

**The Downland Estate:  
Contributing to more sustainable food systems for Brighton & Hove**

Report on a workshop held on 12th July 2018, 12pm to 5.30pm,  
Brighthelm Centre - Stanmer Room, Brighton



## Executive Summary

This report details a workshop convened with the aim of bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss and debate the existing farming practices on the Brighton & Hove Downland Estate, to explore the possibilities for the estate to better contribute to a more sustainable food system for Brighton & Hove, and to identify next steps for this to happen. The 26 participants included 7 growers (including farmers on the estate and others from the surrounding area), conservation bodies such as the South Downs National Park, Natural England and Sussex Wildlife Trust, Brighton and Hove City Council and their land agents (Savills), NGOs and local food retailers. This report adopts the Chatham House rule, reporting on what was said but not attributing any statements to individuals.

The event highlighted differences in opinion over the desirability and feasibility of significant levels of food production on the Downs, and – beyond this – questions about the overall “purpose” of the estate and the processes for determining and prioritising among its many roles. A key outcome was that a policy review involving a democratic/ participatory process was needed to identify this purpose, and that a clear vision and political leadership was required to take it forward to implement a new approach to managing the Estate.

Beyond this need for a more inclusive process for reviewing the Downland Estate policy, a number of suggestions/ recommendations gained widespread support:

- The Downland Estate is large and heterogenous. There is therefore a clear need and demand to map the ecological potentials within the Downland estate - drawing on and collating existing data on soils, morphology, climate, delivery of biodiversity outcomes, natural capital, infrastructure etc – in order to inform decisions over where opportunities for food production (and other) activities may exist.
- An innovation and experimentation role for the Downland Estate – in line with the ambition of the UNESCO Biosphere to act as an international demonstration site for sustainability – should be considered in relation to food production. Initially small in scale, this might involve a specific tender process for farm business tenancies.
- There is a role for the local authority in collaboration with other groups in supporting farmers to access shorter, more direct supply chains to urban consumers (see Taylor 2018), enhancing on farm profitability and strengthening the link between the public and the Downland Estate.
- A research and innovation hub involving local academic organisations, farmers and other bodies could act as a source, repository and point of exchange for knowledge – collecting data and experience from conventional farmers, agro-ecological farmers and other forms of land-use.
- There is a role for different groups in the city to celebrate the positive activities of farmers in terms of good environmental practice, habitat conservation etc. This could involve more of the public going out to farm open days, communication activities among schools or consumers.
- Briefings produced on key issues in the run-up to the next local Council elections which will take place on Thursday, 2 May could raise awareness of the importance of the Downland Estate.

There are different kinds of producers on the South Downs and in the neighbouring area. Some of this diversity is apparent from the account below, but an even wider variety of voices were not ‘in the room’ at the time of the workshop. It would be important to bring in these farmers’ voices, so that they can be taken into account with any future changes in policy.

## Background

The City of Brighton & Hove has made impressive progress toward improving access to healthy and sustainable food for its residents. However, 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<sup>1</sup>, and 8% of the population are living in food poverty.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the STEPS Centre's 'Transformative Pathways to Sustainability' network, an initiative in Brighton & Hove has been bringing together farmers, civil society organisations and academics to identify ways to address these remaining challenges. An initial workshop in 2015 identified farmland around Brighton as an area of interest. On the basis of interviews and a further workshop (December 2016), the research group focussed down on two challenges facing local farmers: how to connect local producers with the market in the city and how to facilitate access to land for agro-ecological producers. On the latter, research raised questions about the potentials of the Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) owned Downland Estate to help meet the city's needs.

The Downland Estate comprises 4,109 hectares of farmland and its management is guided by the City Downland Estate Policy, first developed as the Downland Initiative Feasibility Study – see Smiths Gore and the University of Reading (2006). The aim of the City Downland Estate 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'. This comprises four broad themes: agriculture and land use, access, wildlife and landscape and education and interpretation. In relation to agriculture, the objective of the Estate 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 down land objectives.' While the Downland Estate is providing multiple benefits, there is scope for more progress to be made.

This event, convened by researchers from the University of Sussex and the Institute of Development Studies, provided an opportunity for the initial research to be discussed and for a broad range of perspectives to be heard about the multiple potentials and future options for the management of the City Downland Estate. It took place in parallel with other ongoing processes, including the Whole Estate Plan<sup>3</sup>, the City Food Strategy Refresh<sup>4</sup> and the Council's 2030 Vision<sup>5</sup> process.

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<sup>1</sup> Brighton & Hove Food Partnership (2012) 'Spade to Spoon: Digging Deeper'

<sup>2</sup> Brighton & Hove Connected, 2017 City Tracker Survey

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/supporting-communities-business/whole-estate-plans/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://bhfood.org.uk/resources/food-strategy/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bhconnected.org.uk/content/2030-vision>

## Proceedings - an account of the afternoon's discussions

### Introduction and Welcome

Adrian Ely welcomed the participants and thanked them for giving up the time to spend the afternoon to the workshop. He set the scene, explaining the purpose of the workshop and what it was hoped it could achieve.

Agriculture in the UK, he said, was facing a major upheaval associated with Brexit, for which we needed to prepare. Brighton and Hove as a city could see this as an opportunity. He also introduced some of the work being carried out at the University of Sussex, including a growth in local work on environment, food and agriculture associated with the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme.

He also introduced the project under the auspices of which this workshop had been convened, part of an international network looking at 'transformations to sustainability'. The project had been co-designed with stakeholders, with its focus gradually evolving. The first event in 2015 involving farmers, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, Brighton Permaculture Trust and NGOs such as Land Workers' Alliance had collectively decided to focus on the "missing middle" – farmers that were too small to benefit greatly from subsidies but were too big to receive support from charitable donors (like community growers) (see Ely, Wach and Segal 2015). This led to interviews and blogs and another workshop in December 2016, which identified two key issues - firstly market linkages (connecting local producers and local markets) and secondly land availability – as a key constraint facing local agro-ecological producers.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of those discussions, the team had produced two reports that were made available on the day (Taylor 2017; Wach and Ely 2018). Today's event was focussing on the second of those key issues – that of land availability.

The purpose of the workshop was to create the space for diverse views in this area to be heard and for new ideas to be voiced - not only technical/ expert perspectives, but also the knowledge of the hugely experienced practitioners in the room. Whilst several conversations were ongoing around how the Downland Estate should be managed, this was an opportunity for them to come together in order to explore different perspectives and priorities. Adrian explained that one of his colleagues would be taking photos, which might be posted online and asked participants to contact him if they had any reservations. He also clarified that they would be circulating people's contact details and asked participants to let him know if they had any concerns. None were raised.

Adrian then introduced Ben Messer (Food Matters) who had been contracted to facilitate the workshop.

### Facilitator's introductory question: vision for change over the next 20 years

As facilitator, Ben Messer explained that he would be looking to enable a cross-fertilisation of different perspectives – working in small groups and feeding back to group as whole in order to ensure as many voices were heard as possible. He explained the overall outline for the day, which started with each attendee providing a brief introduction to themselves and why they had attended the workshop.

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<sup>6</sup> In the earlier parts of the project (up till 2018) there was no specific focus on the Downland Estate, but on producers within approximately 50km of Brighton and Hove.

Previously, as people had been arriving, Ben had posed an introductory question, asking people to write their answers on post-it notes on a flip chart at the front of the room:

The B&H Downland Estate and its contribution to a more sustainable food system for Brighton & Hove - what 1 THING would you like to see in 20 years' time?

The full range of responses are below:

- Multiple delivery of ecosystem services facilitated across City Downland Estate
- Stanmer Park is a beacon for good practice and inspiration for sustainable food
- Locally grown food available across the city
- More trees and diversity of habitats
- Sustainable family farms on the South Downs
- A profusion of alternative food networks linking local producers with consumers who value local, sustainably-produced food
- Environmental land management across downs – consumers sourcing local food – shorter supply chain
- Sustainable farming on the Downs
- Many small organic farms providing diverse range of grains, fruit and veg and wildlife habitat
- Resilient local food network supplying 20% of Brighton and Hove's city needs
- Cohesive vision for the wider landscape – resource, habitat and production
- 10 years' time: demand for healthy, locally-produced food is met by initiatives supported by the Downland Estate
- 20 years: a majority of the residents identify a sense of attachment to the land around Brighton and Hove
- The estate provides the opportunity for sustainable food production for Brighton and Hove's people
- Profitable farming able to support good environmental management
- More young agroecological farmers producing food for the city
- Sheep and cattle still on the South Downs and a greater general understanding/ awareness of the origins of food and the food chain
- A sense of Downland Estate – 'branded' produce available in the city
- Increase in local supply chain. That we have sustainable and environmentally-sensitive farming that delivers wider public benefits
- Ecologically-sensitive land management by farmers is incentivised – more profitable than alternatives
- Less monoculture and more diversified crops and agroecological methods
- More small farms feel confident to produce agroecological food for local consumers

Additional comments that were raised in discussion included:

- A need to consider profitability – “businesses in the red can't be green”
- A need to consider climate change as well as current conditions
- Working on the basis of the “polluter pays” principle (tax per litre on nitrates, ammonia, phosphates)
- Recognising that in many cases farmers have the most detailed knowledge of the current situation and realistic options.
- Many of these issues are already being discussed, for example on the basis of the Natural Capital Committee's work.

An important framing question to the organisers was “what product can we produce in a sustainable way, considering the chalky soil and water availability? What are we talking about today?” Adrian Ely

answered that the Downs are obviously especially suited to livestock, but that the workshop was also interested in considering opportunities for enhancing vegetable production (currently at a very low level) and experimenting with arable approaches that are less damaging in terms of fertilisers and synthetic chemicals.

This led to a further question about whether there was a detailed soil understanding of Downland Estate? There is a dominance of talk about the chalky soils, but there are different soil types with different potential, and some people have managed to produce well on the chalk. No-one in the room was aware of a detailed soil map that had been undertaken of the Downland Estate, however there are national (UK) soil map data held by Natural England, the Landis/ NSRI Site Soils Reporter (Hallet et al 2017), and publically available data from soil sampling which has taken place as part of agri-environment schemes.

There was a history of growing vegetables in some areas (e.g. around Peacehaven), however a response was that the current state of the market means that farmers have to specialise. Beyond soils, water is crucial for market garden crops and, as there is insufficient water available on the Downs, they have become unviable. Another organic farmer argued that it was definitely possible to grow profitable vegetables, even on marginal land.

The conclusion was that a more detailed mapping exercise (beyond soils and water) was needed to adequately inform the debate, drawing from existing data from national databases, as well as Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre and climate change forecasts.

## Second Question: what's in it for you?

Participants were asked to find someone they didn't know and discuss the following question:

Using the Downland Estate to contribute to a more sustainable food system.  
What's in it for you?

Participants had a 5 minute conversation in pairs about why the question of the Downland Estate was important to them, and what they stood to gain or lose from any proposed shift in management. They were asked to feed back on key issues and in particular points of contention.

From the perspective of tenant farmers on the Downland estate, some wondered if there was anything "in it for them", questioning that the Council's policies pointed towards sustainability and local supplying, but were at the same time pushing up rents, encouraging further mechanisation. Some thought there would only be something "in it" for most tenant farmers if any changes led to an increase in profitability – for example if products could attract a premium. In a context in which the general population are looking for the cheapest product, there is a limited market for branded products in South Downs. Perhaps "getting the farmers' voices out" was an opportunity that this presented.

Rather than competing on farm gate price alone, another farmer pointed to the need for the authorities to support farmers to cut out the middle man (where most profits go) and look for more direct supply chains that could work over the long-term. A response was that there are heavy regulations on food production and processing, meaning that it is expensive for farmers to necessarily grow the food and prepare it for the market themselves. For some products at least (e.g. meat), it was suggested that this meant that it had to go through the established large scale system and cutting out the middle man was "unrealistic".

In response to the need to attract a premium for local produce, it was noted that earlier initiatives to support the marketing of South Downs lamb hadn't been entirely successful – they had been too complicated and farmers usually didn't have the marketing skills. This was an area in which one participant suggested farmers could be supported to generate the necessary skills.

Elise observed that farming models are dominated either by economies of scale and cutting costs, or selling more expensive produce into niche markets. Neither is sufficient under current conditions. Public procurement is one way local authorities can help (BHFP have done some brilliant work in this area) but is usually still favoured to large producers unless there is a specific focus on small and family scale producers. However, other models (e.g. in Plymouth) have demonstrated ways in which the products of (and infrastructures for) small scale producers can be aggregated in a way that supports both producers and consumers.

Another participant observed that wine production could be an option in the future, but requires a significant financial investment and 8 years to establish vines.

A wider issue was raised around “what is purpose of the public estate?” As a private farmer, the purpose of the land is usually to make profit, but as a public land owner what is its purpose? Public access or profitability or other issues? Another question was how to strike the right balance? There are so many different priorities and sustainable food systems (the focus of the event) was only one element. This was backed up by a participant who said that the land is all held ‘in trust’ - what we're trying to do here is define ‘stewardship’ and the kind of ‘stewardship’ that is demanded by the public.

The facilitator then asked what were the factors that stood in the way of sustainable food production? Several participants responded that farmers also wanted to farm sustainably but were constrained by the political and economic conditions under which they operated. Many farmers (including on the Downland Estate) hold very strong values about sustainable farming, about what they want to eat, how they want to work the land and also work with communities, but profitability was still a constraint. For other farmers or potential farmers, it was suggested that the profit motive (itself a matter of degree) was not the main priority.

As an example, one farmer took issue with the figures quoted in the report that had been circulated in advance (drawing on work from the University of Sussex<sup>7</sup>). Exclaiming that “pesticides were not for fun”, they emphasised that they used as few as possible due to the expense, and faced a great challenge balancing environmental worries and producing crops.

Recognising the different types of farming that were being practised, and might be possible on the Downland Estate, participants called for a combination of stakeholder dialogue (in particular including farmers' voices) and leadership (in terms of the purpose of the public land).

## A review of the research to date

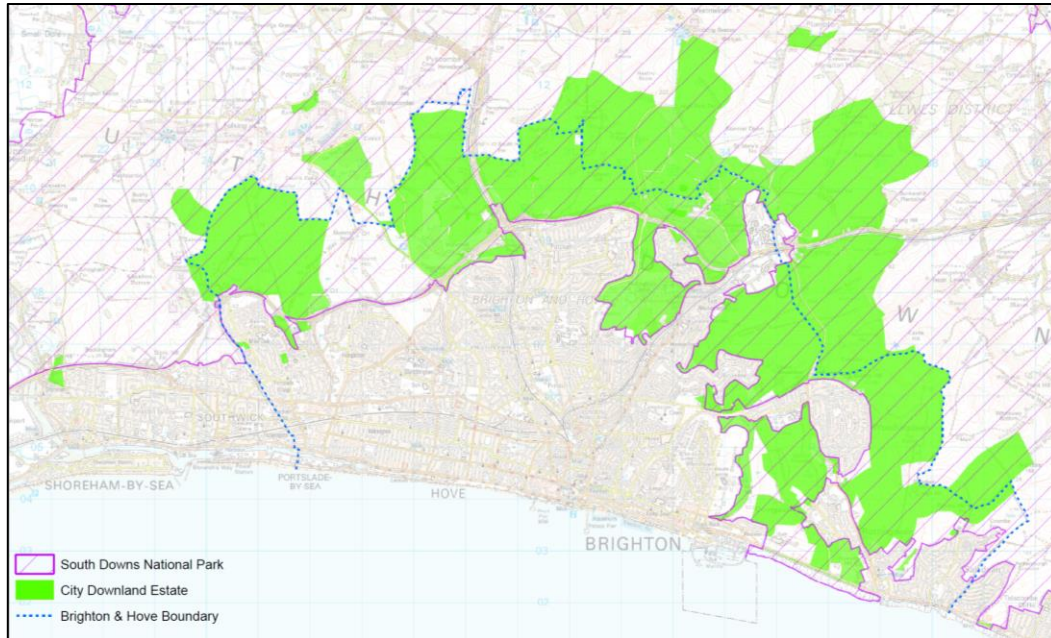
Elise Wach reviewed the work that had been done so far by the ‘Transformations to Sustainability’ project, including its collaborative design, focussing down on challenges facing small farmers, issues of land access and market linkages, and the findings from documentary and interview research. She explained what has been achieved so far for food in B&H and in the Downland Initiative and why

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<sup>7</sup> <http://splash.sussex.ac.uk/blog/for/dg229/2015/01/16/biodiversity-v-intensive-farming-has-farming-lost-its-way> (Accessed April 2018)



more action is needed, given declining farming livelihoods, high rates of food poverty and poor nutrition and declining farm ecosystems on the Downland Estate. The presentation reviewed and updated some of the information included in the report 'Brighton and Hove's Farmland: potentials for a more local and ecological food supply' (Wach and Ely 2018) and the summary circulated prior to the event.



Map indicating the City Downland Estate and South Downs National Park

Farmland around Brighton & Hove, including the Downland Estate, is primarily used for either arable crop production or for grazing. The products of arable crop production—primarily of spring barley, winter wheat, and oilseed rape—are mostly sold into national and international markets, with a minority sold locally (e.g. for brewing). While many farmers are part of Defra (Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs) stewardship schemes, it is still possible to use pesticides, herbicides and inorganic fertilisers as part of these schemes, and farmers are not required to use adequate cover cropping. These practices are leading to soil erosion, lower fertility, contamination of water supplies, and harm to bird and insect populations.

Animal products from the Downs are primarily from rearing sheep and cattle. Conservation grazing is prevalent around the city and can help preserve chalk grasslands. These are deemed to be valuable ecosystems, providing habitats for butterflies, wildflowers and other species, though there are debates about other ecological potentials of the area. 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 (Food Matters 2011).

However, up until recent history, much of the land in and around Brighton & Hove was used for the production of various crops, from blackcurrant and beetroot to cauliflower. Some farms are demonstrating that this is still feasible. Within a 50km radius of Brighton & Hove, the research has so far identified 25 agro-ecological<sup>8</sup> farms which are producing a wide range of vegetables, fruits and even heritage grains. They use practices such as intercropping and companion planting, planting of

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<sup>8</sup> This means that they minimise or eliminate the use of pesticides, herbicides or inorganic fertilisers and encourage biodiversity – see Gliessman, S.R. (2007) *Agroecology: The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems*, Boca Raton: CRC Press



green manures and use of soil covers, natural pest management techniques, integration of trees and integration of crops and livestock. The majority of these farms are selling their products to nearby local communities (i.e. even more local than Brighton & Hove), with some also selling into the city.

Elise outlined some of the potentials of agro-ecological farms, including:

**Contributions to healthy diets:** Compared to conventional farming, agro-ecological farming has been shown to produce yields at similar or higher levels for field scale conventional vegetables in the UK, for crops including beetroot, kale, cabbage, carrots, broad beans, calabrese, French beans and spinach (Laughton 2017). Such production could help support healthy diets, given the need for people to be consuming more vegetables and fruits.

**Farm livelihoods:** A recent study in the UK found that agroecological farms, which are typically small in scale, provide more employment per hectare than the average British farm. The study also found that incomes could be higher in agro-ecological farms, even though farmers did not receive subsidy support (Laughton 2017).

**Access and Education:** Small-scale and agro-ecological farms also have the potential to host visitors and to educate citizens about food production. Many Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms host open days for visitors and volunteers, school and youth groups to expose young people a diversity of flora and fauna. Support for agro-ecological farms could help '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', an objective of the estate.

Elise outlined the way in which many young people want to enter the sector. Rates of enrolment into agricultural training programmes increased 20% in the past ten years. Locally, as of 2016, 125 individuals and families have registered as seeking affordable farmland for agroecology in East Sussex (Ecological Land Cooperative 2016). This demand suggests that agroecological farming could also respond to some of the challenges facing the farming sector at the national level. The number of farmers is decreasing across the country, with rates of decline even higher in the South East (Adas Consulting 2004). In this context, particularly with upcoming post-Brexit changes to agricultural policy (but depending on their nature), agroecological farming presents a potential opportunity.

The presentation also provided a comparison between the B&H Downland Estate and Norfolk and Suffolk County Council Farmland Estates. It was noted that there are more tenants per land area in Suffolk and Norfolk, and that while all three estates are used for farm-related businesses, woodlands, allotments and footpaths, a significant difference is that Suffolk and Norfolk estates explicitly support new entrants and provide affordable farm-based housing for them. It was also noted that these supports do not come as a tradeoff with profitability. Norfolk has made changes to their estate in a way that supports council aims and generates revenue.

Drawing on examples of estates owned by other local authorities across the UK, the research pointed to a number of potential options that might enable the Downland Estate to provide better support to healthy diets, communities, ecosystems and farmers themselves, beyond initiatives to support marketing and market linkages (on which, see Taylor 2018 for a discussion):

**Dedicating a portion of the estate to agro-ecological production** could be achieved through for example, dedicating an upcoming tenancy or through dedicating a portion of an existing tenancy to

this purpose. The proposal is not to make sweeping changes to the entire estate but to foster and support the beginnings of change on portions of the estate.

**Learning from other councils:** While some councils have sold off their estates to raise capital, other councils such as Suffolk, Norfolk and Pembrokeshire County Councils, for example, have split their farmland estates into smaller tenancy units, to try to encourage new rural businesses, support local food economies and provide affordable housing, while also generating revenue for their councils.

**Collaboration with land trusts,** such as the Ecological Land Cooperative, could help in that they bring expertise in working with and supporting agro-ecological farmers and new entrants (e.g. in matching tenants to available land, market linkages, connecting farmers to networks for technical advice and supporting with infrastructure and equipment).

Overall, the research demonstrated that there is potential for the Downland Estate to better support local food, livelihoods, community, healthy diets and ecosystems – this summary was put forward as a potential focus for further discussion.

## Questions and Answers

The presentation provoked a wide-ranging discussion, illustrating some very different perspectives. Some participants questioned the size of farms focused on for the initiative, and Elise specified that the initiative originally oriented towards supporting the ‘missing middle’ of farms – those too small to significantly benefit from subsidies and also outside of the scope of community and local funding initiatives. To date the initiative has not constrained itself to a particular size, given the different area requirements of different types of farms.

The inclusion of the figure of 20 pesticides was again contested, with one participant arguing that it implied that farmers were going over field 20 times in a season, whereas they were using 20 different pesticides in small quantities. At the same time, another researcher who was familiar with the study argued that this figure was based on data from five Sussex farms, and had been backed up by other research at a national level. Another participant suggested that no matter how many pesticides were used, they were all generally bad for biodiversity. It was suggested that the wording on the powerpoint slide could be adjusted to refer to ‘significant use’. While the figure (or the way it was used) was criticised as being alarmist, there was clearly a difference in opinion in the room.

In response to a question about Fork and Dig It, one of the people involved explained that the CSA model involves shareholders bearing some of the risk, and so is a two-way cooperation between producers and consumers. They offer no choice in produce and seasonal eating is important. In their case, demand is greatly outstripping supply.

One participant noted that while quite a lot of tenants live in houses that are farming on the estate, the purpose of the Downland Estate was not for affordable housing. At the same time Brighton and Hove City Council works hard to provide affordable housing within the city. Elise noted that while there is a distinction between agricultural land and housing development land under planning law, when there is an ‘essential need’ it is possible to obtain planning permission to build a dwelling on agricultural land. Agro-ecological farms in particular tend to have an ‘essential need’ for the farmer to live on site, given the nature of farm tasks which require a great deal of responsiveness. Living on site also supports farmers’ financial viability as paying for housing in addition to farmland is generally prohibitive given low farm incomes across the sector. The point in the presentation was that other

councils, such as Norfolk and Suffolk, have supported farm tenants with affordable housing on their farmland estates.

Some drew the potential comparisons with other council farm estates, such as that in Cambridgeshire (which has relatively flat and fertile land) into question.

In response to the point about the age of farmers, it was pointed out that there was some support for farmers under 40, although it was not clear whether this has had a substantive impact. Elise noted that Scottish government offers much more support than England for farmers under 40 and new entrants in general.

### Small Group Discussions

For the next sessions of the workshop, the participants were split into 3 mixed groups (named “carrots”, “sprouts” and “courgettes”) of 6 or 7 people and asked focus on a sequence of questions. Each person was asked to write down individual answers on post it notes on flip charts first, and then facilitators (on each of the tables) were asked to group these responses and then open up and mediate a group discussion. This led to detailed discussions, however – given the distributed groups – it was not possible to record them in as much depth as the plenary sessions. For this reason, the following represents an attempt to capture the essence of the small group discussions on the basis of the short ‘report-backs’ from each of the table facilitators, and the text captured on the flip chart paper and post-it notes.

### Discussion of Negative/ Limiting Factors

The three groups were first asked to answer three questions:

- 1) What factors limit the potential for the Downland Estate to contribute to a more sustainable food system in B&H
  - a. What makes it difficult?
  - b. What gets in the way?
  - c. What factors are the most important and why?
- 2) What would make it easier for the Council’s Downland Estate to better contribute towards more sustainable food systems?
  - a. How can those factors be addressed and overcome?
- 3) What action needs to happen now to help make this happen?
  - a. Who needs to do what?
  - b. What can you do to help make this happen?

### Feedback

#### **“Carrot” group**

The group identified a number of factors (grouped as biophysical, economic and political) constraining the potential of the Downland Estate to contribute to the city’s food system.

- The group expressed that there is a need to foster more partnerships between tenant farmers, to share experiences and work together to shared goals.
- The group saw a great opportunity for mapping what’s there already – in terms of biodiversity but also in terms of opportunities for different activities.
- Legal issues and security of tenure were a challenge – a growing demand for land and housing/ accommodation which is unavailable.

- There are key constraints (and therefore opportunities) around education, knowledge and communication. Within the city, there is insufficient awareness of the rural context. There is a need for farming 'PR', further recognition and celebration of current efforts to move towards environmentally-sustainable agriculture on the Downs. This could take place through Open Farm Sundays, for example.
- Consumer preferences/ expectations act as a barrier to local food. Knowledge about seasonal produce and local supply chains needs to be built.
- Among farmers, maintaining the status quo is easier than experimenting with new techniques and awareness of better approaches is sometimes lacking – incentives and impartial advice for more agro-ecological techniques would be useful.
- Economic incentives focus towards scale, rather than farmers being rewarded (e.g. through reduced rent) for environmental services.
- There are political differences about the role of the Estate – different stakeholder priorities and tensions between EU, national and local levels. A 'shared vision', better co-ordination and political leadership was needed.
- There is currently a lack of resources to drive change – increasing awareness of the issues among residents, changing culture could lead to greater political pressure and therefore momentum.

#### **"Sprout" group**

- The group in general recognised the importance of mapping the Downland Estate, around land grade, type and designations etc to identify opportunities for new crops or management practices
- The group saw a need to lobby for political change around public goods and food production, recognising that transition takes time. Farmers were seen to respond to incentives from both the UK and EU levels.
- Poor soils and no irrigation potential was recognised as a constraint to food production on the Downs
- Given the limited flexibility around tenure, there was a need for positive incentives to enable 'new people' to access land and support for farmers to sub-let
- Infrastructure (electricity, water, roads etc) are also important and there is a need to support 'local' farms and 'local' food (including through aggregation, markets etc).
- There is a disconnect between the urban and rural, with the urban centre being prioritised by a disinterested Council. A question was raised - tax the urban for the rural benefit?
- There was a need to revisit what the purpose of the land is/should be – the Council has mixed priorities and changing policies. There is a lack of co-ordination and discussion between stakeholders. An overarching vision for the Downland Estate is lacking and there are very few opportunities to input or influence the decisions – a better process for public engagement is required.
- There are limits to knowledge (e.g. agricultural or ecological knowledge amongst estate management) and opportunities for training courses.
- There is also a need for educating the public and consumers to eat local vegetables.

#### **"Courgette" group**

- The group identified physical, economic, awareness and governance/policy/political-related constraints. All these created uncertainties and needed to be taken into account in the Whole Estate Plan.
- Physical included porosity of chalk, leaching water and chemicals and reliance on groundwater abstraction. Thin chalk soils created (at least the perception of) poor land for horticulture. Climate change necessitated further adaptation measures. These could be mapped and modelled for sustainable food opportunity areas.

- Political/ governance challenges included different values and priorities, a range of Council commitments and responsibilities (as well as a general lack of resources, necessitating farm income), wholesaler monopoly/ global market economies dictating a less sustainable approach.
- Further political tensions existed between different stakeholders at local and national levels, but the group noted there was no political commitment to agroecological production in general.
- No structure for supporting routes to market combined with inequality and consumer behaviour to make marketing into the city very difficult.
- Better communication and awareness raising was needed among consumers. At the same time cultural factors impeded changes in farming, for example conventional farming culture/ traditional farming attitudes and the difficulties of innovating around supply chains/ delivery systems.
- There were opportunities to improve public understanding of farming and food production

## Discussion of Positive/ Encouraging Factors

The groups were next asked to focus on the following new sequence of questions

- 4) What factors currently support and encourage the shift towards sustainable food production systems on the Council's Downland estate?
  - a. What is currently happening to help realise the potential?
  - b. What food production activities are currently sustainable?
  - c. What should we already be celebrating?
  
- 5) How can this current activity be strengthened and built upon?
  - a. What could help to support what's already happening?
  
- 6) What action needs to happen now to help make this happen?
  - a. Who needs to do what?
  - b. What can you do to help make this happen?
  - c. Who needs to do what?

## Feedback

### **"Carrot" group:**

- The 25 year environmental plan was seen as some as an encouraging factor, with many other local examples that were seen as positive and in need of further support
- The existence of local farm clusters enabling farmers to collaborate in landscape-level management
- All but one farmer on the Estate were understood to be in ELS or HLS, and two tenants practice some organic farming
- The CEH Assist Project and the CHAMP project with many local partners
- Knowledge exchange activities such as the Oxford Farming Conference and Oxford Real Farming Conference and events managed by the CLA
- The fact that there are two significantly-sized stores in the city focussing on sustainably-produced food (Infinity and Hisbe) – although still a niche – was seen as encouraging.
- The Food for Life programme in schools (Soil Association Silver certification), ensuring sustainable fish, red tractor standard meat, local eggs etc.
- Investment by local businesses was encouraging but higher end restaurants were not seen to be buying enough local produce.

Some of these (e.g. the positive initiatives taken by some farmers) should be celebrated and encouraged, for example through open farm Sundays or workshops (farmers could be offered support with issues such as insurance, marketing within the city). This could also contribute to better urban-rural understanding and partnerships.

### **“Sprout” group**

- Good things are happening at Stanmer Organics and Fork n Dig It
- Tenants trying covered crops with support from Southern Water
- Other cities such as Manchester and Plymouth are setting an example in terms of co-ordinating between suppliers and consumers
- Changing perceptions is possible (one person said “people have got used to wind farms, they will get used to polytunnels”)
- Local shops stocking local produce was positive. There were remaining questions about how to make farmers’ markets work in Brighton and Hove (as in Lewes)
- Groundwater projects (e.g. Brighton CHAMP)

There were opportunities for education and interpretation, as well as better linkages and partnerships. The above positive actions could be built upon and supported by soil mapping and GPS technology. A policy review needs to take place identifying priorities, analysing what has worked and what remains to be done.

### **“Courgette” group**

- The Whole Estate plan was seen as an encouraging initiative that could be used in promoting sustainable food production
- Heritage Lottery Fund bid “The Changing Chalk” - sustainable grazing project
- The UNESCO Biosphere status – the Living Coast as an internationally-recognised demonstration area for sustainability
- National Park status and support for sustainable farming
- Increasing consumer demand for organic produce and box schemes (locally)
- Conservation grazing schemes by council and NGOs
- Sussex University project on Brighton and Hove’s food system (under which this workshop is taking place)
- Brighton and Hove City Food Strategy

Overall, the group agreed that these positive and encouraging initiatives could be built upon by agreeing objectives, understanding proportion of land available for various projects and being mindful of all the factors involved in change. Significant opportunities were seen for mapping issues, opportunities and priorities - involving soils, morphology, climate, delivery of biodiversity outcomes. Designation of an experimental area (for sustainable food production or other activities) could use a specific tender process for farm business tenancies. This could also be tied in to rent review negotiations.

The discussion went on to further explore the idea of specifying a proportion of the Downland Estate for experimental approaches, with Brighton and Hove as a potential test-bed for innovation (linking to Biosphere ambitions), with local research to analyse and share lessons.

One participant questioned again whether sustainable farming is really achievable on the Downs and before going further wanted to establish whether sustainable farming is achievable – is the land capable of making a difference to sustainable food production? In response to this, one participant suggested an experimental approach to test whether agroecology was indeed feasible on the chalk soil. However, another farmer argued that this research and experimentation had been undertaken for the past 7 years to answer that exact question, and the concept had been proven by examples such as Fork and Dig It. It was noted that in order to address these remaining questions, it was necessary to get farmers together more to talk about what’s practically possible – dissemination and sharing knowledge and showing that good practice exists.



One person suggested that clear objectives for the Downland Estate needed to be identified democratically (especially if sustainable agriculture was to become more central to its purpose), however it was also important to understand the scale of the change proposed – that it was not the whole estate but just a small portion of it. This need not necessarily be a threat and could be welcomed if undertaken carefully.

It was questioned whether the successes of local initiatives like Fork and Dig It were visible to the Council/ agents. A representative from Fork and Dig It reported struggling to obtain support from the planning authority with the placement of polytunnels, permission for a packing shed etc. and suggested that Brighton and Hove could lead the UK on planning policy to develop infrastructure for such organisations. Other farmers agreed that there were planning barriers and that the council could help with these. The National Park authority played the key role here, and recognised the need to make these processes easier is part of the point of the Whole Estate Plan. At the same time, it was noted that the planning regime protects the public interest, but that definition of the public interest could potentially be more progressive in terms of supporting sustainable food production.

A direct question was asked about when the Whole Estate Plan would be finished, with someone involved stating that it was being discussed with the City Council but they don't know precisely when it will happen. This will be as soon as possible, but it is not a quick process - there are a lot of people to bring together – it is likely to take 12 months.

## Discussion of New Ideas

Finally, participants were asked to address the following questions in the same groups:

- 7) What new actions or approaches could be adopted to support and encourage the shift to sustainable food production?
  - a. What could be happening that isn't?
  - b. What policy levers, interventions around tenancy agreements and organisational principles would actively encourage this?
  - c. What lessons could be learned from best practice and pioneering work elsewhere?
  
- 8) How could these new ways forward be facilitated, encouraged and supported?
  - a. What steps need to be taken?
  - b. Who needs to do what?
  - c. What could you do to support this?

## Feedback

### **“Carrot” group**

Aside from identifying the overlap in priorities between different stakeholders, the group reported on 3 main areas:

- Communication, including to politicians (through producing briefings on key topics in advance of the elections) and the public and farmers (to prevent a step backward in the face of Brexit)
- Training in sustainable agriculture, including the link with Plumpton, around business models, shared farming/ land share, supply chains and processing. For sustainable agricultural production methods, Natural England could try to find funding for training in any demonstrated approaches or technologies
- Research – better linkages with universities, including joint proposals and student projects.

### **“Sprout” group**

- There was a need to get people talking more – greater dialogue between new and old farmers – new constructive alliances and engagement
- There were opportunities for utilising academic institutions in area - Sussex, Brighton, Plumpton (and Tablehurst which does biodynamic trainings)
- Approaches towards defining best value for the council needed to go beyond monetary value – making the case for public benefits even if not quantified
- There was a requirement for coordinating local level activities with new agricultural policies
- There was a potential for new approaches to advertising tenancies and vetting potential new farmers

### **“Courgette” group**

- A proposal for a local research hub – answering questions posed by local users (farmers, other stakeholders) to innovate and improve the functioning of the Downland Estate, possibly combined with a model farm – getting best practice out there.
- A more sympathetic planning policy – use better practice to influence that – allowing things to happen for public benefit
- Knowledge exchange – making sure experience and knowledge (eg Fork and Dig It) is out there and available
- Share expertise and draw on knowledge of other stakeholders e.g. Ecological Land Cooperative, which has experience of supporting new entrants into agro-ecology and is currently working on models of sub-letting

### Concluding thoughts

These discussions led into a summing up, which included thoughts on what had been learned, what were the key headlines and outputs, what needed to happen and what would be taking place immediately.

Participants agreed that the workshop could easily have taken a whole day – we are dealing with complex issues (with significant risks) and don’t allow ourselves the luxury of this kind of time in planning. The workshop had covered a lot of ground and was useful, but the group needed more time to properly think it through and reflect. Ben Messer recognised that half a day had been a big draw on people’s time and that the organisers appreciated it. It was always difficult to coordinate people and get everyone to give up their time – many others (especially farmers) had not been able to make it.

Participants were positive about the workshop but questions were asked about how to facilitate what’s been discussed and move forward – how can the dialogue continue to enable things to happen? It would be great to use all the individuals today to facilitate progress evolution into a reality – not sure what the follow up mechanisms there are. There is a need to break down the results and establish outcomes, and ensure there is a follow up to this workshop. The Whole Estate Plan was seen as a key strategic opportunity.

One participant stressed that what people were proposing for agroecology on the Downs was not about widescale change across the whole estate. It was noted there is room and opportunity for incremental change and experimentation. If we take Whole Estate plan approach, we can understand scale and that there are different circumstances for different areas – data is already available for much of this kind of mapping – it is just a matter of collating it.

In terms of immediate actions, Adrian Ely agreed to try to capture the depth of discussions from the workshop and outline the key suggestions, recognising that it would not be possible to put forward a

consensus where one hadn't necessarily been identified. He would circulate the report in two weeks' time. The idea that had been raised about a research hub would be followed up – joint fundraising was already something that the University of Sussex had been working on with some of the other groups present, but further efforts could be made.

A participant said that one of the best things to come out of the discussion was recognising the numerous possibilities presented – not just the existing approaches. The organisers thanked the participants for sharing their time to enable this to happen, and hoped that – beyond the report – numerous other conversations and links would emerge from the day's discussions.

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