

## Resilience and Community Action in Bristol

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Bristol has a reputation, deservedly or not, as one of the world's greenest and most resilient cities. It was chosen as European Green Capital for 2015, and among the first 33 cities worldwide in the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities programme. These accolades in large measure build upon the achievements of the city's dynamic and vibrant movement for community-based action on sustainability. Impressive as these achievements are, genuine progress is minor relative to the continued scale and momentum of the fossil-fuel based economy. This chapter examines the recent history of grassroots environmentalism in Bristol through a resilience lens, focusing on the nature and consequences of cross-scale interactions involving and affecting community level action.

Bristol has a long and proud tradition of grassroots environmental action. Emmelie Brownlee's green history of the city dates its origins to the late 1960s, when a coalition of community groups successfully opposed construction of an inner ring road that would have dramatically altered the urban landscape, with the local Friends of the Earth Group the first of many pioneering environmental initiatives launched during the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Precedents go back further, at least to the founding in 1788 of a group dedicated to the abolition of slavery, the first outside London. Historian Steve Hunt sees the city's garden suburb movement, inspired by Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities movement in the early decades of the twentieth century but later undermined by drives towards low-cost housing, the pragmatic demands of post-war urban reconstruction, and the reshaping of cities to accommodate private cars, as anticipating many of the present-day ideas of the Transition and permaculture movements in its concerns with integrated working and residential neighbourhoods, urban environments conducive to residents' mental and physical health, ready access to green spaces, attention to social capital, desire to foster community cohesion through provision of social amenities, emphasis on community ownership of housing, association with cooperative enterprise, attention to edible planting.<sup>2</sup>

Active since 2007, Transition Bristol is tenth on Transition Network's list of 'official' initiatives, making it the world's first Transition city. Like many big-city initiatives, it quickly shifted the emphasis to smaller neighbourhood groups focused on local projects, with the city group taking more of a strategic and coordinating function.<sup>3</sup> More recent years have seen the emergence of several city-wide initiatives, in energy,<sup>4</sup> food, education,<sup>5</sup> well-being,<sup>6</sup> transport,<sup>7</sup> and with the establishment of the Bristol Pound as a city-wide complementary currency, whose ten-pound note, fittingly, bears the image of abolitionist Hannah More.<sup>8</sup> Some of these arose from neighbourhood groups, some directly from within Transition Bristol, others entirely independently but based on common aims and values. Transition Bristol directly initiates very few of the events and activities listed in its website and newsletter<sup>9</sup> or posted on its Facebook group. Its core team members describe Transition in Bristol as this broader movement and network rather than the organisation itself.

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1 Brownlee, E., 2011. *Bristol's Green Roots: the growth of the environmental movement in the city*. Bristol: The Schumacher Centre.

2 Hunt, S., 2009. *Yesterday's Tomorrow: Bristol's Garden Suburbs*. Bristol Radical Pamphleteer #8. Bristol Radical History Group.

3 [transitionbristol.net/about-transition-bristol/the-transition-bristol-story-so-far/](http://transitionbristol.net/about-transition-bristol/the-transition-bristol-story-so-far/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

4 [www.bristolenergynetwork.org/](http://www.bristolenergynetwork.org/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

5 [www.shiftbristol.org.uk/](http://www.shiftbristol.org.uk/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

6 [www.happycity.org.uk/](http://www.happycity.org.uk/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

7 [www.livingheart.org.uk/](http://www.livingheart.org.uk/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

8 [bristolpound.org/](http://bristolpound.org/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

9 [transitionbristol.net/category/events/](http://transitionbristol.net/category/events/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

This wealth of activity can create a compelling illusion that Bristol is a truly sustainable and resilient post-carbon city. The cycling infrastructure, while it appears shockingly primitive to visitors from Germany and the Netherlands, is as good as I have seen in any British city.<sup>10</sup> Thriving networks of allotments and community gardens support exchange of skills, knowledge, plants and other resources among growers, and larger projects on the outskirts of the city provide a range of options for buying local organic produce. Numerous community energy projects – including two separate renewable energy co-operatives – collaborate as the Bristol Energy Network, which produced the first Community Energy Strategy for any British city in 2013,<sup>11</sup> a few months before the UK government released its national equivalent. At the time of writing in December 2014, nearly 700 independent small businesses in the city accept the Bristol Pound, whose Real Economy Project seeks to use the currency as a tool to develop an alternative economy, localised and socially responsible.<sup>12</sup> Nearly 1000 people subscribe the Bristol Permaculture Group's email list, with over 50 more people every year training on the city's annual permaculture design certificate course or the more advanced Practical Sustainability Training offered by permaculture teaching co-op Shift Bristol. It's easy to move through the city and visit only places and meet only people who would support this impression: a comfortable microcosm of a society that has already made the Transition away from dependence on fossil fuels and economic growth. Some guide books detail walking and cycling routes that show how to do exactly that.<sup>13</sup>

Grassroots activism also benefits from a number of cross-sector partnerships, in which business and local government enable and directly support the creation of common pool resources through grassroots action, and actively work towards their upscaling. These include organisations that emerged from the grassroots and have grown to become part of the establishment. Sustrans, Britain's national cycling charity and custodian of long-range national cycle routes, began life as a local pressure group and continues to extend and maintain cycle routes in the city. A former project manager at Sustrans set up Roll for the Soul, a cycling cafe and networking and event space in central Bristol operated as a Community Interest Company. The Centre for Sustainable Energy grew from its roots as a volunteer-run experiment in retrofitting derelict urban properties in the 1970s to chief delivery organisation for national government programmes in energy efficiency in the 2000s. It continues to maintain a careful and sensitive presence in Bristol's thriving community energy scheme, supporting – but not leading – the projects and process that led to the creation of the Bristol Energy Network, and, just as important, keeping out of the way when its support is not needed. The Bristol Pound's financial services are delivered via a partnership with the local Credit Union, a member-owned provider of financial services.

Many grassroots action also benefit from direct support from local government. City Council decisions to accept payment of council tax and business rates in Bristol Pounds greatly strengthen the currency's viability.<sup>14</sup> The Bristol Food Policy Council,<sup>15</sup> a council-run initiative supported by EU funding, works closely with the Bristol Food Network, an association of businesses and community projects,<sup>16</sup> on developing and implementing the Good Food Plan for Bristol.<sup>17</sup> The Good Food Plan built on an earlier report, *Who Feeds Bristol*, commissioned by the City Council and NHS, and something of a successor to the Bristol Peak Oil Report,<sup>18</sup> produced by Transition Bristol

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10 The Bristol Cycling Manifesto sets out a strategy for dramatic improvement of infrastructure in the city at [bristolcyclingmanifesto.org.uk/manifesto/](http://bristolcyclingmanifesto.org.uk/manifesto/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

11 [bristolenergynetwork.org/strategy](http://bristolenergynetwork.org/strategy). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

12 [bristolpound.org/real-economy](http://bristolpound.org/real-economy). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

13 Walmsley, E. (ed.), 2010. *Bristol: a guide to good living*. Bristol: Alastair Sawday Publishing.

14 [bristolpound.org/news?id=38](http://bristolpound.org/news?id=38). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

15 [bristolfoodpolicycouncil.org/](http://bristolfoodpolicycouncil.org/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

16 [www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/about/](http://www.bristolfoodnetwork.org/about/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

17 [bristolfoodpolicycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Bristol-Good-Food-Plan\\_lowres.pdf](http://bristolfoodpolicycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Bristol-Good-Food-Plan_lowres.pdf). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

18 [www.20splentyforum.org.uk/UsefulReports/Bristol\\_Peak\\_Oil\\_Report.pdf](http://www.20splentyforum.org.uk/UsefulReports/Bristol_Peak_Oil_Report.pdf). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

with financial support from the City Council. Two of the city's key community food growing projects – the CSA at Sims Hill Shared Harvest<sup>19</sup> and the neighbouring education and demonstration site Feed Bristol, run by the Avon Wildlife Trust<sup>20</sup> – operate on prime agricultural land provided rent-free by the City Council.<sup>21</sup> All of these grassroots initiatives and associated collaborations featured prominently in Bristol's successful applications to become European Green Capital – itself the outcome of a long-term, and ongoing, cross-sector partnership - and for participation in the Rockefeller Resilient Cities Programme. In all these instances – and many others – cross-scale interactions are of a nature we would expect to have positive benefits for local economic resilience: community-scale innovation beyond the limits of what local government can achieve directly, both benefits from public sector support and nurturance, and feeds into larger-scale initiatives, both directly within the City Council and through national and international initiatives in which it is involved, with many of the resulting initiatives being delivered as or in collaboration with local businesses, or taken up by them.

Despite these achievements, Bristol remains, overwhelmingly, a city dependent on the global fossil fuel economy, with all its negative consequences for sustainability, ethics, equity and resilience. The Who Feeds Bristol report estimated that 84 per cent of food retail purchases take place in outlets of the five major national supermarket chains – higher than the national average – and suggests that the numbers of such stores per head of population are higher than in other major UK cities.<sup>22</sup> The two largest companies in greater Bristol – and among its biggest private sector employers - are Imperial Tobacco, whose annual turnover is several billion pounds and which sells tobacco products in 160 countries worldwide, and Airbus, a plane manufacturer whose sales portfolio includes military clients.<sup>23</sup> Levels of congestion on the city's roads every weekday morning and afternoon clearly show that transport policy is dominated not by concerns with mobility, but with cultivating captive markets for asphalt, cars and people. Bristol's claims to be among the greenest and most resilient cities in the UK may be well founded: but this casts a harsh light of realism on just how remote resilience remains as a goal.

Many examples where lock-in to existing systems is hampering transitions to resilience indicate the power of the memory effect. A recent history of the green movement in Bristol concluded that fragmentation among existing groups – sometimes associated with outright competition for scarce funding and other resources – means it is, in total, rather less than the sum of its parts.<sup>24</sup> The launch of the Community Energy Strategy in June 2013 appeared to be rather co-opted by the announcement of a new programme led by the unreflectively business-as-usual West of England Local Enterprise Partnership, Bristol Solar City, whose stated ambition is to install 1 gigawatt of new photovoltaic output by 2020 but whose website shows no signs of activity since the launch.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, central government plans move forward to construct two new industrial biomass power plants and a 3.2 gigawatt nuclear power station within the vicinity of the city, in the face of strong local opposition.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps most ironically of all, the City Council has approved construction of a new road that will cross land it currently leases to the Feed Bristol project, destroying some of the

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19 [simshill.co.uk/](http://simshill.co.uk/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

20 [www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/feedbristol](http://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/feedbristol). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

21 [simshill.co.uk/2010/12/01/sims-hill-in-recent-bristol-city-council-press-release/](http://simshill.co.uk/2010/12/01/sims-hill-in-recent-bristol-city-council-press-release/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

22 Carey, J., 2011. Who Feeds Bristol: a baseline study of the food system that serves Bristol and the Bristol city region. Pp. 22-24. [www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/environment/environmental\\_health/Who-feeds-Bristol-report.pdf](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/environment/environmental_health/Who-feeds-Bristol-report.pdf). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

23 Bache, R. 2014. The £40 Billion Club. Pp. 8 in The Business Guide 2014. Western Daily Press.

[www.southwestbusiness.co.uk/southwestbusiness-co-uk/img/Supplements/Top\\_150\\_Businesses\\_Guide\\_2014..pdf](http://www.southwestbusiness.co.uk/southwestbusiness-co-uk/img/Supplements/Top_150_Businesses_Guide_2014..pdf). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

24 Brownlee, *op. cit.*

25 <http://bristolsolarcity.com/>

26 [www.avoncoalitionagainstbigbiofuels.org.uk/](http://www.avoncoalitionagainstbigbiofuels.org.uk/)

[www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/10/hinkley-nuclear-power-plant-bombshell-out-going-european-commission](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/10/hinkley-nuclear-power-plant-bombshell-out-going-european-commission) Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

city's very limited area of prime agricultural land along with at least 25 other green and public spaces.<sup>27</sup>

The tension between community action on resilience and inertia in incumbent systems is not just circumstantial or contextual, but manifests directly in its interactions with higher-level strategic programmes, including Green Capital and 100 Resilient Cities. Each, in a different way, could be seen as to some extent appropriating the achievements of grassroots actions by top-down initiatives that deploy key terms like resilience and sustainability in more conservative ways. In cross-scale interactions of this type, institutional memory at high levels restricts the potential for small-scale innovations to escalate up the panarchy in revolutionary ways (in other words, the Remember effect dominates the Revolt effect).

Bristol's Green Capital bid was the outcome of a careful process of partnership-building, loosely held by the council but involving hundreds of organisations and groups from across the city and anticipated to be an ongoing endeavour far beyond 2015 itself.<sup>28</sup> Concerns at transfer of many implementation responsibilities to a new company, Bristol 2015, whose main function appeared to be to attract private sector sponsorship and inward investment for the Green Capital programme, turned to consternation at a general lack of inclusion and transparency, leading to removal of the company's highly-paid chief executive just three months before the start of 2015 itself.<sup>29</sup> Whether this amounts to the replacement of a 'remember' effect with a 'revolt' effect – in other words, a return to the partnership as the core framework for green capital activities, with the company in a support role - remains to be seen.

The main stated aim of the Rockefeller programme is the creation of a learning network among 'Chief Resilience Officers': high-ranking local government officials in each of the cities involved, each of whom will oversee the development of a resilience plan with the support of Rockefeller and commercial partners.<sup>30</sup> The impression is of a clear hierarchy of top-down influence, with grassroots involvement presumably at the discretion of participating authorities and clearly subordinate to the centralised processes through which resilience is defined and operationalised in the programme. A Resilience Action Group has been set up within the more flexible and participatory framework of the Green Capital Partnership. Its remit includes providing a platform for grassroots engagement with the Rockefeller Programme and supporting the Chief Resilience Officer in cross-scale aspects of their work.<sup>31</sup>

Initial conversations among members of the Resilience Action Group indicated a range of perspectives on what resilience is and ideas of how to achieve this. These converged on more radical notions of resilience, with an emphasis on ongoing systemic change, both incremental and transformative, rather than resisting change or 'bouncing back'. Many members of the group talked about the need for ongoing learning processes to promote flexible and proactive responses to change and build adaptive capacity, and the need for this to involve all sectors of society. Inclusion in planning and decision-making was a key factor, raised in many different contexts and as both a practical and an ethical issue: in other words so that adaptive capacity can draw upon the greatest range of perspectives and knowledge, and that resilience can be for the benefit of all. In summary, Mike Zeidler of Happy City<sup>32</sup> suggested that this reflects a recognition that cities are human systems, and resilience in cities involves a human response that can recognise the need for change and understand how to bring it about. Revolt – in the form of shifts to more inclusive, human-centred forms of decision-making via the upscaling of learning and transformational processes

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27 [stopbrt2.org.uk/brt2-part-citywide-metrobus-green-space-grab](http://stopbrt2.org.uk/brt2-part-citywide-metrobus-green-space-grab). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

28 [bristolgreencapital.org/](http://bristolgreencapital.org/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

29 [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-29472188](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-29472188). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

30 [www.100resilientcities.org/pages/about-us](http://www.100resilientcities.org/pages/about-us). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

31 [bristolgreencapital.org/resilience-action-group/](http://bristolgreencapital.org/resilience-action-group/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

32 [www.happycity.org.uk/](http://www.happycity.org.uk/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

already underway at small scales and consequent reconfiguration of higher level systems and processes – is a clear implication.

As the foregoing account suggests, any such transformation will need to combine building on existing areas of cooperation and support with directly opposing undesirable initiatives of both local and central government. The Avon Coalition Against Big Biofuels mobilised enough public support to force a public hearing about a planning application for a proposed biomass installation in Avonmouth, which councillors rejected due to concerns over air quality and attendant public health risks.<sup>33</sup> Local campaign group Frack Free Bristol raised a petition of over 5000 signatures in favour of a ban on fracking in the city, provoking formation by the City Council of a cross party working group to discuss the proposal.<sup>34</sup> Members of the Blue Finger Alliance seek to secure 1000 hectares of prime agricultural land on Bristol's urban fringe for food production and associated employment, training and amenity opportunities.<sup>35</sup> The Blue Finger land includes the council-owned smallholdings where the Sims Hill and Feed Bristol projects are located, threatened by the controversial Metrobus project. The Alliance's vision seeks to make this situation an opportunity to initiate a high level conversation involving the local councils about how best to use this valuable resource, including via partnership working and joined-up decision making.<sup>36</sup> Many of these campaigns draw attention to the particular folly of initiating such schemes during Green Capital year, when Bristol's claims to be a sustainable city have the attention of the entire world. It's possible that a shift in the balance from memory towards revolt could be the tipping point towards a powerful transformation.

A new proposal emerging from the Green Capital Partnership is for Bristol to become a One Planet City. Significantly upscaling community-level work undertaken over the past few years by grassroots organisation One Planet Bristol,<sup>37</sup> this would involve residents, community groups, businesses, and local authority working in partnership, supported as necessary by national government, to operationalise the concept of One Planet Living and create a long-term legacy of meaningful action beyond 2015 itself.<sup>38</sup> The transformative potential of such a vision – if implemented through the lens of Type 4 resilience, rather than more limited notions of greening the economy – is clear. Although within tangible reach, it will face major challenges: whether community action for resilience in Bristol is now coming of age remains an open question.

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33 [www.avoncoalitionagainstbigbiofuels.org.uk/balfour-beattynexterra-11mwe-biomass-gasifier-rejected-by-bristol-city-council/](http://www.avoncoalitionagainstbigbiofuels.org.uk/balfour-beattynexterra-11mwe-biomass-gasifier-rejected-by-bristol-city-council/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

34 [www.bristolpost.co.uk/Councillors-debate-fracking-allowed-Bristol/story-20822076-detail/story.html](http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Councillors-debate-fracking-allowed-Bristol/story-20822076-detail/story.html). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

35 [www.bluefingeralliance.org.uk/blue-finger-explained/article-downloads/vision/](http://www.bluefingeralliance.org.uk/blue-finger-explained/article-downloads/vision/). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

36 Pugh, S., P. Summers & M. Longhurst, 2014. *The Blue Finger Vision. Business as usual? Or an opportunity to create a world class Urban Agriculture Hub?* [www.bluefingeralliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/The-Blue-Finger-Vision.-A-world-class-hub-of-urban-agriculture-for-the-Bristol-city-region.pdf](http://www.bluefingeralliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/The-Blue-Finger-Vision.-A-world-class-hub-of-urban-agriculture-for-the-Bristol-city-region.pdf). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

37 [www.oneplanetbristol.com/](http://www.oneplanetbristol.com/). Access Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

38 [sustainablecitiescollective.com/david-thorpe/1020916/bristol-takes-steps-towards-becoming-uks-second-one-planet-city](http://sustainablecitiescollective.com/david-thorpe/1020916/bristol-takes-steps-towards-becoming-uks-second-one-planet-city). Accessed Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015.