

NORTH EAST VICTORIA
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER 2016



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Adequate food

Enough food to meet a person's need for optimal growth, development and health throughout life and contribute to physical vitality, mental health and social wellbeing.

Food access

Having sufficient access to physical and economic resources to obtain appropriate food for a nutritious diet. Resources include physical ability, money, transport opportunities and geographical location of food outlets.

Food availability

Availability of sufficient quantities of nutritious food on a regular basis, similar to food supply.

Food insecurity

Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally, safe foods or the ability to acquire personally acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.¹

Food literacy

An individual's food knowledge and skills. The awareness of healthy eating, seasonal availability, where to access healthy food choices, competence in preparing healthy foods, and the impacts different food choices have on individual and family health, the environment and society generally.

Food security

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.²

Food system

The food system includes everything from farming, food processing, transportation and the selling of food, through to how we buy, enjoy and dispose food. We all have an influence on the food system through what we choose to eat and where we obtain it from. The food system also influences the way that we eat through the types of food that is available to us, their cost and the way food is marketed.

Nutritious food

Refers to a wide variety of food in accordance with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, which is balanced against the body's requirements for growth, metabolism and physical activity across the life stages and is consumed regularly and consistently; without periods of over-consumption or severe restriction.³

Right to food

The right to food is a basic human right recognised under international law. It describes the right to feed oneself with dignity, either by producing food or buying it.⁴

The region

The Region referred to in this discussion paper refers to the LGAs in the catchment: Alpine, Indigo, Towong, Wodonga, and Wangaratta.



2.1 Overview

How we grow, process, distribute, consume and dispose food are all part of our food system. These processes affect food accessibility, our environment, the local economy and our health. In North East Victoria a wide diversity of fresh produce is grown locally and a variety of nutritious and culturally appropriate food is generally available to our communities. Our region also boasts a strong food tourism sector.

Despite these strengths, there are significant challenges affecting on the environment, the economy and the health and wellbeing of our communities including:

- Increasing numbers of people accessing emergency food relief
- High and increasing rates of overweight and obesity
- Pressures on agricultural production such as reduced profitability, climate variability, shifting demographics and regulation

Communities around the world are recognising that coordinated action is required to address these challenges. The North East Victoria Food Policy Working Group developed this discussion paper to advance the conversation about what local government can do to ensure people have access to healthy, sustainable and culturally appropriate food, now and always.

This paper discusses how the development of local government food policy and strategy can strengthen communities in the areas of:

- Health
- Local economy - agriculture and tourism
- Environment
- Food security
- Food safety
- Culture and community

Recent forums demonstrate that our community members feel strongly about strengthening our region's food system.

Local governments are well placed to take action.

Health promotion staff across our region are focussed on the priority area of healthy eating.

This is a call to action for Alpine, Indigo, Wangaratta, Wodonga and Towong Councils to lead the way and develop and implement food policy and strategy to build on this momentum.



2.2 Defining the food system

The food system includes everything from farming, food processing, transportation and the selling of food, through to how we buy, enjoy and dispose of food.

We all influence the food system through what we choose to eat and where we obtain it. The food system also influences the way that we eat through the types of food that are available to us, their cost and the way food is marketed. The following diagram is adapted from Nourish organisation and highlights the complexity of the food system.

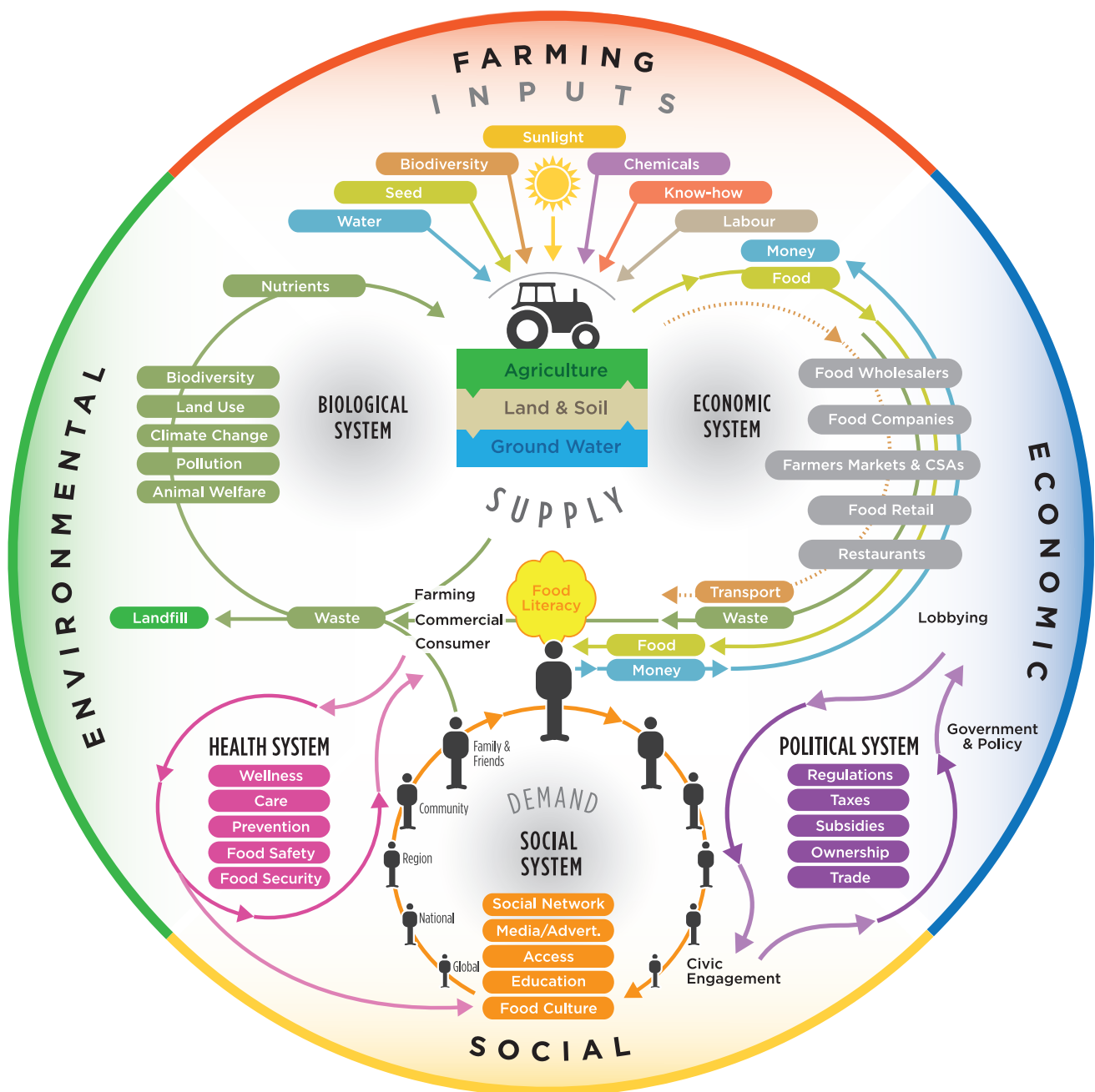


Image adapted with thanks from the *Nourish* Food System Map | nourishlife.org

A food policy or strategy is a framework to guide understanding and action around how food is produced, distributed, consumed and disposed. These fundamental components of a food system can significantly impact on health outcomes, the local economy, the environment and agriculture.

Food policy and strategy aims to:

- Provide a framework for local government that guides action to support and strengthen local food systems
- Foster a thriving, equitable, healthy and sustainable food system
- Support the adoption of sustainable farming practices and food production enterprises
- Improve the availability and accessibility of nutritious and culturally appropriate food for everyone
- Celebrate the diversity of local food production and the economic opportunities of further developing the sector

Many local governments across Australia currently have food policies in place. A key aim of developing food policy for the region is to identify initiatives that will enable the region to seize the opportunities while addressing the challenges.

Businesses, community organisations, individuals and all levels of government have a part to play in creating a thriving, equitable, healthy and sustainable food system. Local government is in a unique position to play a key leadership role in creating change through coordinating action at the local level. As a key influencer, Council understands the local context, has access to a range of local networks, and works closely with other levels of government and the community.

Local governments across Australia and internationally have recognised that they play an important role in leading efforts to strengthen the local food system. Areas where local government can make an effective local contribution include:

- **Leadership and advocacy** - One of Council's greatest strengths is their capacity to bring community together to address issues of concern. Council has strong partnerships with community organisations, local businesses and residents. Council is well placed to support whole of community responses to local issues. Local Council is also legislated to develop a Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, where strategies to address food insecurity and healthy eating can be embedded.
- **Community engagement** - Council works closely with the community and other key stakeholders to address issues that affect the community by raising awareness through forums, running campaigns and supporting programs.
- **Regulation** - Council's regulatory role ensures the safety and wellbeing of community members through the enforcement of local laws or assessment and approval processes. For example, this can include food safety inspections at local food businesses.
- **Land use planning** - Council's strategic and statutory land use planning role ensures spaces are designed with health and social impacts taken into consideration. For example, in growth areas, council can ensure that there is access to supermarkets through the design of public transport routes.
- **Workforce and organisational development** - Councils can look internally to identify ways to strengthen the food system. This can include adopting a healthy catering policy or promoting the benefits of healthy eating to all staff.

The following sections explore the current food system challenges and opportunities in the region that could be addressed by local government food policy.

5.1 Health

Health and wellbeing is intimately linked to what we eat. Unhealthy eating is the single biggest contributor to poor population health.⁵ Overweight and obesity are linked to a range of chronic diseases, including high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and some cancers.⁶

63% of Australian adults and 26% of children are overweight or obese.

Overweight and obesity is increasing.

Overweight and obesity is more common in outer regional and remote areas and in areas with lower socioeconomic status.⁷

Around a third of the burden of disease experienced by the Australian population could be prevented by reducing the exposure to modifiable risk factors. The risk factors causing the most burden are tobacco use, high body mass, alcohol use, physical inactivity and high blood pressure.⁸

Healthy food choice is influenced by many factors, including income, food availability, ease of access, food preparation and food marketing.

Food education and awareness is increasing in many schools. A key challenge is to improve the region's food supply so that 'the healthy choice is the easy choice'. Another key challenge is to ensure that the good food produced locally can be better distributed and available locally. The development of local food policy provides an opportunity to create an action plan to achieve these goals.

TABLE 1: LOCAL HEALTH STATISTICS 2011-2012⁹

	% of population who met vegetable intake requirements (5 serves per day)	% of population who met fruit intake requirements (2 serves per day)	% of males (m) and females (f) overweight or obese	
			M	F
Alpine	8.2	20.6	56.9	46.2
Indigo	12.5	28.3	55.4	43.2
Towong	11.6	35.3	67.2	46.3
Wangaratta	8.4	28.3	61.3	40.4
Wodonga	14	27.2	68.4	51.1
State average	7.1	28	58.5	42.1

5.1 Health continued

TABLE 2: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT HEALTH

Local government role	Example strategies
Leadership and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt healthy food procurement policy • Ensure healthy food choices in council led home and community care services and children's services
Community engagement	<p>Work with community organisations to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage community gardens and produce swaps • Provide tailored community programs that focus on shopping, storing, planning and preparation of healthy meals
Land use planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When planning new growth areas ensure food deserts are avoided • Consider ratio of essential vs non-essential food outlets
Workforce and organisational development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt healthy catering policy to ensure healthy, local foods are provided at council events and facilities. For example Wodonga Council adopted a Healthy Catering Directive to ensure that healthy choices are available to staff and community members attending council meetings, functions, services and events



Photograph by J Kronborg

5.2 Local economy - agriculture & tourism

Farming, food processing and agri-tourism are established and important sectors of the North East Victoria regional economy.

32% of the land area is used for agricultural production in North East Victoria, contributing around \$380 million annually to the region's economy.¹⁰ On farm activity accounts for 15% of the total Upper, Central and Lower Hume sub-region workforce.¹¹

North East Victoria produces a significant variety of foods, primarily dairy, beef, grain and horticultural crops (grapes, apples, berries, nuts, olives), in addition to a diversity of smaller enterprises producing honey, eggs, vegetables and boutique crops such as oil pumpkin seeds, saffron and capers that are finding important niches. New crops such as quinoa, amaranth and teff are being explored locally with significant potential.

North East Victoria has major food processing and distribution centres that provide employment for many. Tourism North East sees food, wine and beer tourism as a key strength and food tourism is a well-established segment of Tourism North East's strategy. Regional Development Victoria identifies a strategic imperative for a strong agri-tourism sector.

Agricultural production in North East Victoria is vulnerable to a range of pressures:¹²

- Increasing costs of production due to global increases in the cost of fuel and fertilisers, resulting in decreased profitability.
- Increased frequency of extreme weather events and shifts in rainfall patterns and temperatures due to global climate change. Climate change is likely to make our food system in South-Eastern Australia less resilient and may reduce the amount of food that farmers are able to produce.¹³
- Decreasing water availability.
- Change in land use from agricultural to 'lifestyle' properties, due to an aging farm workforce, shifting demographics and population growth. Between 2001 and 2006 population growth in the region was among the highest of all regions in Victoria.
- The majority of farms in Australia are relatively small, 55% have an estimated value of agricultural operations of less than \$100,000.¹⁴ Small farms are disappearing as these farmers cannot compete within the commodity-driven agricultural paradigm, centred on supermarket retailing and exports.¹⁵
- Limited food processing options available locally for smaller producers.
- All these factors are contributing to declining interest by young people to pursue careers in agriculture; In the 5 years to November 2015, employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing in Australia fell by 11.3% (38,800 people), the second-largest decline in any industry.¹⁶

TABLE 3: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Local government role	Example strategies
Leadership and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support initiatives to build the regional food economy. For example Rural City of Wangaratta recently funded a food hub feasibility study Support promotion of North East Victoria as a premium agri-tourism destination Incorporate infrastructure for farmers markets into outdoor spaces Planning for productive regions and food growing
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support capacity-building opportunities for producers and food businesses Develop a regional calendar of agribusiness events Collaborate with other organisations to encourage and support young people and new immigrants to pursue careers in agriculture. For example investigate ways to support access to land for farming
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support compliance with government regulations around food production and manufacturing Appropriate signage regulation to support farm gate sales



5.3 Environment

In spite of the wide diversity of food grown in North East Victoria, there remains a disconnection between what grows here and what is eaten. Food typically travels long distances to reach the consumer. It is estimated the total distance travelled by 29 common food in a typical weekly shopping basket in Australia is over 70,000 km.¹⁹

The way that we produce, distribute, consume and dispose food can have damaging effects on the environment.²⁰ Potential impacts of food production and distribution include loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, soil health decline, greenhouse gas emissions, spread of pest plants and animals, and chemical residues. In addition, a large proportion of our food reaches the consumer in plastic and cardboard packaging.

Food waste has been identified as an issue for many local governments. Around a third of food is wasted in the global food system,²¹ and around 36% of rubbish from the typical Victorian household is food waste.²² This food waste generates greenhouse gas emissions as it decomposes in landfill.²³

TABLE 4: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT THE ENVIRONMENT

Local government role	Example strategies
Leadership and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and support strategies to reduce food waste, such as the Halve Waste initiative implemented in Indigo Shire and City of Wodonga • Support organisations that reclaim and redistribute food waste such as Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare • Encourage awareness of the benefits of consuming local, seasonal and sustainably produced foods
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support initiatives and opportunities for producers to improve their land management practices • Support initiatives to build the local food economy
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of the relevant legislative and planning scheme regulations to protect biodiversity, land and water resources
Workforce and organisational development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement appropriate food waste and recyclable disposal systems in the workplace

5.4 Food Security

There is an abundance of food in the region and most people in the region have regular access to enough safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food to meet their dietary needs.

Some people in the North East however experience food insecurity. Determinants affecting people's level of food security include income, how far they live from food outlets, availability of transport to food outlets and food literacy.

People most vulnerable to food insecurity are those on low incomes, frail and aged people, newly arrived immigrants and refugees, indigenous Australians, single parent families, homeless people and people with disabilities.²⁴ The experience of local emergency food relief providers tells us that the demand for emergency food relief is increasing. Local data tells us that for most local government areas in our region, food insecurity is higher than the state average.

There is a strong community-based effort in our region highlighting and addressing food insecurity. Albury Wodonga Regional Food Share (AWRFS) coordinates the collection and redistribution of rescued food to 90 welfare agencies, 21 schools and 8 neighbourhood centres in Albury Wodonga and surrounding regions. AWRFS stress that solutions to food insecurity need to address underlying causes and should not be limited to providing emergency food assistance. Federal government funding for many of these emergency relief organisations has become less reliable adding the difficulties of providing consistent service.

While local government may have limited power to address all the determinants of food security there are opportunities to identify solutions that deliver both affordable prices for consumers and fair prices for farmers.

TABLE 5: LOCAL FOOD INSECURITY²⁵

% OF POPULATION WHO RAN OUT OF FOOD IN THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS & COULD NOT AFFORD TO BUY MORE					
Alpine	5.1%	Towong	5%	Wodonga	6.7%
Indigo	6%	Wangaratta	3.8%	State average	4.6%

TABLE 6: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT FOOD SECURITY

Local government role	Example strategies
Leadership and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support social enterprises that aim to increase access to affordable, healthy food Develop strategies to support organisations that reclaim and redistribute food waste such as Albury Wodonga Regional FoodShare
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assist communities to develop their own solutions to increase access to affordable, healthy food Encourage community gardens, food markets, mobile fresh food outlets, food hubs and swaps
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating edible landscapes into new developments. For example edible nature strips, roof top gardens.
Land use planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure land use and design considers walking, cycling and public transport to essential food outlets Adopt food sensitive planning and urban design²⁶ principles

Food safety is essential to our health and important for public trust in the food system.

We expect that the food we buy is wholesome and safe to eat.

The provisions of the Food Act 1984 require councils to ensure the safety of food and minimise risk to the community.

As our food system has become more complex, new food safety challenges have emerged related to new ways of producing, preparing, storing and selling foods.²⁷ Local councils have responded to these evolving food safety challenges, including those related to donated foods, an increasing variety of community food events and the use of domestic kitchens for food production.

In the past, most commercial food production was done in kitchens specifically fitted out for that purpose. There is now a trend towards commercial food production in other facilities like public halls, registered domestic kitchens and temporary pop up sites. This increases access to healthy food, while promoting a vibrant food culture. This poses a challenge for local government balancing food safety regulation while championing the best food system outcomes.

Food producers and businesses may require assistance or training to help them take advantage of the opportunities offered by new local markets while meeting food regulation.

TABLE 7: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT FOOD SAFETY

Local government role	Example strategies
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement food safety education • Assist food producers and retailers to navigate food regulation
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require that council-owned facilities have registered commercial kitchens
Workforce and organisational development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the importance of food safety in healthy eating policy

5.6 Culture and community

Food plays a role in the way that we interact and express ourselves within families and communities. Communities and regions traditionally develop distinct ‘food cultures’.

Food cultures are influenced by many factors, including the marketing and availability of convenience foods and ‘fast foods’, as well as a broad range of social circumstances, including cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Food provides a bridge between cultures. Food outlets and restaurants are often means through which immigrants establish themselves.

TABLE 8: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD POLICY AND STRATEGY TO SUPPORT CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Local government role	Example strategies
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan initiatives to encourage food production within migrant communities. For example City of Wodonga supported establishment of a community garden led by the local Bhutanese community• Foster a robust local food culture supportive of regional food producers
Leadership and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop strategies for increasing access to culturally appropriate foods• Increase employment and training opportunities, such as training kitchens• Encourage shared celebrations of food that bring people together, strengthen social inclusion and build connected communities

It is recognised that local governments in the region already acknowledge the importance of food and are implementing a range of initiatives related to improving food security and strengthening the region's food and agricultural systems.

Communities across the region are mobilised and ready to provide input to food policy and strategy development, with local food networks established in Wodonga and Wangaratta that bring together those who work, volunteer or take an interest in the food system and its issues.

The North East Victoria Food Policy Working Group invites the Local Governments in our region to develop and implement food policy and strategy tailored to their local context and issues.

Photographs by J Kronborg



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