

# Review of Measures Designed to Support London's Local and Neighbourhood Shops – Response from London Food Link November 2009

## About London Food Link

London Food Link (LFL) runs a network of organisations and individuals who want to make London's food system more sustainable. Membership includes farmers, food writers, caterers and community food projects. The specific aims of LFL are to increase the availability of sustainable food in London, tackle the barriers preventing access to healthy and sustainable food for Londoners and to protect and celebrate London's diverse food culture. LFL is part of Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming. This response is submitted following a consultation with colleagues and members of the London Food Link and represents the general, rather than detailed views of members of that network. LFL has already submitted an initial response to the London Plan, and to commercial growing around London which can be found at [http://www.sustainweb.org/localactiononfood/food\\_and\\_planning/](http://www.sustainweb.org/localactiononfood/food_and_planning/)

## Food, Planning and Health

Food, like water, shelter and air, is essential for human existence. London is a city of over 6 million and remarkably little attention is played to virtually the only activity that all Londoners do every day. Spatial planning affects where food is physically available for us to buy and can also influence the type of retail outlet that sells us our food. This in turn will affect what we eat, how we eat it and our long-term physical and mental well-being.

LFL is writing a response to this review because as expressed in the current consultation on a strategy to address health inequalities in London, not all Londoners are able to access a healthy and affordable source of food<sup>1</sup>. This is a complex problem influenced by many factors and research has shown that accessibility to a healthy diet may be influenced by the socio-economic status of the person, by the location of shops, whether the food is affordable and good quality and personal choice. The general consensus is that poorer people are less likely to eat as well as richer people<sup>2</sup>, people on lower incomes might end up paying more than the better-off for healthier food<sup>3</sup> and that in areas of high deprivation there is more likely to be diet-related ill-health. Moreover The Commission on Social Determinants of Health (WHO) recognises that our environments must be better designed to encourage healthy eating.<sup>4</sup> LFL believes that neighbourhood shops are essential and can help promote not only healthier eating, but healthier places to live in and should be promoted and encouraged by planning policy for the following reasons:

- Food retail outlets in neighbourhood shopping centres are an important access point for many Londoners especially the elderly, socially isolated, and people who find it difficult to use transport to go out of their area for shopping
- Neighbourhood shops can offer price competition, opportunities for alternative supply chains and a greater variety of foods for people who cook culturally different foods.

<sup>1</sup> The London Health Inequalities Strategy; Draft for Public Consultation (August 2009), Greater London Authority <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/priorities/health/docs/health-inequalities-strategy-draft-consult.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The London Health Inequalities Strategy; Draft for Public Consultation (August 2009), Greater London Authority <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/priorities/health/docs/health-inequalities-strategy-draft-consult.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> "Inequalities in food and nutrition challenging "lifestyles"" (Dowler, Caraher, and Lincoln) in Challenging Health Inequalities: from Acheson to Choosing Health (Dowler & Spencer) (2007), Policy Press [http://books.google.com/books?id=IpangCPsvoAC&pg=PA127&lpg=PA127&dq=liz+dowler+et+al+2001&source=bl&ots=Bob9EwKOV\\_&sig=u9yWrPBjtZSe\\_uflx2UrYyfSjAQ&hl=en&ei=ZUbwSqHOLomNjAeI9fi7CA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=IpangCPsvoAC&pg=PA127&lpg=PA127&dq=liz+dowler+et+al+2001&source=bl&ots=Bob9EwKOV_&sig=u9yWrPBjtZSe_uflx2UrYyfSjAQ&hl=en&ei=ZUbwSqHOLomNjAeI9fi7CA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false)

<sup>4</sup> Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health, World Health Organization, 2008 [http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/closethegap\\_how/en/index1.html](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/closethegap_how/en/index1.html)

- Local shops may be more practical for Londoners who live on their own and find it difficult to carry large amounts of shopping in one shopping trip.
- In some areas neighbourhood shops are the most realistic way of buying food as there are no supermarkets nearby therefore maintaining and supporting them is all-important.

The London Food Link's response to the Review questions follow.

## **1) What pressures do small shops and neighbourhood and local shopping centres face e.g. threats to economic viability, changes in shopping patterns, competition?**

Small shops and neighbourhood centres can be a vital source of food shopping for many people. The key pressures facing smaller, neighbourhood shops are that they have to compete with bigger shops or supermarkets that have economies of scale, therefore sometimes cheaper prices, or a perceived wider range of items for sale. The pattern of out-of-community centre supermarkets that has emerged over recent years means that shops in community centres tend to be convenience or "top-up" shops selling added value items such as packaged food for customers to "add-to" the weekly shop they do elsewhere. They are often limited in the range that they offer because of competition with the supermarkets. Distance from supermarkets than becomes a disadvantage for Londoners particularly around accessing fresh, healthy food. There also some research that indicates that supermarkets have tended to choose the most profitable sites and therefore areas where there are poorer people are disproportionately worse off for food retail.<sup>5</sup> To add to this, smaller retailers have a misperception that fresh fruit and vegetables are difficult to sell therefore limiting choice even further. This then has a knock-on effect that customers will have to shop elsewhere especially to buy fresh fruit and vegetables and shopping choices become more and more restricted. There is an added complication with the sale of fruit and vegetables because they are perishable and have a limited shelf life so more of a risk to stock if their purchasing is not assured.

*A recent study in Tower Hamlets found that 76 per cent of households are within a 10 minute walk of a supermarket, retail market or greengrocers, but 97 per cent are within a 10 minutes walk of a fast food outlet. The researchers also found that many of the borough's shops do not sell the range of fresh fruit and vegetables necessary for a healthy diet<sup>6</sup>.*

## **2) What are the advantages of local centres that provide convenient access to goods and services that are needed on a day-to-day basis?**

Local centres that include an affordable range of culturally appropriate fruit and vegetables can provide a range of social, economic and environmental advantages to local areas. For example they can provide for people who are elderly, or disabled, and have more limited transport options and those for whom buying food nearer to their home is very important. They may stay open later providing access to working and non-working people. They also have a role as a community hub as a family-based businesses known to local people. If there are more people using a street or shopping parade there may be more people around and this could make it a safer environment. Smaller shops, street markets and food stalls can also be a route for more alternative supply chains e.g. more local producers. They may also sell culturally specific food to suit local populations because the retailer

<sup>5</sup> "Inequalities in food and nutrition challenging "lifestyles"" (Dowler, Caraher, and Lincoln) in Challenging Health Inequalities: from Acheson to Choosing Health (Dowler & Spencer) (2007), Policy Press

<sup>6</sup> The London Health Inequalities Strategy; Draft for public Consultation (August 2009), Greater London Authority <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/priorities/health/health-strategy.jsp>

has more freedom to choose the supplier. Independently owned shops can stimulate the local economy, one example although outside London demonstrates that independent shops created more community cohesion, economic vibrancy and fresh items such as fruit and vegetables<sup>7</sup>. There is some emerging evidence that prices for fruit and vegetables do not necessarily cost less in supermarkets; Sustain undertook research looking at prices for fruit and vegetables supplied by farms near London, a community food project and supermarket. Generally the supermarket prices compared overwhelmingly badly both with respect to the community food project who bought their produce from a wholesale market, and to the price direct from the farm<sup>8</sup>.

### **3. How effective the planning system is in supporting small shops in local high street and where has it failed in recent years?**

The two most recent planning documents that strongly relate to the high street are PPS 6 on town centres and PS4 on Planning for Prosperous Economies. They both note the importance of the high street and town centres, as opposed to out-of-town centres as has been previously more supported by planning policy. We support these moves and think they have been produced with the acknowledgment by central government of the importance of having a thriving retail market local to where people live. It is important to note that the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables comes with its own challenges (as noted above) and needs to be considered as a type of outlet in its own right in order to have the desired impact of creating a wide range of affordable, culturally appropriate fresh food for sale and separate planning guidance should be included for these types of retailer.

To illustrate this point further policy 3A.18 of the existing London Plan mentions specifically convenience shopping, banking facilities and post offices however we are concerned that the planning Class Use Order for convenience shopping does not necessarily mean whether there is fresh food being sold at that outlet and there is no way for planners to either see whether there are sufficient food retailers, or to stipulate more of them are needed from the current planning system. We believe that planners can find solutions to this problem, for example to creating a separate Use Class Order for fruit and vegetable outlets to ensure there is sufficient provision in their area.

### **4. What are London local authorities doing to support small shops and neighbourhood and local shopping centres through the planning system, Development Plan Documents, or proposals under the Sustainable Communities Act?**

A few councils including Hackney and Islington have tried to use ensure a good spread of retail in their unitary development plans and have designated some types of shops with “key local service” or “essential service” status which restricts change of use. Some councils such as Camden and Lewisham also stipulate that there should be neighbourhood parades within walking distance or accessible at a point of 500 metres anywhere in the borough<sup>9</sup>. Most however do not stipulate “food outlet” as an essential service, or ensure that they are considered as essential for inclusion in new build housing developments.

In the final consultation version of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Core strategy, there are references to the importance of improving a healthy diet for the borough’s population however a clearer direction from the London Plan would send out strong messages of support for other

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<sup>7</sup> The Real Choice, CPRE (2006) [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> Research conducted by Sustain for Community Food Enterprise. Prices collected for 7 weeks in April to June 2008. Contact [Suzanne@sustainweb.org](mailto:Suzanne@sustainweb.org) for more information.

<sup>9</sup> How London’s Planners can improve access to healthy and affordable food (2004) Sustain and The Food Commission [http://www.sustainweb.org/londonfoodlink/food\\_and\\_planning/](http://www.sustainweb.org/londonfoodlink/food_and_planning/)

boroughs to do similar things and to guide them in how to tackle this issue from a London-wide perspective. Local authorities and the GLA have recognised the importance of increasing fresh fruit and vegetable outlets. For example the Buywell Retail project is working with 17 independent small retailers across London in order to increase the amount and quality of affordable fruit and vegetables in their stores. This project is being supported by the London Food Board, and with support of the local authorities in the participating areas<sup>10</sup>. The Department of Health via the Change4Life programme is also running a similar programme with retailers across the country which has seen the following effect:

“Change4Life corner shops have been really successful in the North East with an average increase of 40 per cent in sales of fresh fruit and vegetables from the stores.”<sup>11</sup>.

We believe that these initiatives go some way in recognising and tackling the problems around fresh fruit and vegetable access, but the planning system can also facilitate and drive long-term change.

## **6. How can the Mayor’s commitment to help protect the high street best be implemented through London Plan and other policies?**

## **7. What outstanding actions and opportunities are in order to support and to help small independent retailers in London and facilitate ongoing support?**

The London Plan and other policies can help protect and promote high street food retail in many ways including:

- Providing clear guidance in the London Plan that fresh, affordable and culturally appropriate fruit and vegetables need to be accessible for Londoners in a range of retail outlets including supermarkets, markets and shops. Fruit and vegetables are an essential part of a healthy diet and because of some of the reasons outlined above, not all Londoners are able to buy healthy food.
- Encouraging borough level core strategies to consider fruit and vegetable retail in their Local Development Framework documents.
- Supporting a new Class Use Order for fruit and vegetable retail outlet.
- Encouraging unoccupied business premises to be used for temporary use food outlets e.g. weekly fruit and vegetables stalls
- Providing business support and advice to retailers who wish to sell more fruit and vegetables (e.g. Buywell project)
- Restricting the concentration of fast food takeaways near schools, or working with food businesses to sell healthier options e.g. London Borough Barking and Dagenham Supplementary Planning Document or London Borough of Tower Hamlets Core Strategy.
- Encourage mixed use development
- Support from the local police for businesses that are affected by crime or anti-social behaviour.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.sustainweb.org/buywell/buywell\\_shops/](http://www.sustainweb.org/buywell/buywell_shops/)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH\\_103380](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH_103380)