

# Shaping Places for Healthier Lives

A whole systems project to improve food  
security across Bristol, North Somerset and  
South Gloucestershire

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Led by Bristol City Council with North Somerset Council and  
South Gloucestershire Council

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## Report purpose

This report summarises the **Shaping Places for Healthier Lives** project across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG), the approach taken when working with local areas and community partners and the key impacts and learning achieved.



# Shaping places for healthier lives

## Background

**The Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL) programme focused on taking system-wide action to improve health and reduce health inequalities across five projects in England.**

It was funded by the Health Foundation in partnership with the Local Government Association and set out to learn about local government-led systems approaches to address the wider determinants of health (economic, social and environmental factors).

Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council received

partnership funding (just under £300,000) from 2020–2024 to develop sustainable solutions to local food insecurity through a systems change approach.

As the lead, Bristol City Council employed two part-time project workers over two years to implement the project, addressing root causes of food insecurity and building on community strengths and resources. A steering group of the three Local Authorities gave strategic direction and oversight to the project and other key partners included Feeding Bristol and the University of Bristol<sup>1</sup>.

## Our vision and aims

**To develop innovative and sustainable ways to improve food security in priority communities across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire.**

- **Work with local people to find out what needs to change and how.**
- **Build on community strengths, resources and existing work.**
- **Develop a stronger local voice.**
- **Test different ideas to tackle root causes of food insecurity.**
- **Reflect on what supports lasting change and share learning.**



1: Taru Silvonon and Ges Rosenberg from the University of Bristol.



## Our areas of focus

- **Bristol:** Knowle West, Lawrence Hill and Lawrence Weston
- **North Somerset:** Weston Central and Weston South
- **South Gloucestershire:** Patchway Coniston, and Charlton and Cribbs

These communities were identified through indices of multiple deprivation and health data, by the suitability of the local food landscape and by the capacity and interest of local organisations to engage and work on the project.



## What we did

- **Engaged** with partners and organisations to shape the best approach in each area.
- **Funded** community area leads and formed local project teams.
- **Consulted** with residents to identify the issues and possible solutions.
- **Developed** action plans through **co-production**.
- **Funded** a range of initiatives to address actions in each area.
- Captured, shared, acted and celebrated **learning** throughout the project.

**Crucial to this work was developing a language and approach for systems change usable for local community projects.**

New and sustainable ways to improve food security in priority communities were developed using a **co-production approach**. Relationships were built with local organisations and communities, and **working collaboratively** approaches were identified and shaped that were most effective for the food landscapes in each area.



### Two stages of local funding were used:

- 1) Early on community organisations were funded (£9,000 shared in each area) to take on lead roles;
- 2) later local partners were funded to deliver the agreed initiatives (£20,000 in total for each area).

# Food security initiatives

In every focus area **project teams** of voluntary and community organisations, schools, GPs and residents were set up. They worked together with project workers to plan initiatives that responded to needs and gaps highlighted in the engagement process. This approach was designed to build on community strengths, resources and existing work, and led to co-production of **new action plans** for improving local food security.

The teams agreed initiatives by using either a voting system, setting up a resident decision panel, or through mutual consensus. Local organisations were encouraged to develop proposals for the initiatives and then received project funding for their delivery.

Examples of the initiatives included:

- **Food hub with support / advice**
- **Food support mapping / information**
- **Resident micro grants**
- **Local food forum**
- **After school cooking clubs**
- **Healthier takeaways**
- **Cooking / budgeting courses**
- **Food ambassadors and events**
- **Community batch cooking and freezers**
- **Cost of living support events**
- **Slow cooker club**

Project partners worked at the same time on different initiatives across the system to amplify efforts and potential impact, tackle the root causes of food insecurity, and test and iterate new approaches.

Local people were involved throughout the project and residents encouraged to have a **stronger voice** about what needed to change and how. **Learning** was captured and shared within and between areas throughout this process and also with wider partners and stakeholders.

Some of these project activities created spin-offs and rippled out to other parts of the system. For example additional funding was secured for new fruit and vegetables on prescription schemes in two areas of Bristol; for extension of the pop up food pantry in Weston and support for South Gloucestershire to develop plans for becoming a Sustainable Food Place.





## Initiative case studies

### After School Cooking Clubs

Families met weekly after school to cook and eat a healthy meal together. They learnt about cooking skills and healthy eating and formed strong social connections together.

**Impact:** Children prepared and tried new healthy foods and started eating vegetables. Parents volunteered to help in other groups. All 70 plus participants used learning at home, increased understanding and tried new foods!

"My children have tried new foods. They love preparing veg. They have a greater understanding where their food comes from... (and) built up confidence around new people and new skills."



### Community Batch Cooking

Residents batch cooked healthy meals together, freezing multiple portions and providing these free or based on what people could afford.

**Impact:** Over 600 community meals were prepared. Residents developed cooking skills, nutrition and food safety knowledge and confidence. Health benefits were reported from social connection, sense of purpose and belonging.



"I like having some in the freezer for those days when I'm too unwell to cook. The kids are being fed proper food without me having to worry. And we've started trying some new food too. The recipes on the packaging is a great idea."



## Slow Cooker Club

A six week programme supported 10 vulnerable, low-income households, empowering them to create nutritious meals and build cooking confidence through using a slow cooker.

**Impact:** All participants tried new foods and recipes, increased veg consumption and saw time and cost savings. 86% cooked more from scratch, with children and in batches.

“(It) involved our child in cooking more, enjoyed trying a new way of cooking. Also enjoyed discussing how food cooked in the slow cooker tasted different and because it was new it encouraged our five year-old to try more veg!”



## Healthy Cooking Courses

New local cooking and budgeting courses were set up and completed by all learners and a high proportion went onto longer local courses.

**Impact:** All learners found the courses useful and a positive change was seen especially on likes and dislikes, for example towards cooking with lentils and spinach!

## Why this project was different



### Collaboration

across three local authorities affecting change at a community, local authority and BNSSG level



### Reflective learning

approach being able to adapt and flex



**Making systems thinking approachable** with evidence of changing mindsets and ways of working



A focus on **building relationships and wider connections**



### Co-production

creating shared solutions – shaped by local people's knowledge and experience



# What worked well

## Collaboration

Developing strong and inclusive connections between organisations and with residents. Sharing of learning, vision and expertise between councils.

## Co-production

A genuine approach co-creating shared solutions based on resident responses and organisation strengths.

## Empowerment

Local people shaping initiatives and making decisions about their funding.

## Flexibility

Building new partnerships and onto existing local work and networks to shape engagement and planning.

## Concurrent Work

Delivering complementary initiatives tackling different parts of the system at same time.

## Strategic Links

Embedding into wider food equality, healthy weight and environmental strategies.





# Successes and challenges

## Bristol

- Building good relationships at a local and city level was the strong foundation for change.
- Co-producing deliverable solutions from community engagement proved key for them to work.
- A participatory funding approach with residents was very effective and empowering.
- Complementary initiatives tackled the same issue, at the same time in the same area.
- Wider links into city food equality work and plans enabled shared learning and coordination.

## North Somerset

- Developing a partnership of nine different organisations formed the project team.
- Taking a collaborative approach enabled allocation of project funding.
- Building on an existing local food network was effective.
- Persevering through lead staff changes and flexibility to respond was key.

## South Gloucestershire

- Talking in plain accessible words about systems thinking supported lasting change.
- Forming a collaborative project team brought together five different organisations.
- Building on existing assets and projects added value and created stronger connections.
- Collaborating moved the wider food agenda forward.

## Challenges

**Each council began the project from a different starting point so work across the three local authorities reflected this and brought both opportunities and practical challenges.**

Aligning council processes across the BNSSG was especially challenging and affected the pace of activities. It was learnt that it is more effective to collaborate and communicate well rather than have everything aligned exactly the same. Ongoing feedback, sharing of learning and experiences, communication, regular meetings and continuous problem-solving all strengthened relationships across the three councils.

Changes in lead staff at both council and area levels caused challenges. This was overcome through flexibility, perseverance and working with partners who could step in to fill emerging gaps. Our collaborative working meant that other local organisations were already involved and had the understanding of the project and connections to take over and deliver the work as needed.



# Sharing learning

**Project teams and leads in each area met frequently throughout the project to develop and monitor their plans, update and coordinate delivery and share learning together.**

Local **evaluation plans** were developed alongside each initiative action plan. Partners agreed what evidence should be collected, and how, before delivery started. Delivery partners were encouraged to reflect, record and share learning and initiative progress against these regularly.

Learning events and workshops helped share project learning between BNSSG projects and wider colleagues. Resources and tools were developed with the University of Bristol and Centre for Systems Leadership.

Contributions were made to a programme wide [Shaping Places systems learning resource](#) and work with the Design Council developed our project story and slide deck used to present our learning to wider public, voluntary and community organisations.



## Funding specific learning

- Initial funding enabled local partners to take a paid lead role and support meaningful community engagement.
- Flexibility was key so funding could be fitted to the local landscape and cooperation between partners encouraged.
- Simple, straightforward and a quick funding process targeted those interested and already doing local food related work.
- Involving residents in making decisions and giving feedback about local initiatives funding was insightful and powerful.



# Key project learning<sup>2</sup>

- **Invest time and funding upfront to develop and strengthen relationships and identify need**

Spend time building new connections and strengthening existing relationships between local partners, residents and workstreams. This pays dividends and is an important and lasting change.

- **Give ownership and be flexible to get better buy-in**

Invite people to get involved and give them the space to participate meaningfully towards creating change. Adapt your approach to respond to local context and landscape.

- **Adapt the language and approach for systems thinking to local needs**

Talk in accessible language that resonates with residents / groups and overcomes barriers and any previous alienation. This can help develop a mindset and approach towards systems change.

- **Build on what is already there and add value and capacity**

It is important to start with existing community strengths and assets. By then adding resources it gives 'breathing space' to try new things, work with others and test new ideas and ways of working.

- **Build in monitoring and reflection and think about the long term from the start**

Take the time to set up monitoring at the start and then step back and reflect at intervals how the system is evolving and how this affects future plans. Building on existing work will bring long term benefits.

- **Small changes are valuable, add up and have ripple effects**

Systems change is challenging and often things don't go to plan. Real-world change is much 'messier' than academic models but lots of small changes can have much wider and cumulative effects.

2: See BNSSG Shaping Places for Healthier Lives case study (2024) at:

[www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/whole-systems-project-improve-food-security-across-bristol-north-somerset-and-south](https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/whole-systems-project-improve-food-security-across-bristol-north-somerset-and-south)

# Our impacts<sup>3</sup>

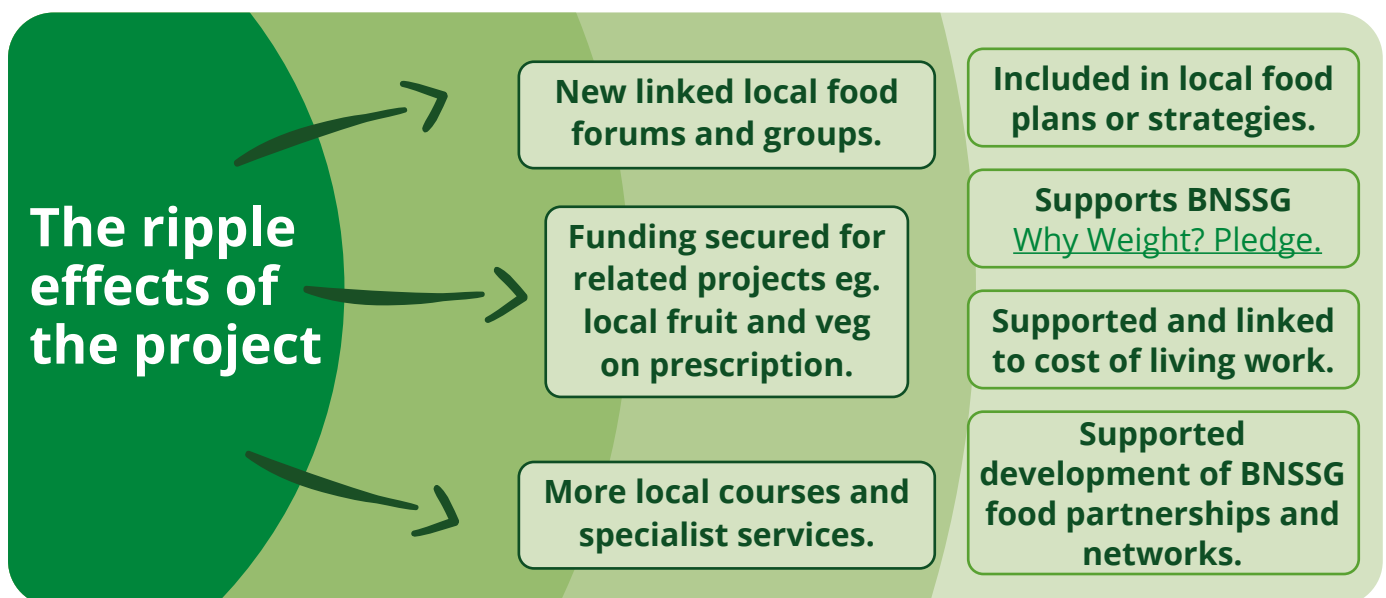
**Positive changes and both planned outcomes and unexpected ripple effects were seen throughout the wider system at different levels with residents, local community groups, councils, and across BNSSG.**

## Residents

Residents taking part in the cooking clubs and courses reported improved cooking skills, a better understanding of healthy eating, and healthier meal choices at home. Local access to healthy and appropriate food has also been enhanced through providing food alongside support and advice. Residents are now more actively involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

## Local community groups

Local community groups have increased engagement and collaboration and have stronger working relationships in project areas. They now come together to discuss broader social and systemic issues affecting local food security, sharing ideas for long-term solutions and exploring partnership opportunities. Project participation models have already been replicated locally.



## Councils

Councils' approaches to working with communities were influenced and improved, helping with the cultural shift towards resident and community co-production. This led to sharing of experience and learning opportunities, and improved relationships. Council colleagues also reported an increase in collaborative working on food security, for example in South Gloucestershire where departments are working together on the newly formed Food Partnership.

## Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire

Across BNSSG, working collaboratively strengthened relationships between the three local authorities, council teams, cross sector networks and BNSSG wide partnerships. Sharing learning and challenges led to a greater understanding of regional differences and fed into strategic decision and policy making, funding allocation and wider service development.



# How we changed systems<sup>4</sup>

Our **language** was adapted to make talking about systems change with local partners and residents more accessible. The focus from the start was on the bigger picture by asking questions about prevention, adding value and lasting change, especially when agreeing action plans and initiatives.

Relationship building was at the heart of the work with new local **collaborations and networks** developed that will last beyond the project. This enabled broader longer-term thinking and shared solutions to be developed, wider connections to be made and more ambitious targets to be set.

The system was influenced at **multiple levels** at the same time. This included both structural impacts, such as on partnerships,

information, resources and services, and through changes in beliefs and goals. This required us to play the role of connector and convenor effectively and to be responsive and adaptable as the system changed and as new opportunities and challenges presented themselves.

A BNSSG food insecurity **systems map** and Theory of Change was developed by the University of Bristol with stakeholders at the project start. They then mapped each area with partners towards the project end to produce a systems map for the project.

**Our systems-based approach enabled wider involvement and impacts and led to a system that was more collaborative, networked and sustainable.**



4: Also see BNSSG [Shaping Places for Healthier Lives case study](#) (2004)

University of Bristol Systems thinking resource, area maps and project systems map to be available [www.bristol.gov.uk](http://www.bristol.gov.uk)

## Sustainability – working for the long-term

The project partners and new networks have been supported to continue their local activities beyond the project with relevant future funding and partnership opportunities being shared. Remaining project funding allowed some local initiatives to extend and expand further.

Partner organisations have also been connected into wider services and collaborations such as Feeding Bristol, Community Learning and the South Gloucestershire Food Partnership. The SPHL steering group is now becoming a forum for bringing together more stakeholders across the region who work to address food insecurity and the wider good food agenda.

Project teams plan to continue to meet and work together to share resources, access funding streams and continue to deliver their food security action plans. Stronger local relationships and cross sector collaborations, such as with local GPs, Locality Partnerships and councils will further amplify shared efforts and support sustainability after the project funding ends. Additional funding has already been secured from other sources for example Integrated Care System Locality Partnerships and the Household Support Fund by several project partners to sustain and develop their food security initiatives.

## Take away actions



**Embed  
partnership/  
co-production  
approach**



**Replicate/  
sustain food  
security  
initiatives**



**Build on  
learning  
and system  
changes**

These actions have been developed from the project for wider stakeholders to take away and apply to other community work to build lasting system change.





# Acknowledgements

**Huge thanks to all our amazing local leads without who this project could not have taken place:**

## **Knowle West:**

Redcatch Community Garden, Square Food Foundation, Oasis Hub South, Knowle West Alliance, Downton Road Surgery

## **Lawrence Hill:**

Wellspring Settlement, Barton Hill Activity Club, Bristol Somali Forum, Eastside Community Trust, Caafi Health

## **Lawrence Weston:**

Lawrence Weston Community Farm, Oasis Hub North, Community Learning, Ambition Lawrence Weston, Bristol North West Foodbank

## **North Somerset:**

Weston-super-Mare Town Council, Alliance Homes, The Purple Sheep Pantry, The Stable, The Other Place, Weston-super-Mare Foodbank, For All Healthy Living Company, Voluntary Action North Somerset

## **South Gloucestershire:**

Coniston Community Centre, Southern Brooks, Coniston Primary School, Mamas Bristol, South Gloucestershire Over 50's Forum

Thank you also to our project partners for their valuable contribution and support which also include the University of Bristol, the Design Council and Feeding Bristol.



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