



# ***“Let’s Talk About Food”***

Which Suburbs Have the Best Access to Affordable, Healthy Food in Illawarra and Shoalhaven?

RESILIENT & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH GROUP | UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

January 2025 | Prepared by Dr Katherine Kent, Professor Karen Charlton and Alemayehu Gebremariam in collaboration with Kelly Andrews and Grace Potter from Healthy Cities Illawarra





### SUMMARY

The "Let's Talk About Food" survey, conducted with over 700 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, explored residents' thoughts on food availability, affordability, and accessibility in their communities.

Key findings reveal that while most residents feel they can access healthy food shops, affordability remains a major concern. There is also strong dissatisfaction with the low availability of farmers markets and locally grown food, as well as a perceived overabundance of fast food and unhealthy food advertising. Community food initiatives, such as community gardens and food assistance programs, are seen as insufficient.

Some differences between Wollongong, Shellharbour, Kiama and Shoalhaven regions existed.

- **Wollongong:** High accessibility to healthy food and culturally diverse options, but food costs remain a concern, with low satisfaction in access to local produce.
- **Shellharbour:** Good access to healthy food but concerns about limited local produce and high fast-food presence.
- **Shoalhaven:** Easy access to healthy food from home and workplaces, yet concerns exist around food affordability and cultural diversity.
- **Kiama:** Strong satisfaction with local produce and minimal fast-food concerns, but concerns around food affordability and limited cultural food variety exist.

This report proposes recommendations to improve the availability, affordability, and accessibility of local food options, strengthen food security, and support healthier food environments in the region.

### THE LET'S TALK ABOUT FOOD SURVEY

The community food environment in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions matters because it influences the dietary choices and overall health of its residents. Easy access to shops and restaurants that offer affordable and healthy food options encourages better eating habits, which can prevent chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Despite this:

- A study by the [Resilient and Sustainable Food System Research Group](#) showed that of the [1,924 food outlets](#) across the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions, nearly half (44%) are classified as unhealthy (fast-food outlets and pubs), about a third (41%) as less healthy (cafes and restaurants), and only a small portion (15%) as healthy (supermarkets, greengrocers, and butchers).
- [Another study showed](#) there has been significant increase in the cost of both healthy (6%) and less healthy foods (8%) in the shops between 2022 and 2024.

This report presents an analysis of the "Let's Talk About Food" survey that engaged over 700 households in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions to explore their views and experiences with their community food environment. We asked about their access to healthy food options, the affordability of food in their neighbourhoods, and their satisfaction with the variety of food outlets available. The survey also explored how easy it is for residents to reach these outlets from their homes and workplaces.



## Results of the “Let’s Talk About Food” Survey

### ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS

As shown in Figure 1, most residents feel they can easily access healthy food from their homes (76%), especially in Wollongong (78%) and Shellharbour (75%). However, workplace access is lower (53% overall), and only 67% believe there are enough healthy food shops in their neighbourhoods. Less than half of people agree that there are enough cafes and restaurants with healthy food in their region (46%). There are notable differences between regions. For example:

- A higher proportion of residents in Wollongong (70%) and Shellharbour (65%) report having enough healthy food shops nearby, compared to Shoalhaven (53%) and Kiama (50%).
- More residents in Wollongong (78%) and Shellharbour (75%) agree that it is easy to get to healthy food shops from home, compared to those in Shoalhaven (66%) and Kiama (67%).
- Wollongong has the highest proportion of residents (54%) who agree that it is easy to access healthy food shops from work, which is higher than in Shoalhaven (53%), Shellharbour (47%), and Kiama (40%).

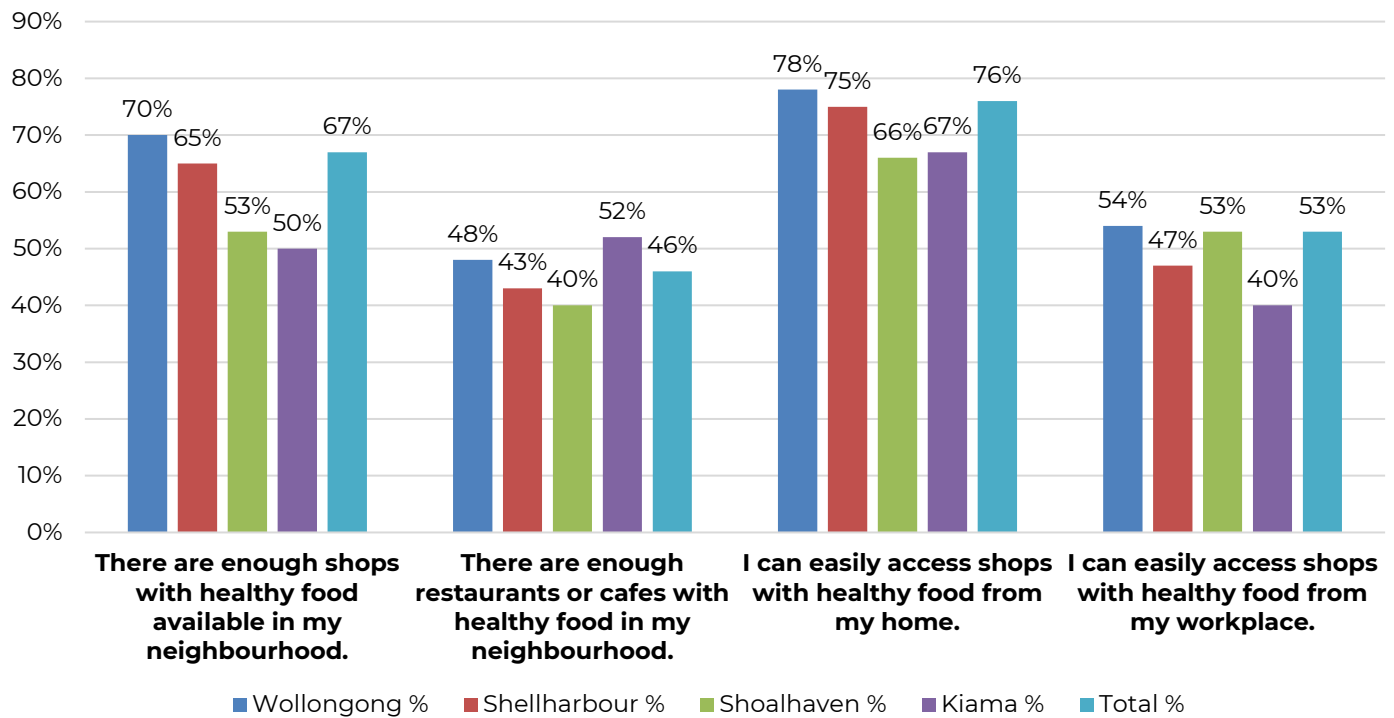


FIGURE 1 – Healthy food access

### AFFORDABILITY OF FOOD

Only 38% of respondents agreed there are enough affordable food options in their neighbourhood, suggesting that most people are struggling with food costs (Figure 2).

- Wollongong (41.4%) and Shellharbour (38.7%) had the highest agreement that food is affordable, while Shoalhaven (26.7%) and Kiama (21.4%) had the lowest proportions of people agreeing that food is affordable.

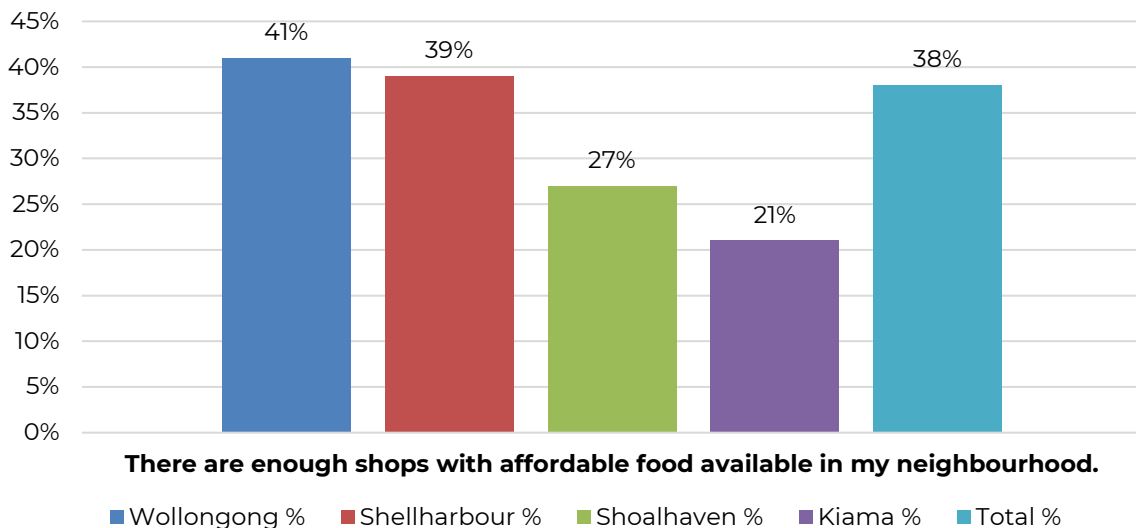


FIGURE 2 – Affordability of Food

### FOOD ENVIRONMENT CONCERNS

Overall, a majority of respondents believe that there are too many fast-food restaurants (55%) and that food advertising mainly promotes unhealthy options (61%; Figure 3).

- Shellharbour (60%) and Wollongong (58%) report the highest agreement that their neighbourhoods have too many fast-food outlets, while Shoalhaven is slightly lower (46%). Kiama stands out with a much lower perception of fast-food saturation at just 18%.
- Shellharbour (71%) had the highest agreement that food advertising promotes unhealthy options, followed by Shoalhaven (61%) and Wollongong (61%). Kiama again had the lowest agreement at 39%, indicating a comparatively lower concern about unhealthy food promotion.

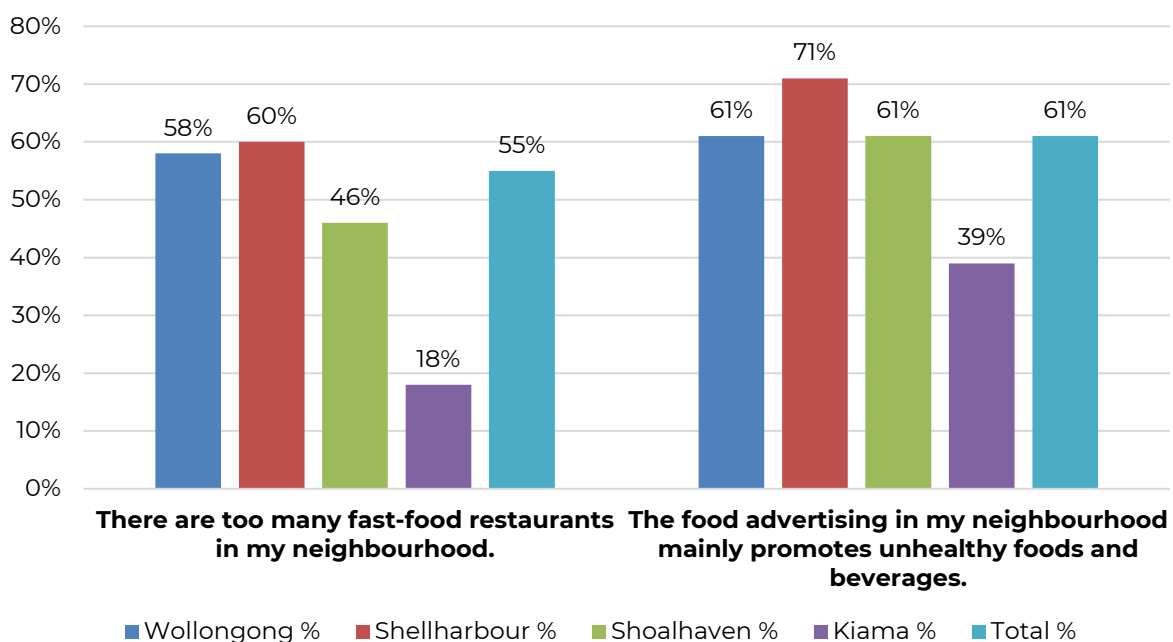


FIGURE 3 – Food environment concerns



### AVAILABILITY OF LOCAL AND COMMUNITY FOOD RESOURCES

Overall, agreement with the availability of local and community food resources is low, suggesting significant gaps in access to locally grown produce, community-based food initiatives, and culturally diverse food options. Additionally, few respondents believe there are sufficient food assistance programs, highlighting potential vulnerabilities in the region’s food security support systems.

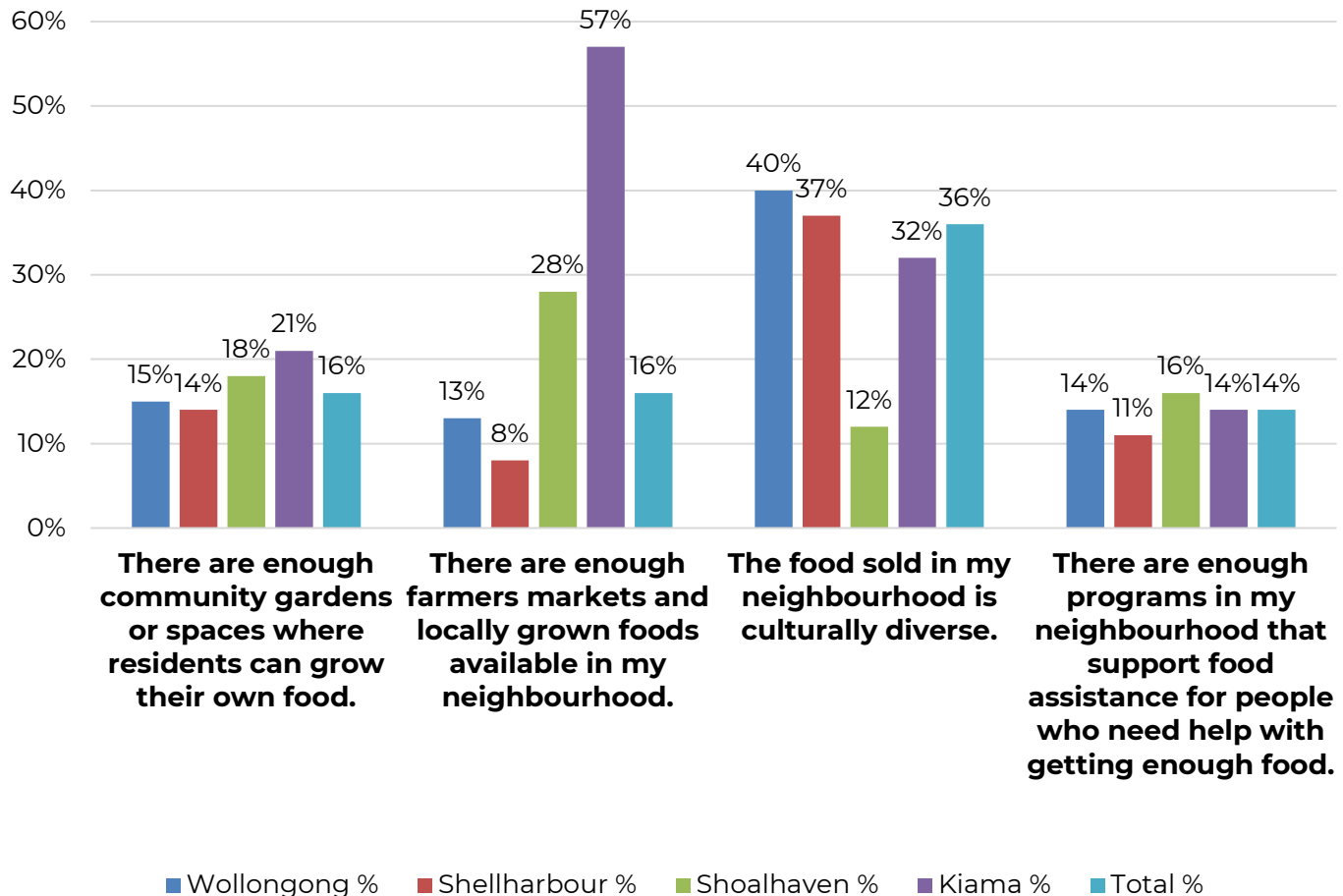


FIGURE 4 – LOCAL AND COMMUNITY FOOD RESOURCES

**Community Gardens:** Only 16% of respondents agree there are enough community gardens or spaces where residents can grow their own food, indicating a general lack of accessible opportunities for community-based food production. This suggests a need for expanded community gardening initiatives to strengthen local food resilience and foster community engagement.

- While still low, Kiama leads the region with the highest agreement (21%), potentially reflecting its focus on local food initiatives or more available public spaces.
- Wollongong (15%) and Shellharbour (14%) report the lowest agreement, implying urban areas may lack suitable spaces for community gardening or have fewer initiatives supporting local food production.

**Farmers Markets and Locally Grown Foods:** Agreement on the availability of farmers markets and locally grown foods is particularly low at 16%, highlighting a substantial demand for better access to fresh, local produce.

- Kiama stands out with a notably higher agreement (57%), suggesting a well-established local food system or better access to regional produce markets.



- Shoalhaven (28%) shows moderate agreement, potentially benefiting from regional agricultural activity. However, few residents from Wollongong (13%) and Shellharbour (8%) agree there is enough farmers markets, pointing to limited opportunities for residents to access locally grown produce in urban areas.

**Culturally Diverse Food:** Only 36% of respondents agree that local food options are culturally diverse, indicating a perceived lack of representation of different cultural cuisines in local food environments.

- Wollongong has the highest agreement (40%), likely reflecting its more urban and diverse population, which may support a wider variety of culturally diverse food options.
- Shoalhaven lags significantly behind other regions (12%), suggesting limited availability of culturally diverse food options in more rural areas.

The lower levels of agreement in regional areas indicate an opportunity to support culturally inclusive food initiatives, which could contribute to both community cohesion and a richer food landscape.

**Food Assistance Programs:** Agreement on the availability of food assistance programs is uniformly low, with only 14% of respondents believing there are enough such programs in their neighbourhoods.

- The low agreement across all regions indicates a significant gap in accessible food assistance programs, highlighting the need for expanded support services, particularly in areas with higher food insecurity risks.

## WHERE NEXT?

The findings from the Let's Talk About Food survey suggest a strong demand for better access to affordable and diverse local food options across the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions. Strategies that improve food access, affordability, and local food infrastructure are needed to address these gaps. This includes expanding opportunities for fresh, local produce, improving community food programs, and supporting policies that promote healthier food environments.

To respond to the community's concerns about local food accessibility, affordability, and diversity, the **Illawarra Shoalhaven Food Futures Taskforce** has been established. This Taskforce brings together key stakeholders to co-develop strategic actions aimed at strengthening food security and supporting healthier food environments in the region. A critical component of the Taskforce's work is the development of a **Regional Food Strategy**. This strategy will provide a coordinated framework for local governments, businesses, community organisations, and residents to improve the region's food system. It will outline long-term goals and actionable plans to ensure that local food environments support healthier, more sustainable, and accessible food choices for all.

Key focus areas for initiatives should include:

- **Expanding farmers markets and food hubs** to increase access to fresh, locally grown produce.
- **Strengthening food affordability initiatives**, such as subsidy programs or community bulk-buying schemes.
- **Enhancing community food programs**, including more community gardens, crop swaps, and food-sharing networks.
- **Supporting healthier food environments** through advocating for better zoning regulations, limiting fast-food outlets, and improving the visibility of healthy food options.
- **Building resilient local food systems** by encouraging local food production, supporting food-related businesses, and fostering community-led food initiatives through targeted regional policies.