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Traditional public markets: Inclusive hubs for a just food system

Sara Gonzalez, Gemma Bridge

Faculty of Environment, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT.

S.Gonzalez@leeds.ac.uk

Traditional public markets in the UK, selling food and household items, and mainly owned and managed by municipal authorities, can support public policies for a socio-ecological just food transition if they are linked to public health, food and environmental policies. However, there is a lack of research and policy focusing on this area particularly on how to avoid a potential “green” gentrification process. The paper focuses on a policy-led research project in collaboration with Bradford City council to develop a Sustainable and Healthy charter for a new public market in the city centre. The research involved meetings with the public health and market management teams of the council, four interviews with stakeholders, a survey of 21 traders and a community engagement event at a market where we spoke to 50 market users as well as data from 2 public consultation surveys. The research highlighted the role traditional markets are currently playing in the just food system transition. It also reveals the challenges and risks for local public authorities in the UK to pursue these policies in a context of austerity and competing priorities on urban regeneration and income generation.

Keywords: Traditional markets; Food policy; Sustainability; Health; Local authorities

Introduction

In this paper we argue that traditional markets can support public policies for a socio-ecological just food transition if they are linked to public health, food and environmental policies although there are significant risks if vulnerable groups are not included in the strategies. Our argument is illustrated with the results of a policy-led research project where we were commissioned by Bradford Metropolitan District Council (Bradford Council for short), a local authority in the north of England, to support them in aligning their investment into a new public market with their public health and sustainable local development policies. The paper presents our key findings and recommendations within the context of a complex and challenging environment for traditional public markets in the UK¹.

Bradford has a young and ethnically diverse population of 500,000 (Bradford JSNA, 2019) and is one of the most deprived local authorities in England (13th out of 317 in the country) (Bradford JSNA, 2022). Health and wellbeing across the district are poor with life expectancy lower than in the wider Yorkshire region (Bradford.gov, 2021; OHID, 2023). The food environment in the Bradford district contributes to poor health, with the highest concentration of fast-food outlets in the Yorkshire region (142.1 outlets per 100,000 population) ().

The local authority in Bradford is responding to these challenges and in 2023, the Bradford Good Food Strategy (Bradford.gov, 2023) set out a vision for the future of food in Bradford, supporting the development of an Eating Well culture, reducing food Insecurities, improving community-led food growing, and promoting a sustainable food system for all. However, achieving these aims in Bradford is challenged by the competing ambition to promote local economic development within a context of austerity policies. Whilst Bradford was at the centre of the colonial-dependent industrial revolution as a manufacturing centre, it has long since suffered a post-industrial decline. It has the highest unemployment rate in the wider Leeds City Region, with 7.6% of the working age population claiming unemployment benefits (Bradford.gov, 2024). And in terms of retail, Bradford has one of the highest proportions of empty shop units in England at over 20% (McDonald and Swinney, 2019).

¹ Ethical approval was obtained for all stages of the work by the University of Leeds ethical review board. The project was funded by Bradford City Council District and the University of Leeds.

In this context, Bradford Council has adopted a strategy to push its own investment via the 'Economic Recovery Plan' (Made in Bradford, 2021). It is within this context that the council has developed a retail strategy, closing two existing (and largely disinvested) markets and investing £23million in developing a new market, Darley Street Market, due for completion in Autumn 2024 (Bradford Markets, 2022). The market will have three floors: ground floor with non-food and beauty services, first floor with fresh foods, and the top floor with an open-plan world food and drink hall (Bradford Markets, 2024). The market aims to be an exemplar of the district's green regeneration and sustainability ambitions (Bradford Markets, 2022) and has been designed with integrated ecological features such as a smart heating system, an energy management system and solar roof panels. In tandem, the operation of the market will align with the Bradford Good Food Strategy, with a focus on reducing the environmental impact of food (and other products) sold at the market, offer healthy hot food options and to maintain the affordability, variety, and diversity of fresh food. Traders, who will include those moving from the other two Bradford markets (due to be closed) and those from across the city and beyond, will also be expected to work towards achieving this vision.

To support the market team to align market operations with the Bradford Good Food Strategy, we were commissioned to develop a "charter" for the local authority and the market traders. The rest of the paper discusses the methods we used and our key findings.

Public markets: opportunities and challenges in strategies for just food systems

Traditional public markets in the UK are "generalist" retail markets selling affordable fresh food (not necessarily local), household goods, electronics, clothing or furniture and increasingly prepared and hot food. Across the UK, there are just over 1,000 traditional markets, 87% of them managed and owned by public local authorities (NABMA, 2022) and take various forms from covered historical market halls to daily or weekly street markets. These traditional public markets tend to mainly serve low-income groups, older people, and those from minoritised ethnic communities, however, people from a diverse range of communities also frequent them. Traditional public markets are distinct from "farmers markets", of which there are over 2500 in the UK (Yassin, 2024), which are smaller, sell locally sourced food, direct from producer to consumer and tend to cater for higher income groups.

Although historically public markets emerged partly to control food prices and ensure food supply (Schmiechen and Carls, 1999) structural changes in retail such as the domination of supermarkets and of online shopping, have marginalised them to only a small portion of the whole retail sector (Smith, 2012). Additionally, changes in local authority finances and priorities have also led to a gradual decline and disinvestment from public authorities (Taylor and Gonzalez, 2024) Despite this, traditional public markets in the UK, such as the new Darley Street Market in Bradford, can play an important role in supporting a just and socio-ecological transition to a better food system, although this potential is under researched and undervalued. Emerging research has shown that these markets can increase access to healthy and affordable food. In Grainger Market (Newcastle) and Bury (Greater Manchester), market users from neighbourhoods with poor food store provision (food deserts) stated that they relied on shopping at markets for fresh food more than those that came from better provided areas (Newing et al., 2023). This was further supported in Bury when market traders were encouraged to accept Healthy Start cards (a scheme to support young families with fresh food), and the uptake increased from 62% in January 2023 to 65% in April 2023 (Bury Market, 2023). Moreover, traditional public markets can support shorter supply chains, with traders buying their produce from regional wholesale markets and selling seasonal and local produce (Smith, 2012).

However, despite this potential there are important challenges and risks that need addressing. First, there is a growing tension between economic profit and public health; food systems are not driven to deliver human health through optimum human diets, but to maximize profits (Stuckler and Nestle, 2012). This contradiction is starker in poorer areas where austerity cuts in local public services have been more severe even leading to long term deterioration in public

health (Marmot et al, 2020). In this context, councils aim to generate a financial surplus for the operation of their markets, promoting outlets that bring more footfall such as fast food. For example, research by Machel and Caraher in 2012 revealed that in Leeds Kirkgate Market the proportion of fast-food stalls relative to fresh food stalls was 3 to 1 thus promoting an obesogenic environment in a publicly owned and managed asset (Burgoine et al., 2014). Relatedly, many local authorities pivot their markets towards a more elite offer, gentrifying markets into leisure and tourist destinations often anchored in a foodie offer, risking their key provisioning role for those who need it most (Taylor and Gonzalez, 2024), whilst also hampering their potential contribution towards an ecological just food system.

A further challenge relates to green gentrification, a process whereby the introduction of green infrastructures and policies, such as parks, greenways, and community gardens leads to the displacement of low-income residents and the influx of higher-income residents as areas become more desirable and prices increase (Anguelovski et al., 2022). In the context of markets, the introduction of sustainability and public health policies (such as Darley Street Market in Bradford) promoting local and/or organic produce or healthy food can lead to the displacement of long term traders and shoppers as products and rents go up or because a change in the feel of the new space where long term users feel out of place.

Our research aimed to support Bradford Council in promoting health and sustainability policies in their new Darley Street market whilst mitigating against these displacement risks. We developed market 'charters' for traders and the market team to follow when moving into Darley Street Market.

Methods

To develop the market charters we undertook a collaborative, multi-phase research project in partnership with Bradford District Council's public health and market teams, and with input from existing traders and members of the public.

Drawing on our existing expertise on traditional markets in the UK we conducted further academic and policy literature review on environmental and food systems aspects and we held an online workshop with academics (n=8) working in sustainability, nutrition, and behaviour change to test method ideas and identify key themes. Throughout the project (between March 23 and 24) we had regular meetings with the Bradford council public health and market management teams, discussing our progress and receiving feedback. We also interviewed key stakeholders such as a senior council officer on sustainability, the new market's architect firm, a local consultancy on sustainable business practices and a local food poverty charity. Using insights from these methods and in alignment with the Bradford Food Strategy we decided on key principles that the charters should cover which we then tested with traders and the public.

For traders, we developed a short online survey which was distributed via email by the council to all the traders that had applied (at the time of the research March 2023) to trade at Darley Street Market. Traders took part in the survey voluntarily, and 21 responses were captured (which is a 46% response rate). The survey, sought feedback on the key principles and information on the traders' current practices relating to waste, product sourcing and transport. Additionally, an in-person engagement event at Oastler market in Bradford was hosted on the 28th of October 2023 to capture feedback from community members and to explore perceptions of the public on the current market provision. It was led by a community engagement specialist, supported by local artists, a young trader and ourselves. We engaged around 50 members of the public on conversations around food waste, travel to the market, and food choices. Notes were made during conversations which were discussed and shared amongst the team. Further perceptions from members of the public were obtained from two separate public surveys (July 2022 and Oct 2023) run by Bradford public health team which had specific questions on Darley Street Market (n= 250 and n=352 respectively).

The final stage of the research project involved bringing together all the collected insights and data to create the Darley Street healthy and sustainable market charters to share with the market and public health teams and seek feedback on their implementation. In the next sections we present the charters, and we discuss the most relevant findings and our recommendations.

Healthy and Sustainable Market charters: Key principles

We developed two healthy and sustainable charters for Darley Street Market. Although similar in scope, one charter was adapted for market traders and the other for Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Figure [1]. Both charters cover health, and sustainability, and consider the range of priorities highlighted in the literature and raised by traders and the public.

Figure 1. Sustainable and Healthy Market Charters for Bradford Metropolitan District Council. Source: Authors

Traders Sustainable and Healthy Market Charter	Bradford Metropolitan District Council Sustainable and Healthy Market Charter
<p>As a trader of the new Darley Street market, you commit to work towards a Healthy and Sustainable market by agreeing to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and offer healthy and fresh food options at affordable prices, aiming to reduce ultra-processed, high-fat/high-sugar/high salt products. • Source, promote and celebrate products that reflect the diversity of cultures in Bradford. • Source your products as locally as possible to reduce food miles and support the local economy. • Reduce packaging and the use of plastic and non-recyclable materials in your business, working towards a plastic free market vision for 2035. • Take all actions possible to reduce the volume of waste (food and others) produced by our business. • Reduce the energy used to run your business as much as possible, finding alternatives for more sustainable transport and energy use in your stall. 	<p>As a member of the council team, working at, and/or managing the new Darley Street market, you commit to work towards a Healthy market by agreeing to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a "Health in all policies" approach to the operation of the market, promoting the market to residents as a part of the Living well/Eating well brand/campaign. • Support traders to promote and offer healthy and fresh food options. • Enable traders to sell products at affordable prices. For example, by keeping rents fair. • Work with traders to reduce the availability of ultra-processed, high-fat/high-sugar/high salt products and ensure healthy options are available and visible throughout the market. • Working with traders and other stakeholder across the region, to source products as locally as possible to reduce food miles and support the local economy. • Promote the market as a space to celebrate the cultural diversity of Bradford. • Turn the market into an exemplar of sustainable and reusable packaging, supporting traders to reduce packaging and the use of plastic and non-recyclable materials, promoting working towards a plastic free market vision for 2035. • Work with traders and members of the market operations team, to reduce energy consumption by exploring sustainable alternatives for both transportation and overall market operations, seeking ways to reduce reliance on conventional energy sources. • Take all actions possible to reduce the volume of waste (food and others) produced by the market, offering composting facilities and supporting relationships between traders and food redistribution and surplus food charities. • In collaboration with regional stakeholders, promote and facilitate active travel options to the market by customers, traders and staff.

The charters are organised around six shared principles: 1) access to affordable, healthy, and fresh food choices, 2) promotion and celebration of the diversity of cultures in Bradford, 3) promotion of locally and regionally produced, made and grown products, 4) reduction in packaging and fading out of single use plastic, 5) reduction in overall waste from the market, and 6) improvement in the energy efficiency of market operations.

The principle relating to the improved access to affordable, healthy, and fresh food choices aligns with the Bradford Good Food strategy (Bradford.gov, 2023) and was highlighted as the most important for market users and members of the public. Two quotes from market users illustrate these points: "I buy meat and fruit from the market. It is cheaper and better quality" (28 years old, Nigerian heritage)" and 'Food is cheaper in the market and has more cheaper options. It is a financial choice.' (32 years old, African Nigerian).

As well as affordability, members of the public highlighted the importance of being able to access culturally appropriate food and were positive about the culturally diverse offers at the current markets in Bradford. As a result, we included a principle in the charter relating to the promotion and celebration of the diversity of cultures in Bradford. Many customers mentioned that they visit the market mainly to take advantage of the range of cultural food options available: “I can buy plantains, and ingredients for Mexican food that I cook for my family”, said a Female, Mexican heritage customer and “I buy ingredients for Nigerian meals, peppers, good meat, which is more fresh than the supermarket, and fish”, commented a 32 years old, African Nigerian heritage customer.

Another key principle of the charters is to promote locally or regionally sourced products. This is something highlighted in Bradford’s Good Food strategy and generally recognised as important to strength local food systems. However, our findings showed that local produce is not currently prioritised by traders, the council, or members of the public at existing Bradford markets, with customers and traders concerned that local/regional produce is more expensive. Traders also told us that they would struggle to find local suppliers for their products and that their customers would not necessarily value locally sourced fruits and vegetables as some of them seek those that come from their country of origin. In our discussions with the council, increasing the percentage of locally sourced produce sold at the new Darley Street Market (comparing to the current market to be closed) was considered as an important target although the council at the moment lacks information and resources to support traders with this.

Reflecting the significant impact that plastic can have on the environment (Jones et al, 2024), the charters include a principle on fading out of single use plastics and packaging waste. Traders were keen to minimise the use of single use plastic, and results from the survey indicate that over a third supported the use of recyclable containers or customers own containers as alternatives to single use plastics for food packaging. Packaging is one of the largest contributors to the waste produced by the market currently, according to the market team. However, traders highlighted that being at the end of the supply chain, they feel powerless to influence the reduction of plastic and packing from their suppliers.

Reducing food waste is a critical step in reducing emissions from the wider food system as well as ensuring more people have access to affordable food and this is a key principle in charters. Fresh food does not appear to be a large contributor to waste produced by the market. We spoke to fresh food traders about how they manage food nearing its sell by date, and they stated that they discount it, or take it home for their own families. It was less clear how hot food traders in the market deal with food waste. Customers are already making efforts at home to reduce the food waste they produce. For example, customers stated that they only buy what they need, something that the market allows them to do, and if there is any food left over from meals, it is either eaten over the following days, or frozen. It was clear from the customers that we spoke to that they came to the market to by specific products which they particularly value and they were not going to waste them. This is illustrated by two quotes from market users: “ I don’t make food waste. I make food and if there is left overs, I eat it over the next few days’ (Unknown); “I reduce food waste by cooking in batches, and freezing what we don’t eat. We then eat it at a later date”.

Challenges and recommendations

Despite the potential of the charters to enhance the sustainability of market operations, several risks are associated with their implementation. One significant risk is the phenomenon of "green gentrification," explained before. Traders and customers that we gained data from regarded locally sourced products more expensive to sell and buy and Oastler market (due to be closed), where we conducted the community engagement event, is highly regarded as a source of affordable products. If local sourced products are prioritised at the new Darley Street market and the market offer is altered to offer higher quality and more expensive products this could lead to the exclusion of groups that currently benefit from the affordability of the public markets. In fact, the move to the new market has already discouraged several traders who

currently trade at Bradford Markets. This potential exclusion runs counter to the market's role as an inclusive community hub and could exacerbate social inequities.

To mitigate against some of these risks, we recommended that the market operations team worked with other council teams including public health to promote a flexible, phased, and collaborative approach, taking on board diverse perspectives. We also recommended that a Darley Street market Healthy and Sustainable advisory team to be launched. We recommended that this team included council staff from economic development and health teams, representatives of community groups, traders and other stakeholders across the city to ensure that a range of voices were heard during the implementation of the charters, and in their monitoring. In terms of monitoring of the charters, we suggested that this was done in collaboration with traders, so as not to add another layer of regulations. It was suggested that to monitor the implementation of the principles in the market, an annual survey would be delivered by the traders for traders, and an audit form would be compiled and completed by the local authority's market staff.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Darley Street market in Bradford has the potential to contribute locally to a just food transition, promoting affordable and nutritious food for diverse communities, sourcing local and regional food and reducing food and plastic waste. It can also serve as an important community hub, fostering social connections, cultural exchange, and local economic activity. Our proposed sustainable and healthy market charters offer a structured approach to achieving these goals, ensuring that market practices support environmental stewardship and promote the well-being of all stakeholders. It is important, however that the market continues to be inclusive of all groups particularly minoritised communities and those on low incomes, mitigating against a potential process of 'green' gentrification. Darley Street market can become a model for other community markets striving to balance tradition and community building with health-focused sustainability.

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