

Government organizations should help create healthier, greener food systems, say researchers

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Cranbrook community garden. Credit: University of Surrey

Public bodies can make or break local initiatives like community gardens, pantries, and food partnerships, and they should use that power for good, say researchers from the University of Surrey.

A study of 34 food initiatives in East London reveals how those projects were shaped by their interactions with councils, funders and housing associations. The findings were [published](#) in the journal *Cities*.

"Our study shows that many people want to make their communities healthier through more [sustainable food systems](#). Public bodies control significant budgets that can be used to help or get in the way.

"This is partly because of how much money public bodies can invest in local food systems. To give one example: the Mayor of London has promised to give local boroughs £140m for free primary school lunches this year. An investment of that size could make a significant difference by investing in locally sourced, healthy and [nutritious food](#).

"When it comes to healthy, sustainable food, we urge local and national leaders to put their money where their mouths are," says Professor of Sustainable Food Systems Roberta Sonnino.

In addition to controlling large budgets for school and hospital food, public bodies are often responsible for grants and permissions that much smaller projects rely on.

Surrey's study found that community cafes and pantries allow volunteers to take back control of retail and hospitality, helping communities come together and share knowledge about food.

In one case, a new community garden was unlocked by grant funding and the council's willingness to release a plot of land. The participant said, "It was a very miserable time in my life. But I hobbled to the lift one day, and there was a tiny note: 'Anybody fancy doing guerrilla gardening?'

"And I thought, yeah, that'll be really lovely...money had been made available through Boris Johnson's scheme for the Olympics. They were

just building all these gardens along the route. We took advantage and got a start-up grant."

Dr. Marta Lopez Cifuentes states, "From our interviews, it was clear that [local authorities](#) are uniquely placed to help food initiatives thrive—by providing land for a community garden or funding a community fridge. Yet, sometimes, they leave volunteers to find their own solutions. Local and national leaders should consider how best to help communities take control of their local food economy."

More information: Marta López Cifuentes et al, Food democracy and the right to the city: Re-assembling urban food environments in East-Central London, *Cities* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2024.105319](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105319)

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