**ARTICLE**

# Challenges and Opportunities in Collaborative Cross-Sectoral (Healthy) Urban Food Environment Planning

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## Abstract

The need to manage change in local food environments is increasingly evident in local government policies, including the demand for an integrated and "whole systems" approach. Land-use planning is often used as a mechanism to promote health—both in the creation of healthy environments and the regulation of unhealthy food environments—for example, through facilitating urban food growing and managing the location and number of unhealthy food outlets. In England, the government recently strengthened the ability of planners to promote health, including through food environments, by publishing a renewed National Planning Policy Framework. It also launched a UK-wide Food Strategy in 2025, seeking to tackle wider food system challenges. This indicates an intention by the government to strengthen food policy leadership, taking a system lens. To date, this has been predominantly led by local government and civil society action via local food policies and healthy planning programmes. Critical to the success of future action is a better understanding of the complexities and barriers to integrated work to deliver healthier food environments. This article reflects on insights gained from qualitative pre-Covid-19 research exploring three local authorities in England and their actors involved with integrated food policies and action. In-depth interviews elicit the perspectives of key stakeholders, including planners and public health officers, and shed light on some important underlying challenges. Stakeholders revealed a range of constraints affecting the ability to enact integrated policy, including conflicting framing and worldviews of food environments, challenges of ongoing organisational and leadership change, and the long timeframes needed to deliver meaningful impact. Reviewed in the light of more recent literature and policy, the insights gained reflect persistent barriers and constraints that are still of relevance today and should be addressed if implementation of integrated policy towards food environment change on the ground is to be realised.

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## 1. Introduction

Local authorities are increasingly recognised as crucial arenas for addressing the complex socio-economic and environmental challenges associated with delivering positive food systems (Sonnino & Coulson, 2021). Concern in the Global North about the economic and human impact of diet-related ill health has spurred considerable investigation of the social, cultural, and political drivers of food choice and the intricate relationships between food environments and health outcomes (Løvhaug et al., 2022). The experience of food (its production, growing, and processing) has undergone a profound transformation in many northern cities. What was once a visceral part of urban experience is now less so, in part due to rationalisation via planning and public health interventions (Lopes & Zuleta, 2025). Instead, urban environments are increasingly characterised by restricted healthy and affordable food choices, assertive advertising, and proliferation of ultra-processed and unhealthy consumptive food environments (House of Lords, 2024). Terms such as "food deserts," "fat swamps," and "obesogenic environments" are now commonly used to conceptualise differing urban environmental exposures affecting consumer choice (Pineda et al., 2024; Saunders et al., 2015).

Despite an increased emphasis on multi-actor, cross-sector partnerships promoting urban food policy, fundamental questions persist regarding the extent to which they are effective in influencing food environments and their impact on health. Barriers persist in access to healthy, nutritious foods, evidenced in rising obesity and diet-related ill health, widening inequalities and growing food insecurity (House of Lords, 2024; Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020). Exploration of urban food environments and identification of upstream policy levers and processes—as factors influencing where and how people obtain food—are critical for bolstering both health and community resilience. Insights have been gained using multiple analytical perspectives, examining cultural, environmental, temporal, economic, and spatial factors operating at different levels. Researchers have identified complex and multi-factorial pathways influencing how and where consumer food choices are made (Lake, 2018; Story et al., 2008). Sallis et al. (2015) and Glanz et al. (2005), for example, explored "socio-ecological" models to characterise pathways to health behaviours, including food environments. Evidence of linkages between food environments and health is complex and often mixed, but also signals areas for action. For example, greater access to and consumption of unhealthy energy-dense foods, including takeaway food options, have been linked to obesity and health inequalities (Cobb et al., 2015; Pineda et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024). Recent literature further highlights how regulating food environments is becoming more complex due to the widening spatial boundaries of food choice, exposed by increased mobility, growth of app-based and online food ordering options, and the emergence of "dark kitchens" (Rinaldi et al., 2022).

Understanding these pathways and interconnections is important for building effective policy intervention and focusing on points of influence. Across the Global North, there is a strong consensus on the need for integrated and "whole systems" approaches; recognising ways in which elements interact is seen as critical to identifying and tackling the complex barriers and underlying drivers of unsustainable food environments

and poor health (Bagnall et al., 2019; Chang, Carhart, Lee, et al., 2025; Wopereis et al., 2024). In practice, this requires policymakers to develop positive and resilient responses rooted in a deep understanding of both the interconnected and dynamic levers of "upstream" interventions, and the pathways to coordinating action over extended periods of time. It also requires collaboration and coordination across multiple sectors and stakeholders—including planning and public health (Barry, 2022; Biesbroek & Candel, 2020; Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018; Chang, Carhart, Lee, et al., 2025). This perspective has fuelled the exploration of the role of integration in local government food policies as vehicles for food planning to influence the wider determinants of health, modify unhealthy food environments, and promote healthier food environments (Hawkes & Halliday, 2017; Ilieva, 2016; Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015).

Urban land-use planning levers have increasingly been used to drive food environment change (Carmichael et al., 2019; Chang, Horrocks, et al., 2025; Chang & Radley, 2023). Examples from Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and England illustrate how planning tools, such as food retail zoning and regulation, design codes, supplementary planning documents, and greenspace planning can all improve healthier food choices (Chang & Radley, 2023; Hassan et al., 2024; Health Equalities Group, 2025; Ilieva, 2016). This includes introducing limits to unhealthy food retail, such as "hot food takeaways," for example, incorporating guidance on density or distance from vulnerable groups, such as schools, increasingly demonstrating clear evidence of health benefits (Keeble et al., 2019, 2021, 2024; Rahilly et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024). Furthermore, healthy planning approaches have explored allocation of land for food growing and urban agriculture, highlighting opportunities to create multifunctional benefits to both human and planetary health (Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018; Fox-Kämper et al., 2023).

This article examines experiences of local food environment actors in strengthening policy levers in different socio-economic and political contexts and what opportunities and challenges exist in strengthening the food-health-planning nexus in England.

## 2. Focus on Food Environments in England

In England, those within local government, community, and civil society have increasingly pressed for stronger national policy leadership to address some of the deep-seated challenges of what many describe as a "broken" food system (Dun-Campbell et al., 2024; Food Foundation, 2025; Rostas & Briggs, 2025). A recent study estimated the annual direct and indirect cost of Britain's unhealthy food system on health and social care at £260 billion (Jackson, 2024). Others emphasise concern about the vulnerability of the food system, including exposure to climate shocks and geopolitical shifts coupled with wider linkages to planetary health (Vilar-Lluch et al., 2025; Winter et al., 2024). A recent UK-focused report calls for clear government leadership on food security, strengthened civil networks, and resilience, including advocating for greater flexibility within spatial planning to bring forward land for food growing at a local level (Lang et al., 2025).

Historically, policy guidance has favoured voluntary measures for the food industry, along with "nudges" to influence individual behaviour change and choice. A lack of decisive, strategic, and joined-up central government leadership has been identified in recent critiques, accusing policymakers of sidelining evidence and failing to address underlying challenges (Lang et al., 2025). This approach has, to date, left local governments filling the gaps, working within limited powers to drive food policy (Dun-Campbell et al., 2024; House of Lords, 2024; van Tulleken & Dimbleby, 2024). Activity at this level has seen the formation of

collaborative networks, the development of loose voluntary frameworks and metrics for action, and the publication of guidance documents. This has included guidance on healthy planning and public health, including a focus on healthy placemaking, obesity, and the determinants of health (Health Equalities Group, 2025; Public Health England [PHE], 2019; Sustainable Food Places, n.d.). In practice, progress has often tended to manifest in local, small-scale and funding-dependent projects, seen for instance in the establishment of allotments and community gardens, or local food markets, as well as improved alignment between planning and public health, including localised efforts to tackle environmental drivers of obesity (Callway et al., 2023; PHE, 2019; Schoen et al., 2020).

In 2025, the Labour Government published a National Food Strategy for the UK (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2025). This has been met with cautious optimism among food policy advocates for its wider food system focus. A renewed National Planning Policy Framework additionally provides more robust guidance enabling local land use planning decision-makers to consider health, including food environments (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [MHCLG], 2024, section 8 on "Promoting healthy and safe communities"). Policy guidance includes the requirement to "enable and support healthy lives, through both promoting good health and preventing ill health" (MHCLG, 2024, para. 96(c)) and to address health inequalities. The National Planning Policy Framework specifically mentions supporting access to healthier food through avenues, such as allotments and local shops, and supports local planning authorities in refusing applications for new hot food takeaways and fast-food outlets "within walking distance of schools" (MHCLG, 2024, para. 97). Similarly, proposed changes within the National Health System architecture include a focus on tackling obesity within the National Health System 10 Year Plan for England, supporting more integrated action (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025). While the ambitions embodied in these policy aspirations are appropriate, they are set against a backdrop of further major local government reorganisation of governance and geographical boundaries. Such periods of uncertainty and constant flux can seriously hamper action as existing expertise, energies, and funding streams may be dispersed or diverted.

## 3. Limitations of Integrated Food Policy Action at the Local Government Level

The in-depth qualitative research informing this article, carried out as part of a PhD research undertaken pre-Covid-19 (2015–2017), sought to shed light on multi-sectoral perspectives on integrated food policy-making, with a focus on food environment change through planning and land use. It was embedded within three real-world local authority contexts in England (Barry, 2022). Academic and policy literature at the time was beginning to build insight into how food can be integrated into the urban fabric through planning. Whilst much of the focus was on aspiration and sharing knowledge about on-the-ground interventions, a gap remained in understanding underlying policy-making processes, supporting conditions, multi-sectoral perspectives, and motivations that take place behind the scenes. The study set out to build an understanding of how aspiration translates into application, and how interpretations of integrated food policy aims are realised on the ground by identifying both integrating and disintegrating factors at play. Literature from across public health and food planning at the time pointed to a lack of understanding about the nuances of integration in the food policy process, weak central government leadership, limited support for regulation, and continued dominance of the influence of commercial factors (Roberto et al., 2015). Food governance was often unclear, leaving local governments and civil society to fill the "policy vacuum" (Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018; Hawkes & Halliday, 2017; Sonnino et al., 2019). Limitations and

complexities of integrated food policy work at the local government level pointed to silo working, gaps in understanding and skills for systems approaches, political and commercial pressures, constant change, and short-term thinking—all acting to hinder progress (Chang, 2017; Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019; Sautkina et al., 2014).

Studies published after that research continue to identify fragmented or inflexible policy governance, where intentions to integrate and prioritise food within policy agendas, despite intent, are still not realised (Duvernoy et al., 2025; Summerhayes & Baker, 2024; Zerbian et al., 2024). Others have examined more specifically the work of planners and public health professionals to implement food environment change. For example, Chang, Carhart, Cook, et al. (2025) highlight the impact of continued instability and uncertainty affecting policymakers' ability to embed action on health, in part due to constant planning reforms in England, reduced resourcing, gaps in skills, and a lack of shared understanding between public health and planning professionals. Coombes et al. (2025), examining the role of healthy places officers in embedding health in local government structures, found that this type of role might be useful in supporting a move towards improved intersectoral working and development of broad health-focused plans, which may have relevance to the food agenda. However, they identified the need for both strategic commitment and formalised structures in place to enable this to become sustainable. Chang and Hobbs (2025), in a health census of local plans in England, provide a baseline for the state of local planning. They map geographical, political, greenspace, and other factors, such as hot food takeaways, against evidence of integration of health into local plans, exploring to what extent health policies are informed by health and deprivation indicators of local areas. Although the study found inconsistent patterns of integrating health into local plans based on health and deprivation data, it provided some initial evidence of this in some areas. Those local authorities in seriously deprived urban areas were more likely to have a health objective policy; those also with a Labour (i.e., centre-left leaning voting) majority were found to be more likely to have a health-specific hot food takeaway policy. Chang and Hobbs (2025) suggest further census work to explore these factors in more depth and to help guide action at the local level.

The following section explains the study's methodology and then presents and analyses views from different actors in the study towards trying to realise laudable policy goals before Covid-19. The article then briefly discusses the findings and ends by reflecting on these challenges in the light of recent research and policy development, to highlight possible ways to bridge the implementation gap towards transformative food environment change.

## 4. Methodology

The research examines pre-Covid-19 insights on integrated food policy around food environment change through urban planning and land use within three urban local authority areas in the English midlands. It draws on narratives collected between 2015 and 2017, based on in-depth interviews with urban planners, public health officers, and food policy leads (Barry, 2022). The case studies were selected on the basis that they would enable exploration of how local government policymakers aspired to galvanise integrated food policy across public health, including via the use of different planning instruments, specifically to facilitate food environment transformation. Pathways towards this included the use of food and healthy planning policies, planning tools, regulations to restrict unhealthy food outlets, and the use of healthy planning principles, for example, in the allocation of land and green infrastructure for food growing and urban agriculture, and development or master planning for regeneration with reference to food. The three chosen case study areas were linked through being

located within the same wider metropolitan area, but demonstrated varied local political, social, and economic contextual factors, with key features described at the time of research, summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Contextual factors for the three case study areas.

| Contextual factors | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Population (Office for National Statistics, 2011) | 314,000 | 308,000 | 206,000 |
| Life expectancy at birth (years; PHE, 2021) | 77 male<br>81 female | 79 male<br>83 female | 80 male<br>84 female |
| Density, fast food outlets/100,000 population (PHE, 2018) | 118/100,000 | 97/100,000 | 70/100,000 |
| Deprivation ranking based on average score (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2015) | 13 (with uniform spread of deprivation) | 110 (deprivation in key wards) | 178 (with deprivation concentrated in 3 wards) |
| Political factors at the time of research (Barry, 2022) | Labour majority and post-industrial low-growth economy | Conservative (narrow margin) and post-industrial low-growth economy | Conservative (no overall control) and strategic drive and focus on economic development |
| Food policy focus, common features, and drivers | Strong public health leadership as a pioneer of food policy since the 1990s, driven by strategic concern on determinants of health, health inequalities, and deprivation<br>Strategic support to develop urban agriculture<br>Commitment to healthy planning and development of systems approaches<br>Use of planning tools to restrict unhealthy food outlets, e.g., supplementary planning document | Strategic policy focus on healthy urban planning<br>Successful healthy town bid, which gave a grounded opportunity to embed approaches to tackle the obesogenic environment<br>Food policy enacted via healthy planning and an obesity focus<br>Use of health and planning policy to restrict hot food outlets as part of a wider health focus in the local development plan | Public health-focused, which post-2010 was extended to exploring food policy<br>Food policy document published in 2015<br>Main focus on obesity, "whole systems" and sustainability lens, including reference to the use of planning tools<br>Explored the use of supplementary planning tools to restrict hot food outlets, but did not proceed due to the use of commercial and other pressures |
| Interviewees by sector: | | | |
| Public health | 6 | 3 | 4 |
| Planning | 6 | 4 | 3 |
| Greenspace/environment | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Other (civil society, urban agriculture, etc.) | 6 | 3 | 4 |

The study sought to explore real-time multi-sectoral policy perspectives on integrated food policy-making and governance around (healthy) food environments, through urban planning and land use. It drew on documentation, policy sources, and in-depth interviews to provide insight into varying frameworks used when developing integrated and systemic strategies. The approach focused on exploring the contextual factors, and the "how" and "who" rather than the "what" of the policy process by drawing on frameworks and concepts from policy analysis and systems thinking, whilst recognising value of a grounded and flexible approach to research design in the light of the complexity of the topic (Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018).

Fifty-one interviews were conducted with spatial planners (planning policy and development officers), public health officials (directors, food policy leads, and healthy planning officers), civil society, and various other professionals involved in shaping the greenspace and built environment. Interviewees were identified using a "snowballing" approach, starting from key informants involved in the local government food policy process, and leading to introductions to others across the system. Included were those who were identified as actively involved in the pathways towards policy implementation, working in or with local government. Ethical approval and informed consent were gained following guidance set out within university policy. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the data, including interview transcripts, along with related documentary and policy evidence, was undertaken using well-established methods common to qualitative research to develop themes, drawing on the frameworks of Huberman and Miles (2002) and Ritchie and Spencer (1994). It involved an inductive and iterative process, visiting and revisiting the data to develop, check, and redevelop themes, in a series of steps, along with consultation and discussion in the research team.

Overarching themes identified focused on the nuances behind the policy-making process within the local authority settings, exploring pathways to food environment change (Figure 1). Themes identified were grouped into integrating and disintegrating factors, which support or hinder development towards
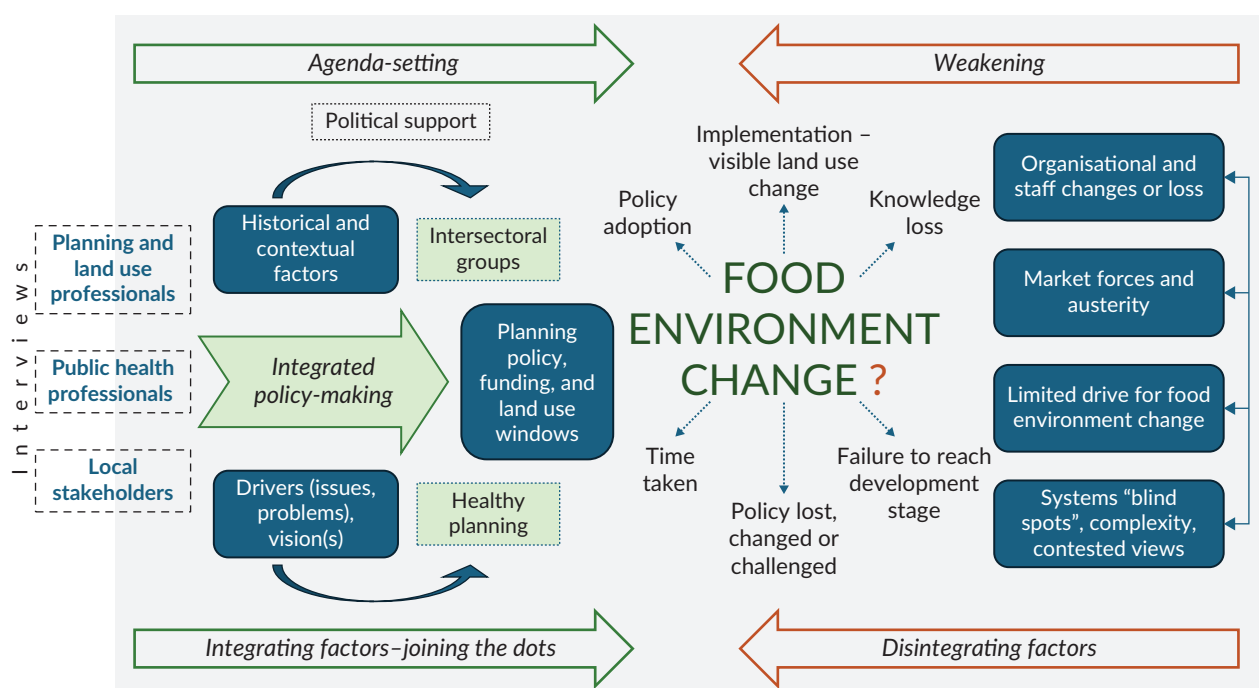


**Figure 1.** Themes indicating integrating and disintegrating factors in achieving food environment change.

integrated systems-based approaches and food environment action through urban planning and land use. In this article, we highlight some of the narratives between planners and public health officers, specifically their views on understanding the place of food, and ways in which integrated approaches were supported or constrained.

## 5. Analysis of Results

The planners and public health officers interviewed drew on decades of involvement in food policy development and integrated approaches towards food environment change. This section contains many direct quotes to convey the specific viewpoints and contexts. Overall, the research identified supportive, integrating factors underlying progress, including the role of key individuals and champions, healthy planning approaches, along with exposing inherent fragility. Disintegrating factors and barriers included different professional and personal viewpoints, a lack of real-world understanding of systems approaches, silo working, and challenges of balancing long-term consistency against ongoing change and external commercial and fiscal pressures.

### 5.1. Varied Understanding and Concepts of Food and the Role of Food Environment Change

Developing integrated policy and identifying complex levers for food environment change rests on building a shared understanding of food and its role in society, and of motivations for change from the start. Contested viewpoints about the justification, meaning, and place of upstream action on food were noted both within and beyond food policy groups, reflecting varied attitudes and understanding, including individual and structural approaches. Interviews with planners, public health professionals, and officers involved in food policy highlighted the critical need for dedicated time to build shared understanding. Officers' perspectives and engagement in the policy process varied, influenced by a spectrum of framings and attitudes to food-related issues, often reflecting highly personalised approaches:

> Food...it's quite emotive, people get very personal about it. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

> I think food, within public health and weight management and healthy eating, and within UK culture, is probably the hardest paradigm to crack...individually it goes both ways in terms of malnutrition and overeating...it is very emotional at an individual and societal level. (Public Health Officer, Case 3)

These individual framings affected some stakeholders' ability to grasp the complex interconnections in the food system. The delicate web of relationships was not always widely understood and often viewed through narrow and potentially restrictive professional silos and personal viewpoints. Consequently, some participants with a broader understanding recognised some societal ignorance of likely critical issues and hence signalled reluctance to overtly reveal their motivations for food environment change within food policy discussions:

> The big challenge...is going to be market volatility and food prices, and I don't think people have realised that is about to happen around the corner, from a global perspective. Having local fresh food supply chains, in case of severe climate change, and in case of warfare...things like that are not considered. (Planner, Case 1)

Some interviewees recognised the necessity of flexibility in articulating broad concepts of food, to gain buy-in, and using opportunities to adapt their messages as needed in order to speak to diverse and multi-functional agendas. Here, for example, one interviewee spoke of the need to highlight relevance across different arenas, thus avoiding "pigeonholing" food:

> We can't afford to get to "public healthy" around this [because of individual and societal resistance to some messages explicitly targeted at public health]…if we pigeonhole things too narrowly around food, physical activity, they remain stuck. We need to change our language a bit…so then we can move these things on. (Public Health Officer, Case 3)

### 5.2. Planners and Public Health Viewpoints and Constraints to Integrated Work

Beyond shared understanding, developing an integrated approach towards developing and implementing practical food environment pathways required strong relationship-building between planners and public health officers. This involved negotiating expectations and constraints, often taking into account their differing remits and professional worldviews. While some planners revealed a strong understanding of interconnections between food and the built environment, this understanding was not universal—some hardly considered food in their practice.

Whilst learning and exploring, mutual benefits occurred to some extent within food policy groups, but they were sometimes limited and abstract. Better adoption and integration were achieved through opportunities to work towards practical and shared endeavours, presented through healthy planning practice and within specific development projects. For example, a healthy planning lens was seen to support broader exploration of the place of food environments in real time. Opportunities emerged which supported the forming of spatial understandings of food, greater buy-in and development of skills towards systems approaches, and mutual benefits, through seeking to position food (for example, food growing or healthier retail) within land-use plans, collaborating on funded urban regeneration projects, design codes, or opportunities presented in drawing up formal development policy and strategies. A planning professional in Case 1, for example, described working together with public health professionals to develop master plans within land allocated for new housing development, as follows:

> Closer relationship with public health has been a driving factor for us in changing our thinking, and the officers…have tried to…change the way the other people think within the office.…Public health and planning should go hand in hand, we should be discussing how we create environments for healthy living, and the food focus…looking at developments. (Planner, Case 1)

In Case 3, opportunities for embedding food within emerging local plans were explored, along with turning some space into a community garden as part of a housing regeneration scheme through the identification of mutual benefits within the cross-sector food policy team:

> This particular site was a bit of space left over…the houses had been built around it, there were houses that had not been developed because the money had run out, space had been left…used for drug dealing and littering…so that was a site we identified something needed doing. (Public Health Officer, Case 3)

Case 2 similarly provided an opportunity to learn and work collaboratively on a "tactile" programme with action on obesogenic environments as a result of a successful bid under the Healthy Towns Programme. This was foundational in building understanding and trust for subsequent work together on a local development plan (see Sautkina et al., 2014):

> We presented it to planning…they all jumped on the thing that will give them a tactile programme to showcase how influential planning is on health, so theory and policy is all very well, but seeing programmes and products emerging…we co-authored it, hit it off really well, could see how we could scratch each other's backs and there was genuine honest collaboration. (Public Health Officer, Case 2)

However, despite their aspirations, both public health professionals and planners often spoke of tensions emerging from their differing expectations and framings, which could counteract this effort. This exposed the inherent limits and realities of formal planning processes when attempting to address complex health issues, particularly the narrower parameters within which spatial planning operates:

> [The public health officer] would probably say they were in that camp thinking planning was the great panacea…to…stop hot food takeaways springing up.…I have to take them carefully through that whole conversation: "Well, you need to be able to demonstrate planning harm, yes, there is obesity, but how do you relate that directly to this development?" (Planner, Case 3)

In each of the case study areas, planning officers—perhaps reflecting the myriad of policy pressures and delivery expectations, or perceived lower priority of healthy planning—expressed concern about the extra burden of work driven by expectations of public health or voiced that they were doing it anyway.

> There's resistance to new things from planners, "oh no, something else we have to think about…not just flooding, air quality and transport…now they want us to worry about how many people have asthma or obesity" (Planner, Case 3).

Health was consistently viewed as just one of the many competing factors within planning decision-making, revealing limitations of planning as a tool for driving food environment change:

> The council has aspirations in terms of delivering healthy communities, I fully get that, but quite often what I see as a planner is "oh the planning system is a vehicle to deliver this, that, and the other," and it's a very blunt planning tool, [but] people think it has the power to control x, y, and z. (Planner, Case 3)

The recently revised National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2024) significantly strengthens planners' capacity to restrict unhealthy food environments and champion healthier alternatives. However, its practical translation into tangible action is yet to be demonstrated. Although local authority public health departments—responsible for promoting population-level health—are increasingly collaborating with others, including planners, to identify and address the wider determinants of health, they lack status as statutory consultees within the formal planning process. This absence of a mandatory requirement (UK Government, 2019) may continue to act as a limiting factor, again placing reliance on relationship building, as one planner's comment reveals:

In our consultation process, we have a lot of statutory consultees, but I don't think public health is (statutory)...it's kind of left to the officers...to remember, "oh yeah, we should consult public health." (Planner, Case 1)

Decision-making within planning, in the context of influencing food environment levers, remains nuanced and far from an "exact science," instead being subject to locally differing interpretations. This could be frustrating for public health efforts; for example, when trying to implement supplementary planning documents that aim to limit new hot food takeaways:

I know public health were keen to get 400m buffer zones around primary schools...but it's just not practical, because we would literally obliterate the whole borough, and that's not what planning is about. (Planner, Case 1)

Some of the narratives indicated systems' "blind spots" and disconnections, which acted as a weakening and disintegrating force, even when policy aspiration was clearly aligned, supported, and in place across councils towards food environment change. Planners, public health, and other actors all revealed to some extent a lack of reach, understanding, ownership, or ability to "see" where the responsibility lay and who/what were the real drivers of food environment change.

## 5.3. Balancing Commercial and Other Implications With Wider Determinants

Underpinning the conceptual and practical differences between planners and public health were significant considerations: the broader determinants of health, along with very real commercial, economic, and land-use pressures. While the aspiration towards healthy planning was welcomed, budgetary constraints and land development pressures brought "reality" into the decision-making process. These pressures are still evident in 2025, and government policy continues to prioritise both financial constraint and drive for economic growth.

Although local authorities and different stakeholders can draw on government strategies and planning policies to limit unhealthy food environments and encourage positive food environment change, demonstrating causal evidence at a local level can be tricky (Keeble et al., 2024). For example, one case in this study tracked the hard work over many years to build integrated policy leverage in a local plan, including collating robust international, national, and academic evidence to support implementation of buffer zones around schools to restrict hot food. However, the levers to introduce these buffer zones were ultimately weakened when the planning inspector challenged the proposed policy in the local plan, questioning the transferability of that wider evidence to the specific local context. Inconsistency of understanding and decisions by planning inspectors—who examine local plans in England for approval—may continue as a constraint undermining moves towards more robust action (see Chang, Horrocks, et al., 2025):

There have been various studies carried out on health benefits attributed to good development....I think the wider determinants are difficult to put a figure on....How many lives have you saved? What gap have you closed in healthy life expectancy? (Public Health Officer, Case 1)

It's been completely turned on its head from the inspector's point of view, so that it is virtually non-existent....We're not really in a position now where we've got a strong policy that allows us to

carry these ideas forward. So we are back in the position now where it [the food environment policy] is supplementary, and therefore it can be appealed. (Planner, Case 2)

Subsequent work highlighted that the difficulties of implementing regulation can lead to reticence and inconsistent approaches from planning inspectors in decision-making on appeals against the refusal of planning permission (O'Malley et al., 2023). Furthermore, the threat of judicial challenges from well-resourced commercial developers and food retailers has also affected the willingness of some local authority planners to use this pathway (Chang, Horrocks, et al., 2025). Commercial and housing pressures continue as key considerations for local authorities, particularly in more deprived areas with constrained ability to generate income, following decades of austerity and funding constraints (Local Government Association, 2024). Such persistent pressures on local authority budgets continue to drive hesitancy, put strain on amenities, services, and green spaces, and contribute to a lack of willingness to face the costs of appeals by food retailers (Chang, Carhart, Cook, et al., 2025; Whitten, 2019):

> We have local evidence, but I think ultimately people are not in a position to use that as a tool against developers. If you have a strong developer who wants to open a burger bar, they know their stuff, their case law inside out, so they'll bat it back….We've been bitten and…very cautious about being bitten again. (Public Health Officer, Case 3)

While emerging health and public policy in 2025 focuses on pooled budgetary decision-making and a focus on the wider determinants of health, the hard reality of continued budget cuts often generates shorter-term thinking and the pressing need to generate capital. This, in turn, exerts pressure to retreat further into silos and away from integrative systems-based approaches. This pressure was tangibly reflected in the case study areas with strong growth-focused policies. This was revealed in the reluctance to impose restrictions on hot food outlets due to the concern about the impact on high streets, alongside some planners' unwillingness to take what they perceived as a "moral stance" or interference with the free market:

> People talk about "well we're looking for economic growth, so we don't want to stop developers coming in, so if it's to open up a fish and chip shop, then so be it," at least it's better than an empty shop in that respect….Public health argument would be, "but what about the cost and the public health issues?" The answer would be "that doesn't matter because it's the National Health System budget." (Public Health Officer, Case 1)

> Until we have shared budgets, people aren't going to be thinking of the systems. (Public Health Officer, Case 3)

The concept of "developer viability" emerged in interviews, underscoring local authorities' limited bargaining power and scope for creativity against developers and house-building pressures. Without robust government guidance (for example, on the mandatory incorporation of green space within developments), this is unlikely to change. While the provision of allotments or food growing sites was a popular aspiration in local planning and food policy, the reality is that flexibility for dynamic thinking is curtailed by the need to ensure on-site viability:

> We have enough issues in trying to make development viable, so adding food production into the mix puts pressure on viability. Whilst I think it's relatively cheap and easy to do this, this isn't the case from [the perspective of] developers. (Planner, Case 1)

Although local authorities are well placed to initiate sustainable agendas through engagement with market actors and other key stakeholders, developers are likely to see food growing spaces as a low priority. Consequently, its implementation remains largely dependent on the initiative of the local community and grassroots groups:

> [A] developer is only going to deliver a nice allotment site if you know they've got enough value out of the rest of it; if they are going to put something in that is nil value, that's always the trade-off. (Planner, Case 1)

One planner expressed frustration with the protracted timeframe—over 15 years—in trying to secure land for a food growing site within bold new development plans. The interviewee recalled how the initial ambition to deliver a communal growing area was effectively lost because of commercial pressures, shifting policies, and loss of knowledge and carrying capacity, following the departure of key staff and individual champions:

> One of the very early iterations [of this development] had a kitchen garden, a communal food growing area, to utilise a bit of land that was harder to develop and had less value, but by the time you have worked through all the constraints of the site, and you had to get a certain number of houses onto it to make it viable, that had disappeared. (Planner, Case 2)

The impact of time taken for development planning and approval processes, as well as loss of staff and knowledge, was also highlighted in other instances:

> All these things…they do take an extraordinary amount of time to develop, and therefore…if you leave it more than two years, you find different people, so with aspects of food development, it's difficult to say it made much difference at all, really. (Public Health Officer, Case 1)

### 5.4. Time, Change, and the Role of Key Points of Consistency

In each case study, whilst written local policies and key advocates clearly aspired change towards integrated food environments through planning and land use decisions, the ability to embed longer-term impact remained fragile. The frequent and often rapid changes within local and national government policy environments, along with constant restructures (and associated losses of key personnel), must be juxtaposed against the longer time frames needed to implement and embed action through land and environment practice. This is, for example, evident in the time taken (sometimes over a decade as described for Case 2 in section 5.3) to bring forward development land for food growing or to prepare robust development policies.

As a result, ambitious programmes, envisaged by public health or within healthy planning frameworks, often prove fragile and prone to disappear once those in key leadership or influencing roles have moved on. This again raises the critical question about the fragility of creating positive land-use change and the ability to see through long-term disruption of dominant food environments (and, indeed, the wider systemic link to health and biodiversity). It strongly indicates the vulnerability of integrated and systems-based approaches and how such progress may continue to depend on key individuals and is highly contingent on contextual factors:

> It's like constellations of stars that brighten up the firmament and then disappear. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

The drive of key visionary individuals, as well as "constellations" of individuals acting as advocates or key actors with leverage at pivotal points across a system, was seen as essential to bring about change. This requires consistency, advocacy, commitment, communication, and knowledge transfer across long time frames:

> It helped that our previous assistant [planning] director was an environmental health officer, from a public health background, and it was a virtual sackable offence not to consider public health in what we did, so that helped us, because our structure reinforced the linkage. (Planner, Case 2)

> Some of the positions they occupied were pretty lowly; they weren't all chief execs at the time, but they were in a position to make change happen. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

Opportunity and timing emerged as critical contextual factors, either supporting or hindering food policy development and subsequent action. One officer, instrumental in driving food policy efforts, highlighted this reliance on several key actors who possessed both the ability to operate across the system and, crucially, were positioned in the "right place, at the right time" and able to access resources to drive change:

> You get constellations of people in places at particular times who are able to actualise disruptive thinking—people who are prepared to take risks and think...or do the unimaginable....There is an idea that progress happens because someone has a bright idea—but often it doesn't work like that, and...the urban agriculture was a constellation of people, structures, and funding streams, eventually made all of that...possible—of course, that has all changed. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

The inevitable and ongoing change to and fragmentation of political structures and leadership—which we still see happening today—exposes the fragility of food policy work and the speed at which once established approaches and programmes can break up as key "constellations" are dismantled. Finding ways to maintain, protect, and transfer knowledge and action across time is important to address, especially recognising the unique combination of facilitating factors and the time taken to align leadership, policy, and practical land use factors on the ground:

> Changes of political regime drive social change, not just about the money, it's about the people...those constellations of people where you get a break-up and scattering of people, ideas, and vision that come with them; and then you get the new people, they don't get it, and it's not important to them. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

Embedded knowledge, particularly visible in physical manifestations of changed food environments and change seen in the tangible fabric of people's lives, such as community gardens, was seen as one way of providing a form of pedagogical learning. This was seen as a way to build resilience and to transcend the ever-changing and often ephemeral landscape of governance, policies, structures, and projects. It was believed that embedded environmental change could act to demonstrate the legacy of policy intent and signify the outcome of integrated work that could endure and survive during times of change:

> For people in civil society to truly see and know that, not by saying, "we have this policy, these programmes" but to be able to see images in their everyday life, in their education, their work, their estate...in the end it comes back to simple affirmations of all these images in their everyday life. (Food Policy Officer, Case 1)

## 6. Discussion

The collected primary data has limitations in that empirical work was completed pre-Covid-19, in addition to publication of further research and policy changes since its completion in 2022, as outlined in the previous sections. Whilst acknowledging such changes, we have also observed through our subsequent applied and academic work that the value and relevance of the insights gained from that in-depth research, as presented in this article, are still relevant. They reflect persistent factors that continue to challenge attempts to embed integrated action on food environment change. Current professional practice and observation indicate that many of the fundamental issues remain pertinent, and we highlight those insights to better understand the connections between and implementation of policy, research, and practice in urban greening, social-ecological systems thinking, and urban transformative processes. The lead author, based within a regional health-focused NGO, has witnessed the tensions between the political rhetoric and action. For example, the previous Conservative government's policy narrative around "levelling up" communities, as well as that of the current Labour government around economic growth and renewal, are set against a backdrop of a rising cost of living, deteriorating health indicators, and increasing food poverty. In our view, this signals that the contextual factors have not fundamentally changed, and possibly worsened, despite the recent increase in policy-making around healthy places and communities.

The interview findings resonate strongly with the broader academic and policy context described in the introduction and literature review. The research reinforces that local government is a crucial arena for addressing food systems challenges, but its effectiveness is highly contingent on a complex interplay of integrating and disintegrating factors. Insights gained from the three local authority case studies pre-Covid-19 can now be enhanced, considering subsequent research by Chang and Hobbs (2025) on locational, political, determinants of health, and other factors, and the likelihood of adoption of health-related planning policies. For example, in Case 1—a post-industrial urban unitary authority, with a strong Labour majority, stark inequalities in health, and poor food environments, including a high density of hot food takeaways—there was strong and early leadership and development of health-related food policy planning driven by analysis of interconnected systems and wider determinants. This contrasted with Case 3, characterised by a fragile political balance, and strong drive towards economic growth, and less uniform or deep-seated deprivation indices. Here, food policy and healthy planning emerged later, as part of wider policy encouragement.

Although planning tools are increasingly accepted by local authorities and different stakeholders as common practice for limiting unhealthy food and encouraging food environment change, challenges persist in effectively implementing them and demonstrating causal evidence at a local level (Keeble et al., 2024). Evidence on the impact of wider determinants on health, including unhealthy food environments, may still be seen as lacking local relevance and robustness within current planning frameworks (Carmichael et al., 2019; Chang, Horrocks, et al., 2025). Thus, the issue of inconsistencies and different understandings of what is regarded as strong, acceptable evidence, or how convincing data can be collected or calculated, and differences in interpretations of national guidance are all persisting issues. Similarly, economic shocks, viability concerns of private developers, vested interests by large food production companies, emphasis on economic growth, extensive austerity periods and measures continue to influence today's decisions and developments and tend to negatively influence the complex interplay of factors affecting physical and mental health, long-term social-ecological wellbeing and fostering resilient processes and systems (House of Lords, 2024; Sievert et al., 2025).

The interviews highlight the need for integrated and "whole systems" approaches and coordination across multiple sectors and stakeholders, including planning and public health. The supportive, integrating factors identified in the interviews—the role of champions and healthy planning strategies—directly align with the literature that champions multi-actor partnerships and the use of planning tools to drive food environment change (Cabannes & Marocchino, 2018; Hawkes & Halliday, 2017). Planners and other food environment actors in Case Study 1, for example, recognised the synergistic effects of food growing, food intake, and healthy living, and an opportunity for a garden city type approach to their spatial plan and design framework to inform redesigning the area.

A more modern take on garden city-inspired planning could involve space for more food produced locally by individuals and communities in the form of private or community gardens and other urban agriculture projects or small business ventures, for example. This could also tie in with the implementation of recent environmental legislation (the Environment Act 2021), which requires developments in England to have a biodiversity net gain of at least 10%. The potential high biodiversity (in addition to mental and physical health and dietary benefits) of small fruit and vegetable growing ventures is often overlooked in planning discourses and negotiations. Unlike in our cited Case 2, where a kitchen garden and community growing area were lost due to value engineering; now with the duty of biodiversity net gain and adherence to the mitigation hierarchy (where benefits should take place on site rather than being offset), net-zero strategies (carbon savings through lower/no food miles) and climate change adaptation pressures (permeable surfaces, shade, pollinator habitats, etc.), urban agriculture provisions may have a fairer chance of becoming valued assets.

The findings also illuminate the significant barriers that hinder this progress. The disintegrating factors, such as differing professional viewpoints and silo working, reflect the fragmented or inflexible policy governance highlighted in the literature (Duvernoy et al., 2025). The documented struggle to build a shared understanding of food's role and the feeling among planners that health is an "extra burden" aligns with recent studies that point to continuing gaps in skills and a lack of shared understanding between public health and planners (Chang, Carhart, Cook, et al., 2025).

The lack of or difficulties with integrating food policies with food systems and achieving cross-realm governance to advance urban sustainability have recently also been studied by Summerhayes and Baker (2024) in Australia (specifically Queensland, Western Australia, and Victoria), proposing a framework for food policy integration to improve food-related urban planning, highlighting social and environmental (resilience) benefits yet also challenges relating to economic hegemonies. Similarly, the interviews in our case studies provide a human-centred perspective on the structural and financial pressures identified in Section 1. The reluctance to face costly appeals from well-resourced developers vividly illustrates the realities of formal planning processes and the political pressures and short-term thinking that impede change (Chang, 2017). This tension is particularly relevant in the context of recent policy changes, such as the revised National Planning Policy Framework, which aims to empower planners but still operates within a system subject to economic pressures and inconsistent interpretations by planning inspectors. The findings suggest that while the new policy provides leverage, the on-the-ground implementation remains fragile and vulnerable to these systemic pressures.

## 7. Conclusion

Navigating the complex landscape of food policy and healthy urban planning, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighted a gap between intention and action. Narratives from that time reveal several enduring challenges that continue to affect efforts to create healthier food environments today. These include a reliance on voluntary measures, an absence of consistent, long-term leadership, and the restricted power of public health in planning decision-making.

A fundamental issue surrounds the divide between laudable high-level policy goals and their implementation on the ground. Despite a growing focus on integrated, whole systems approaches to food policy, many of the same barriers as highlighted in the interview findings persist today. As this study reveals, this is especially pronounced at the local level, where competing interests—from commercial pressures to short-term fiscal realities and siloed budgets—can undercut long-term policy ambitions.

Newer research and policy discussions have explored these issues further, emphasising the need to move beyond simple policy announcements and address the primary causes of these challenges. One promising avenue is the use of "healthy public" policies and food systems approaches within local government. These frameworks can help embed food considerations more deeply into broader policy conversations, encouraging wider and stronger ownership of the issue(s) across different departments.

In the future, the effectiveness of new initiatives, such as the UK's Food Strategy and updated planning guidance, will depend on their ability to create genuine, enforceable levers for change. Developing effective (integrated and cross-sectoral) governance frameworks is key. These should be realistic and resilient enough to withstand constant organisational shifts and leadership changes. This is important for maintaining knowledge and continuity over time, which in turn facilitates a systematic approach to enhancing food environments.

### Conflict of Interests
The lead author was employed by a charity in one of the case study local authorities as an urban agriculture development worker active in local food policy between 1999–2015. The PhD research and primary data collected informing this article occurred after this time. The authors declare no additional conflict of interests.

### Data Availability
Additional data relating to the PhD research can be found in Barry (2022).

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