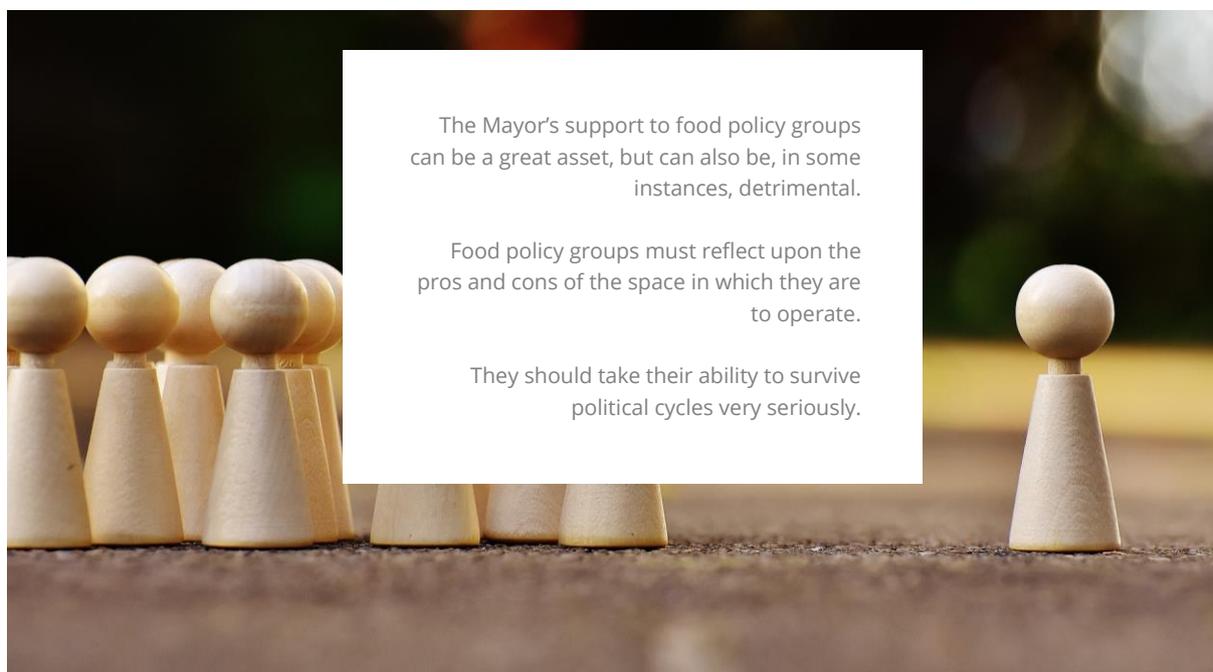


# The subtle relationship between food policy councils and Mayors



When local food policy groups come together, they seek to engage in a conversation with their local government. Obtaining political support is key to achieving their objectives. Researchers from City, University of London and the University of Hertfordshire (United Kingdom) looked into the effect of a Mayor's political support on a local food policy groups (such as 'food policy councils' and 'food partnerships'). They showed that **the Mayor's support can be a great asset, but can also be, in some instances, detrimental**. Their work will help local food policy groups find the right way to work with local elected representatives.

## When political support opens doors

The researchers compared the cases of London and Bristol between 2012 and 2014. These two English cities are well known for both their strong civil society involvement in food issues, and their high-profile food policy groups. They are good examples of a fruitful engagement between civil society and elected representatives.

Indeed, the researchers showed that the Mayors' support for their respective local food policy councils (the [London Food Board](#) and the [Bristol Food Policy Council](#)) was a great help for advancing the food agenda.

**First, Mayoral support helped to integrate sustainable food-related objectives within policy areas that are under the Mayor's direct control.** These areas will vary from city to city (and from country to country), depending on the powers held by the Mayor. In both cities, it made it easier to work across political silos in the local administration, to channel public funds from other departments to food issues and, more

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generally, to explore synergies between political agendas. For instance, in London, the [Food Save](#) project received funding from the [London Waste and Recycling Board](#).

**Second, Mayoral support provided status and legitimacy to food issues.** As one interviewee in London put it, *“if you’ve got the approval of the Mayor then the world’s your oyster because you’ve got the voice”*. This was seen to open doors and help reach actors that food activists otherwise found difficult to mobilise. For instance, in Bristol the Mayor’s support made it possible to convene businesses to talk about food waste. The London Food Board, for its part, was convened by the Mayor’s food advisor, giving its messages considerable credence.

### **Beware of strings attached**

Getting support from the Mayor is generally positive, but it can also come with some downsides that all food policy groups should be aware of.

The main risk is being too closely associated with one political personality. Indeed, this can be dangerous if the majority changes at the next election, as the next leader may want to distance themselves from their predecessors. Therefore, Jess Halliday, who carried out this research as part of her PhD (and now works for the [RUAF Global Partnership](#)), insists that **food policy councils should take their ability to survive political cycles very seriously.**

Political differences within local government structures can also be an issue. In London, for instance, boroughs (local governments within the city) that were led by a different political party to that of the Mayor may have been less willing to cooperate over food. And the Mayor’s changing political priorities changing over the course of the electoral term made it necessary to reframe food objectives in line with the new agenda. For instance, after the 2011 riots, youth opportunities and training became a top priority in London, whereas the Implementation Plan of the London Food Strategy had highlighted the environment

### **Keeping the right distance**

The space in which local food policy groups exist differs from one place to another. The Bristol Food Policy Council is independent, though linked with the city council (its secretariat was provided by the city council). In London, the Food Team sits within City Hall and hosts the London Food Board. In another city, or another country, it will be different.

Jess Halliday stresses that the analysis of the English experience can be useful for actors in other cities that are determining their overall strategy. Indeed, **they must reflect upon the pros and cons of the space in which the food policy group is to operate. What are the benefits of their institutional home? What are the drawbacks? How can they work around these?**

For instance, if being closely associated with the Mayor comes with strings attached, how can some projects or analysis be placed in the hand of civil society? In London, for instance, [the evaluation of local boroughs’ action on food](#) was initially not published by the London Food Board, but by one of its member organisations.

This way, food policy groups can benefit from a Mayor’s support, but also keep the right distance.

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