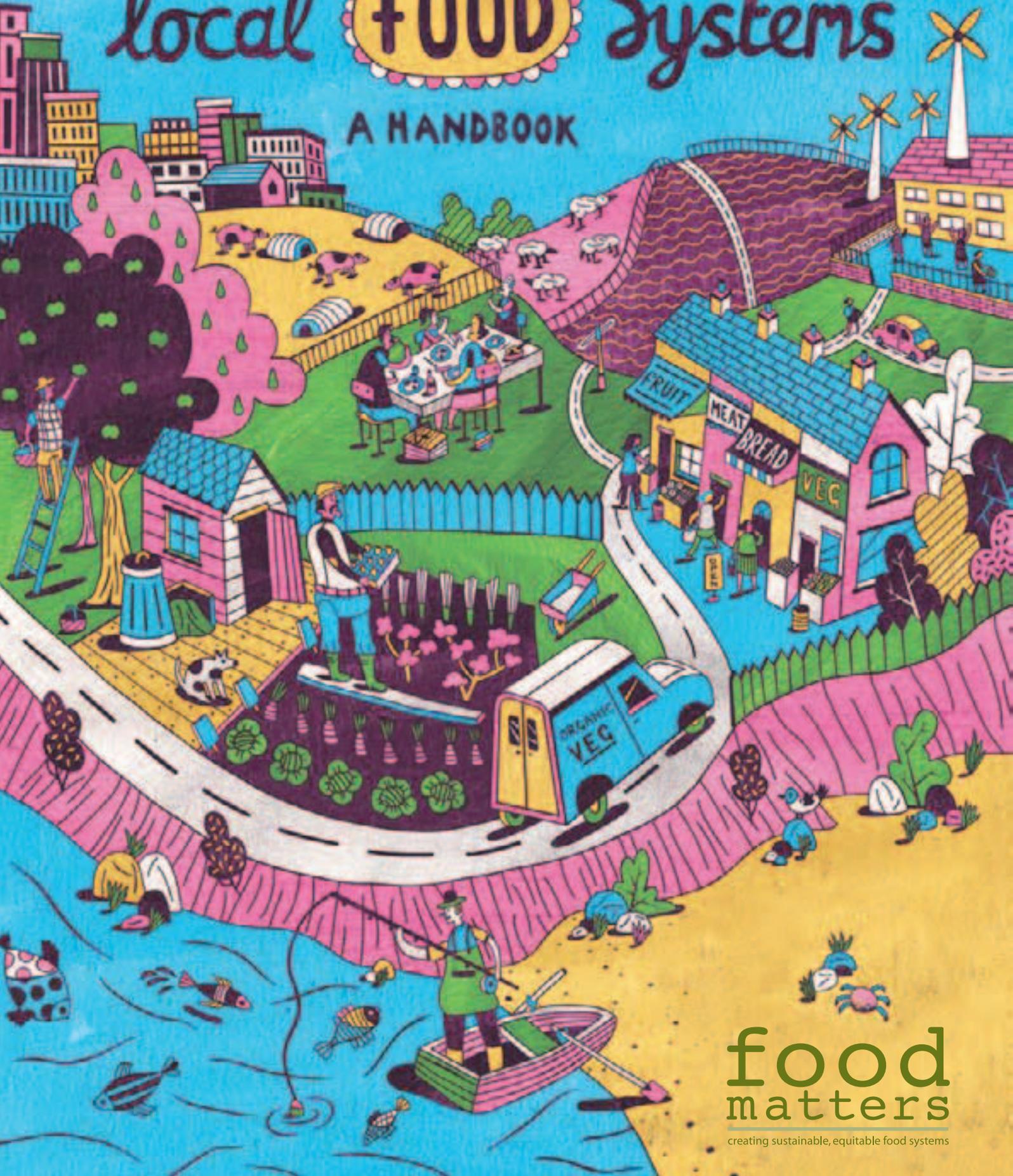


# BUILDING



# local **FOOD** Systems

A HANDBOOK



food  
matters

creating sustainable, equitable food systems

**Food Matters is a national food policy and advocacy organisation working on sustainable food policy issues and community food work, working for and with a variety of organisations on a range of diverse issues. Through consultancy, research, evaluation, training, project management and delivery, at both a local and national level, Food Matters works to create sustainable and fair food systems.**

**Food Matters believes that building sustainable food systems requires a localised approach, which gives communities a greater control of the food system. Food Matters has pioneered local food systems work in the UK through our work in Brighton and Hove, where for the last ten years we have worked successfully with community members and statutory agencies to create a sustainable food system in the city. Much of this work has involved training individuals and community food groups, and providing the skills required to better understand food systems and to make change. We can take credit for the development of the many food strategies and food partnerships that are now appearing in cities and towns, having led the way with the first community-developed food partnership and strategy in the city of Brighton and Hove.**

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**The authors would like to thank all those that gave their time and expertise to help make this handbook as comprehensive a guide as it is – to support the building of local food systems.**

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**This handbook has been made possible with funding from the Local Food Fund:**



# WELCOME

If you are reading this, you are probably fully aware that our food situation is in crisis.

Not a day goes by without a headline in the news about the increasing number of obese children in the UK, or the rising cost of food, or how many people in the world go to bed hungry every night, or the environmental impact of trucking our food around the country.

If you are reading this, you probably want to do something about it.

The good news is that, unlike many other pressing issues in the world, we can all do something positive about food. We all eat at least a couple of times a day and are making choices about what we eat all the time. We can make good choices and we can make bad choices. We may not always get it right, but thinking about the impact those choices are having – on our health, our environment, on the farmers who grow it, on the resources that go into producing our food – can really make a difference.

As individuals, we can bring about change every day through what we choose to buy and cook. But change also begins in our communities, and through action we can take together with our families, our neighbours, our local farmers, our local shops, and even our politicians. Together, we can assume more control over at least some of the food we eat, by understanding where it comes from, who has grown it, how it has been grown and how it has arrived on our plates. And we can even get actively involved in the process by growing our own, or helping a farmer, or setting up a food buying co-op, or influencing decisions made locally that will support a better local food system.

This handbook is designed to help you make change happen in your own community. It is based on two things. Firstly, it draws on the many experiences of people all over the country, indeed the world, who over recent decades have been working to rebuild their local food systems in the face of a growing food crisis. Secondly, it draws on the work undertaken by Food Matters over the past ten years, working in our own community of Brighton and Hove, in the southeast of England, to create a more sustainable food system in the city.

This work is not necessarily about overthrowing a dominant global industrial food system (although this may be the motivation for some!), but about recreating a viable alternative of which we can all feel part. It is about creating sustainable livelihoods, dynamic local economies, and about trading fairly with farmers and growers – both locally and all over the world. It is about protecting precious wildlife and fragile environments. It's about getting to know our neighbours, about building community, about sharing knowledge and learning new skills.

Above all, working to improve the food system is the right thing to do, because it can make a difference.

## **Who this handbook is for**

This handbook is for you, as somebody who eats, shops, and cooks. Dip into the handbook for ideas and inspiration. We hope some of what you read will inspire you to action. It might also help you think differently about what you put in your shopping basket – even if it is as simple as buying a bag of carrots produced on a local farm.

This handbook is also for groups of neighbours, friends, family and community members who can come together – perhaps even for the first time – to do something a little bit more than place that bag of carrots in your basket. Perhaps you will start a conversation about the empty piece of land in front of your houses where together you can grow vegetables or salad to share. Or perhaps you will discuss starting a cookery class or food-buying co-op at the school your children attend.

The handbook is also for people who work in local authorities, or the local health service, and for community members who want to work with them at a strategic level to support a healthier and more sustainable local food system. There are ideas for how to work in partnership with different sectors – businesses, community groups, statutory agencies – to influence policy and planning to support a better food system in your area. Experience shows that without this level of support, it is often difficult to start projects or make lasting change.



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# WHY EATING TOO MUCH MEAT MATTERS ?



It is now generally accepted that eating less meat can benefit both the environment and our health. Despite this, global consumption of meat is on the increase, particularly as developing countries get richer and people start to be able to afford more meat in their diet. But why does it matter?

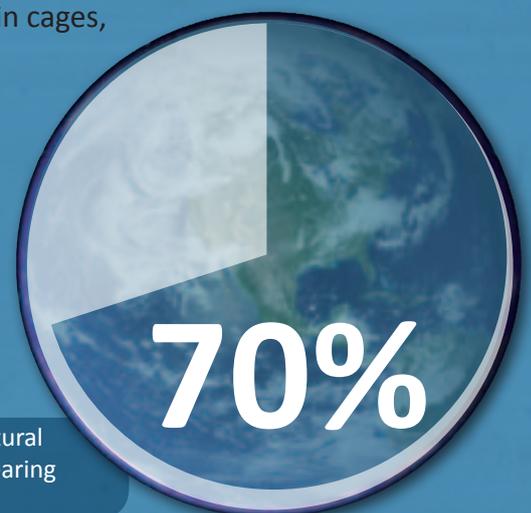
People's food habits have changed more in the past century than they have in the past tens of thousands of years. Industrialisation has revolutionised farming practices, especially since the Second World War. Chemical weapons research and post-war agricultural research resulted in the routine application of artificial fertilisers, farm chemicals and other technologies, resulting in massive increases in crop productivity. Food became easier to grow and animals quicker to raise. In Europe and North America, and now in developing countries across the globe, this marked the beginning of a growing appetite for more animal products such as meat, cheese, milk and eggs, symbols of wealth and good living. However, in the late 1990s, after a series of food scares including Mad Cow Disease (BSE) and food poisoning outbreaks (such as E-coli and salmonella), there came a growing awareness of the environmental and health impacts of high levels of meat consumption. We are now all too aware of the high cost of eating excessive animal produce on our health and the environment, yet reducing consumption is a sensitive and challenging problem to address.

## So why does it matter?

**For health:** A range of diet-related diseases such as bowel cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol levels have all been linked to a diet high in consumption of meat, particularly red meat, resulting in millions of avoidable deaths globally every year. Conversely, eating more food from plants – such as fruit, vegetables and wholegrain starchy foods – can help people reduce, avoid or even reverse these conditions, not only improving people's likelihood of a long and healthy life, but also reducing the growing costs to the NHS of these avoidable illnesses.

Intensively reared animals and birds have also been found to have reduced nutritional value – one study showed that meat from free-range chickens that could run around, keep healthy and eat varied food contained higher levels of healthy fats than meat from hens raised in cages, and who got little exercise and ate a restricted diet.

**For the environment and natural resources:** The impact of animal and poultry production on the environment is huge – not only in terms of high use of resources such as land, water, soil and habitats. It is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, in particular methane – cows belching and farting are said to account for 16% (about one sixth) of the world's methane emissions<sup>2</sup>. Nitrate run-off from manure pollutes water and damages wildlife in lakes and rivers.



70% of all agricultural land is used for rearing farmed animals<sup>10</sup>.

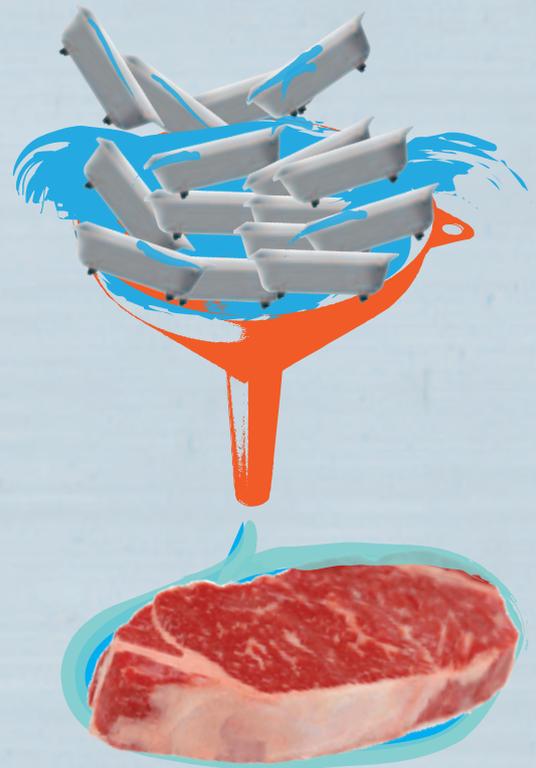
Grass-fed cattle is known to bring better quality meat, but this premium does come at a price. Are consumers ready to trade quantity for quality?



photo: flickr@NaturalEngland



It takes **15,500** litres of water to produce a kilo of grain-fed beef, that's **20 bathtubs** of water for just one steak<sup>8</sup>.



**For animal welfare:** The growing demand for meat has resulted in the mass production and commodification of animals for food production, with farmers pursuing the 'cheaper, faster, bigger' mantra. Animals are kept in conditions that deny natural behaviours and the basic freedom to roam and consume a natural diet. In the US, cattle are more often than not fattened in gigantic, overcrowded feedlots and routinely fed growth-promoting hormones.

In the UK, thanks to public pressure, standards are often higher than elsewhere in the world – restrictive sow stalls for pigs have been banned since 1999 and EU countries must now follow suit by 2013. Across Europe, the use of the smallest cages for hens has now been banned – although many of the eggs and much of the chicken meat that is imported from further afield and used in the processed food we eat continues to come from hens raised in cramped conditions.

# HOW TO...

# SET UP A FOOD BUYING CO-OP

Whenever you see vans outside restaurants and shops delivering food and drink in large quantities, it's a reminder that efficient businesses buy in bulk from wholesalers, instead of making lots of trips to small suppliers. Food businesses order in bulk because they sell a lot of food and drink, and it is more convenient and a lot cheaper.

If only householders could get their hands on those magic cards that allow you to order from wholesalers! In fact, using a wholesale catalogue is not restricted to pubs, supermarkets or convenience shops. Individuals can also buy better food for less money, especially organic food, fruit and vegetables. Getting your food directly from a wholesaler – particularly if you buy in bulk with friends or neighbours – will help keep your food bill down.

## Where to start?

As in every community project, it's good to have a clear overview of what you want to achieve. While not being a business, your food co-op will still involve some administration, money, contacts and deliveries, so it's best to be organised from the outset. Wholesalers work all year round with businesses in a professional manner, so they will expect the same from you. If you intend, there's no reason why a wholesaler shouldn't give your project the same respect as a traditional business. However, they are used to handling large quantities and will require a minimum amount for every order, usually starting at around £100. Therefore, if you are intending to start small with a group of friends and you don't want to stock up for the year, you'll need to get a sufficient number of friends, colleagues or others to make up your food-buying co-op. You will also need to think about what types of things you want to buy (such as dried goods or fresh fruit and veg) and how often you want to order. These decisions will help with your choice of wholesaler.

Organising a food co-op is not complicated and community groups shouldn't be put off by the sound of it. After all, a food co-op starts as soon as a few people decide to combine their shopping list and start buying together. Whether it's a formal or an informal initiative, a food co-op is simply a buying group that benefits the community and/or its members, without private profit. It can be a small informal group, such as friends coming together, or a larger enterprise with a formal co-operative model structure that aims to sell to a wider membership. These issues will depend on the members and what you want from your co-op.



## The Rochdale Pioneers

It all started with a group of people trading essential items such as flour and sugar. Soon after, they became known as the Rochdale Pioneers, setting up the first successful co-op. They adopted seven basic principles for their co-op, which are still used today throughout the world.

1. **Open membership**
2. **Democratic control (one man, one vote)**
3. **Distribution of surplus in proportion to trade**
4. **Payment of limited interest on capital**
5. **Political and religious neutrality**
6. **Cash trading**
7. **Promotion of education**

### Who will be the members?

Group of friends, students, local people



Before doing your needs assessment, you might want to answer these questions:

### What do I want to provide?

Fruits, veg, dairy products, meat, whole foods, processed goods



### Where will you be storing / selling?

In someone's house, city hall, church, community centre



## Needs assessment

Setting up a small food-buying co-op is quite straightforward, but because almost every one of them is different, it's difficult to give a general recipe. The size, the location and eventual type of outlet will vary, but the planning process is here to match your project to the needs of the people involved. A 'needs assessment' just does that. It is clear that the size of your project will shape that process. No need to go through a lengthy market study if you are buying for just 10 people. However, if you aim to establish a fruit and vegetable buying co-op in the middle of a food desert (an area without a nearby food shop), you'll need to get local statistics, do some food mapping and consult the community.

## Benefits of a buying co-op



### Organic & wholefoods at reduced prices

Organic food is not always available, nor at affordable prices. Whole foods like nuts and seeds, pulses, cereals and grains are the basis of a healthy and sustainable diet. Getting them at lower prices tends to increase their consumption and therefore the overall health of the members.

### Fresh vegetables from local farms

Even with high-tech refrigeration systems, conventional vegetables travel long distances from farms to our kitchens. Fruit and vegetables can lose their precious nutritional content quickly. Reducing transport will improve your chances of nutritious food. Supporting a local farm also means supporting local jobs and local businesses that will trade with the farms.

### Health benefits to the community

It is clear that cooking from scratch with fresh produce tends to improve health and well-being. Processed food and ready-to-eat meals are generally higher in saturated fat, sugar, sodium and cholesterol than meals prepared at home. And if you want to reduce unhealthy ingredients for you and your family, you are in more control.

### Reduced ecological footprint

Using less transportation, less refrigeration, less packaging, fewer artificial inputs (e.g. fertilisers, pesticides) all contributes to decreasing the impact of food on the environment. Sourcing produce through a food-buying co-op and local farms will help you reduce your ecological footprint considerably.