

## THE BRIGHTON AND HOVE FOOD PARTNERSHIP (BHFP)

### INTERVIEW WITH EMILY O'BRIEN, POLICY AND PARTNERSHIPS MANAGER

**“Food can be a powerful lens to look at wider issues”**

Brighton & Hove Food Partnership (BHFP) has been called the foremost food partnership in the UK, with a Food Strategy Action Plan that has been described as the most ambitious ever in the UK. The plan involves almost 100 partners, including representation from 26 Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) departments. BHFP is currently leading a bid for Brighton & Hove to achieve the first Gold Sustainable Food Place award in the UK.

BHFP is a small non-profit organisation established in 2003, with a vision of a healthy, sustainable and fair food system. They embrace complexity, working with a wide range of partners including community organisations, statutory agencies, local businesses and individual residents. With 12 staff, 9 Board members and a structured volunteer programme, BHFP engages with the community, helping them learn to cook, eat a healthy diet, and grow their own food, which feeds into BHFP's aim of tackling food poverty and waste to become a more sustainable city.

In 2019 there were 21 emergency food parcel providers in Brighton and Hove, by 2020 during the pandemic this had increased to 42. Through a fundraising campaign, BHFP supported food banks, new food hubs and community meal delivery projects, providing food and living essentials for vulnerable and low-income individuals in need.

#### ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSE:

Initially, the community kitchen was closed temporarily and online courses were developed rapidly. The community gardening project was suspended but quickly adapted to visit those who were isolated to help with their gardens. The team made adaptations to work from home.

BHFP negotiated with funders to 'repurpose' funding to develop the city's emergency food response and sought additional funding to support the work with the community and BHCC.

#### SYSTEMS RESPONSE

**“We put ourselves at the centre to join up the dots”**

Emily O'Brien, Policy and Partnership Manager, BHFP

BHFP have an established and effective track record, with long relationships built up across all sectors around food, and this proved a strong foundation for the city's response to the imminent crisis. Since 2012, BHFP have brought together organisations providing food to those in need to form the Emergency Food Network (EFN), taking a city-wide approach to tackling food poverty and linking statutory systems and advice services. When Covid-19 hit in 2020, the Emergency Food Network (EFN) became the vehicle for an astonishing citywide emergency food response to the pandemic lockdown. The network convened a meeting of existing members and extended invitations to a broader range of potential partners to support the response.

BHFP launched a fundraising appeal under the banner 'Hungry at Home' to buy emergency food and essentials in bulk to pass on to food projects. Between March and August 2020, a total of £352,960 was raised, of which 42% came from Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC), 24% from DEFRA Government funding, 18% from residents donating to a crowdfund campaign and the rest from local housing associations and national and local grant-making bodies.

1 Food Strategy Action Plan 2018-2023: <https://bhfood.org.uk/resources/food-strategy/>

2 Emergency Food Network Report 2020



BHFP set up a **central food processing hub** where wholesale purchased food and surplus food was organised and distributed by a team of volunteers to food banks and meal projects. Food purchased included locally-sourced fruit, veg and milk bought direct from producers via a newly established social enterprise, the Food Factory<sup>3</sup>.

This central hub supported a citywide network of **50 neighbourhood food hubs** made up of existing food banks and shared-meal settings, plus new temporary food hubs based out of a range of community venues. Most operated as a home delivery service with local volunteers taking food from the hubs the 'last mile' to people's doors. These included specialist BAME, homeless support and older people's projects, and a specialist provision for families with children under five provided by BHCC's children's centre service. The value of this 'hyper-local' support was that the volunteers delivering the food were local people trusted by those receiving the food and other support such as befriending and collection of medicines could be arranged.

**“It has been an opportunity to reach out and support the more vulnerable sector of our community who might not usually access our services.”**

EFN member, July 2020.

BHFP also set up a series of **web pages** signposting to support for those in need; and local food shops and veg boxes offering delivery services.

BHCC provided **grant funding** to BHFP to coordinate emergency food distribution and co-lead the council's own response – including ensuring integration with their helpline. Hove Park School provided a base for the BHFP central food processing hub and local college CityMet and local businesses, including Loud Shirt Brewery and Zedify, provided a team of drivers and vehicles.

The network approach meant that BHFP was able to provide the volunteer-led hubs with a range of information and support as well as the food.

**“Thank you also for your support in being able to achieve what we did in our area. I do not know what we could have done or how we could have supported our community without you supporting us!”**

Old Boat Community Centre Food Hub

**Meal provision** formed an important part of the city's Covid-19 response, with for example lunch clubs moving to home delivery services and new services forming. During the pandemic there was a **75% increase in weekly meals served**.

Overall, the community response, which also brought in an unrecorded volume of support between neighbours and through the network of Covid-19 mutual aid groups, was unprecedented.

In the week of 27th April 2020 in Brighton & Hove, projects across the city gave out 3,000 emergency food parcels, supporting 4,800+ people (including at least 996 children) and served 3,966 meals. Prior to Covid-19 the total of food parcels per week was 420.

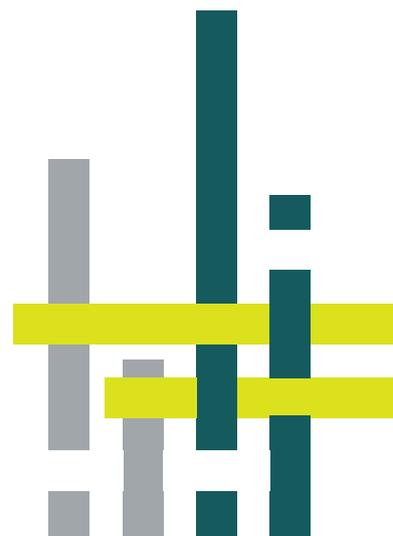
In the week of 18th May 2020, 548 people gave 3,270 hours of time to help their neighbours. If they had been paid the Real Living Wage Foundation rate of £9.30 an hour this time would be worth £30,411.

Whilst Covid-19 brought wider attention to the Emergency Food Network other successes included:

- 3,314 unique viewers on 'How to donate to food banks' blog
- 1,086 unique viewers on 'How to refer to a food bank' blog
- Written response<sup>4</sup> to the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) committee inquiry on Covid-19 and Food Supply

<sup>3</sup> <https://brightonfoodfactory.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/3665/html/>



## SYSTEMS COLLABORATION

**“.....by working together as individuals, community groups, businesses and the local authority we can achieve astonishing things and I am optimistic that we can meet the challenges ahead whilst wishing very much that we didn't need to.”**

(Vic Borrill, Director Brighton and Hove Food Partnership)

Using a 'cell structure', BHFP jointly coordinated the food cell with BHCC. This involved coordinating cross systems meetings with representatives from BHCC including among others: Children's Service, School Meals, Older People's Services, Environmental Health, Public Health and Communications.

The City's food related response had three strands including:

- Working with the NHS-led support for 'shielded' individuals who are clinically vulnerable;
- BHCC response for vulnerable communities through existing council services by adding a food dimension to the Council's existing services – food solutions for housing services, care homes, newly housed rough sleepers, Children's Centres etc. – ensuring that food gets to the people who need it the most;
- Community response through existing and new voluntary community groups and organisations.

The Food Partnership has brought organisations together to share common problems, learn from each other's good practice and develop joint solutions.

*“Working with BHCC via the food cell has been an extremely positive experience. Food safety advice for food banks, venues for food hubs, sourcing cleaning materials, specialist support for homeless people, updates on supermarket opening times, help for alcohol dependent people, hot meal provision for older people living alone, information about the free school meal provision, ways of accessing money for self-isolating people, management of referrals and access to local discretionary grant funds – we raise a vast range of issues via this forum and Council staff have worked quickly and effectively to respond”*

Vic Borrill – Director, BHFP

Additionally, BHFP have also been involved in helping the Council set up their Community Hub help-line to navigate, map and untangle who was doing what and who could provide necessary support, prioritising support and avoiding duplication

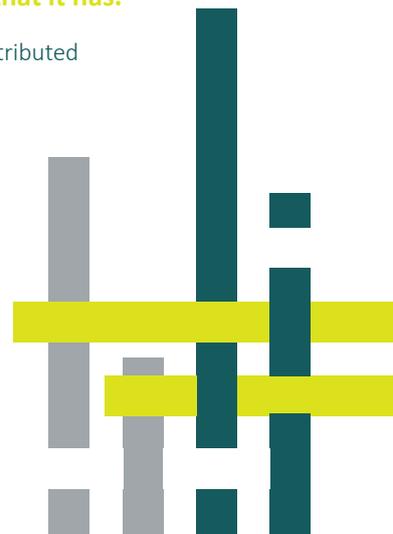
This multi-faceted approach has demonstrated exceptional leadership and partnership working by BHFP and their partners, and the incredible impact of systems collaboration is evident in a multiplicity of ways. Drawing on and pooling significant assets and resources enabled the city to respond rapidly to the needs of the most vulnerable in the city.

**“The way that Brighton & Hove Food Partnership called all the Brighton & Hove food providers together through the Emergency Food Network enabled me to see how we could work together. As the lead of a project that normally provides hot meals to low-income families in school holidays, speaking to other food providers in the city I was able to redesign my service to one that met the immediate need. It was massively reassuring to know that I was now part of a team, I wasn't on my own. In sharing information around the evolving situation in Brighton & Hove, issuing the most up-to-date guidelines on for example food handling, providing guidance, moral support and a single point of contact in the midst of much national confusion, I am convinced that our struggling families have benefited from being in a city that has collaborated in the way that it has.”**

Vanessa from low-income holiday lunch and activity club Chomp. Over 24 weeks, Chomp distributed 1,227 boxes packed with locally grown veg and activity kits to families in need.

During Covid-19 many had to turn 'eating together' on its head as the switch to delivered meals was made. An extraordinary number of meals were taken to people's households by volunteers.

This had advantages, with service such as HIV lunch group Lunch Positive 'finding' new clients; and others such as Food and Friendship reporting easier access for those with mobility issues who had previously struggled to get out to meals .



A number of new shared meal projects established during Covid-19, including provision in East Brighton and Coldean, two deprived areas of the city. Local food businesses came together to provide meals to rough sleepers housed in hotels and to staff working in the Covid-19 wards at the local hospital. Emerging from this work is an ongoing project to provide 'ready meals' prepared by local food businesses, with food parcels funded on a 'pay it forward' model by customers from those businesses.

## THE FUTURE

Covid-19 shone a spotlight on existing food insecurities and the fragility of the food supply. BHFP and collaborating partners are not just taking a short-term view of the immediate crisis. They are working with national organisations such as the Food Foundation and Sustain, to help influence national policy to reduce the reliance on emergency food, ensuring that food is provided with 'dignity and choice'. Attention will also be given to building on existing partnerships and developing collaboration around the food supply chain with partners in West and East Sussex as 'food systems don't stop at the city's walls' whilst making links between food and environmental issues.

BHFP would like to build on preventative agendas by working in further collaboration with Public Health teams and the NHS, to address food inequalities. Emily highlights the high levels of child obesity in deprived areas linked to the high costs of treating diet related health issues in Brighton and Hove alone of £78m a year<sup>5</sup> and sees real benefits on a joint approach to this agenda putting food at the heart of the work.

As we move through continuing uncertainty and a shifting landscape for the VCSE, Emily makes the case for wider engagement in partnership with all sectors, not just with funding but with flexibilities and an investment in resourcing to share learning and intelligence to co-design and implement effective solutions in improving the health and wellbeing of our communities. Partnership working is time intensive but requires careful attention to be successful, citing the strength of their extensive partnership as being the key to a successful response to the crisis.

*"... it's been an incredibly fast moving and connected response, led by Vic Borrill and her team at Brighton and Hove Food Partnership. I dread to think how many hours the remarkable Vic has clocked up in the last three or four weeks but I've yet to encounter her with anything but a positive attitude."*

Iain Chambers, Director of Brighton Food Factory

Collaborating organisations involved in the emergency food provision effort:

- Existing voluntary and community sector organisations working in neighbourhoods: The Trust for Developing Communities, Hangleton & Knoll Project, Crew Club Whitehawk, Brighton & Hove City Council's Neighbourhoods team
- Local social enterprises with food-related aims: The Food Factory, Brighton Permaculture Trust, The Bevy, Infinity Food, HISBE
- Food Banks and organisations running temporary community food hubs<sup>6</sup>
- Surplus food re-distribution organisations: Fareshare, The Real Junk Food Project, the Gleaning Network, Sussex Homeless Support
- Organisations providing pre-cooked meals: The Real Junk Food Project, BELTA, East Brighton Food Coop, Bevy Bites, Food and Friendship, Lunch Positive, Time to Talk, Chomp (holiday hunger project)
- Projects that grow food – they may have had to shut their doors for their educational and therapeutic activities, but they have used the time to put more food in the ground<sup>7</sup> for later in the year.
- Befriending organisations and agencies: Time to Talk and Together Co
- Specialist projects: Possibility People (disabled people), Ageing Well Partnership, BMECP, Voices in Exile
- Neighbourhood Food Co-ops
- Faith groups

5 <https://bhfood.org.uk/resources/food-strategy/>

6 <https://bhfood.org.uk/resources/referring-to-a-food-bank/>

7 <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2020/projects-city-increase-food-production-those-need>