a climate emergency in 2018 and pledged to make the city carbon neutral by 2030 (Bristol City Council, 2019: 5).
2. Amongst the priority outcomes of Bristol's One City Plan are that:
 - a. By 2050, 'Everyone will have access to healthy, ethical and sustainably produced food', 'Bristol will have an abundance of wildlife, all people will benefit from healthy natural environment', and there will be 'Improved integration between neighbourhoods and employers', and 'Economic growth through boosting productivity' (Bristol One City, 2020a: 12).

b. As part of the One City Climate Strategy, by 2030 'Urban food production potential is maximised for sustainable and resilient food production and is used as a mechanism for active community participation and education in food sustainability' (Bristol One City, 2020b: 61).

3. Bristol is aiming to be a Gold Sustainable Food City by spring 2021, and lay the foundations for a resilient food community locally by 2030 (Going for Gold Bristol, 2021b).

4. Bristol is also a signatory city of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact meaning it is committed to 'develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, that minimize waste and conserve biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating impacts of climate change' (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2020: 1).

7. References and further reading

More case studies from elsewhere

Liège, Belgium

Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise (CATL) or the Liège Food Belt is an association launched in 2013 dedicated to promoting sustainable food amongst the general public and to fostering local food production and distribution in the Liège region. Since their launch, 16 citizen-led food cooperatives have been created (Communities for Future, 2020), the City of Liège has identified and provided communal land suitable for urban agriculture, three food policy councils have been established in the Liège Province, and a cooperative food hub has been set up. The Food Hub seeks to bridge missing links of local food production chains, by providing a vegetable cannery, jar and bottle washing unit, meat cutting and processing workshops, and a logistics hub for distribution. This has been supported by finance from the Walloon regional government, with a key recommendation emerging that food hub infrastructures should be owned by public bodies but preferably run by a group of food cooperatives (Jonet, 2021).

New Haven, Connecticut, USA

The city of New Haven has recently established a **Food System Policy Division** which operates according to a food justice framework based around health equity, socio-economic and environmental justice. They plan to work with a wide network of non-profits, volunteers, and community groups to develop a New Haven Urban Agriculture Masterplan. So far, initiatives rolled out include:

- Creating an ordinance to allow small food business entrepreneurs (particularly those with fewer resources) to access shared commercial kitchens, as a way of entering the food industry, as well as creating jobs, and encouraging sourcing from local producers.

- Laying the groundwork for a city-wide community composting network.
- Building institutional partnerships between, and creating tools for, schools, hospitals, and universities, to move towards more sustainable and transparent food procurement practices (IPES Food, 2020).

Brighton, UK

The non-profit **Brighton and Hove Food Partnership** is pushing for a consideration of food growing at a wide scale, including through the planning system, and via the management of the Downlands Estate landscape. An updated version of the Planning Advice Note on Food Growing and Development was recently adopted by the Council's Tourism, Equalities, Communities and Culture Committee, and includes guidance and practical examples for developers on including food growing spaces in new development such as through edible hedgerows, roof gardens or mini allotments (Ward, 2020).

The Partnership has also submitted a response to the recently closed council consultation about how it should manage the Downlands surrounding Brighton for the next 100 years (O'Brien, 2021). In this, the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership advocate for a shift to sustainable farming and food practices to be placed at the heart of the City Downland Estate Plan, and that the Downlands should be recognised not as a 'wild' landscape but primarily a managed one (often through farming), which communities should have a greater say in. You can read their full response here.

Further reading

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