



Response to the National Food Security Discussion Paper

Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, September 2025

Executive Summary

Food security is not just a policy goal—it's a social contract. We envision a future where every person, regardless of age or background, has the skills, access, and agency to participate in a healthy, sustainable food system.

As a globally-recognised, evidence-based national not-for-profit serving the needs of communities through education and empowerment, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation stands ready to collaborate, challenge, and co-create with Government to make this a future reality.

Our key recommendations:

1. Be place-based and consumer-first
2. Be transparent, open, and independent
3. Transcend political cycles and establish independent governance
4. Invest in a national framework for food education and training pathways
5. Maximise urban land for food production
6. Support sustainable and modern practices
7. Ensure ease and transparency for consumers

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these directions further.

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Introduction: A possible vision

Imagine a future where food systems are decentralised and deeply rooted in local communities—where consumers are not just passive recipients but active stewards of healthy, fresh, and culturally appropriate food.

In this future, schools, parks, and green spaces flourish as vibrant hubs of food production, blending traditional wisdom with modern innovation to grow accessible and nourishing food. A future where every child, adult, and elder possesses meaningful food competencies, enabling them to make informed choices, advocate for healthier lifestyles, sustain the local environment, and drive continuous improvement in the food supply chain.

This is a future where food is not only sustenance but a shared language of culture, care, and empowerment—where every plate tells a story of resilience, equity, and connection.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation (SAKGF) can play a leading role in this vision. We stand ready to provide two decades of experience, expertise and capabilities to support the implementation of the National Food Security Strategy.

Without food education, there is no food security

At SAKGF, we believe that every child deserves a healthy start and a nourishing education. Our vision is to see healthy children and young people living in sustainable communities across Australia.

We know that food access is just one part of food security, and we urge the National Food Security Strategy not to lose sight of the importance of building the capacity and agency of Australian children and young people through food education during their critical school years.

This stance is supported by the recommendations of the recent Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into the impacts, drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria. The resulting Victorian Government response to the Parliamentary Inquiry fully supports recommendation 1: “That the Victorian Government provide support to schools who wish to expand their food education programs, including encouraging them to take a place-based approach by working collaboratively with local communities to meet the specific needs and challenges of each region.”

The response elaborates that the “Department of Education supports schools to utilise existing evidence-based food programs and curriculum aligned teaching and learning resources, including the Kitchen Garden Program, to support and improve whole-of-school environments and approaches to healthy eating, food literacy and placed based approaches to food access, and prevention partnerships.”

Established in 2004 by renowned Australian chef Stephanie Alexander AO, SAKGF is a not-for-profit organisation with more than 20 years' experience working alongside schools and community organisations to transform children's and communities' food skills, knowledge and behaviours through hands-on education.

- The Foundation has reached over a million young people nationwide. Its flagship initiative—the Kitchen Garden Program—teaches children to grow, harvest, prepare, and share fresh, seasonal, and culturally diverse food in over 1000 early childhood services and schools across Australia. This evidence based, pleasurable and positive food education fosters lifelong healthy habits, boosts wellbeing, and builds practical life skills.
- The program is especially impactful in communities facing socio-educational barriers, with over half of its reach in regional and remote areas. Supported by educators, volunteers, and philanthropic partners, the Foundation also runs community-based projects and offers grants to expand access to the Kitchen Garden Program where funding is a barrier to implementation.

An investment in food education is an investment in short- and long-term food security, empowering communities with the skills and knowledge to be active participants in local food systems, building local capacity beyond reliance on emergency interventions.

By acting early and empowering people, we create lasting solutions that lead to robust food systems, with a preventative approach that protects both people and systems for the long term. Food education saves resources, improves wellbeing, and builds local resilience.

Key recommendations (based on the advice requested in Feeding Australia Discussion Paper)

What other principles should government, industry and community prioritise to support the development of the strategy and why are these important?

As a place-based, community-driven not-for-profit, we believe that a resilient, equitable, and future-ready food system must be built around local consumers, transparent governance, and inclusive innovation. Our advice to Government is to consider the following additional principles:

Recommendation 1: Be place-based and consumer-first

Food security must be rooted in local realities. Communities are not passive recipients—they are active participants. Strategy must prioritise:

- Localised food production in schools, parks, and community spaces.
- Culturally appropriate food access that reflects the diversity of Australia.
- Empowered consumers with lifelong food competencies to make informed, healthy choices.
- The principles of codesign and co-creation in solutions and then co-led in implementation.

Policy must be co-designed with those most affected. This means:

- Engaging First Nations communities, culturally diverse groups, youth, educators and elders.
- Valuing lived experience alongside technical expertise.
- Creating feedback loops that are ongoing, not one-off consultations.

We respectfully ask the Government to speak plainly and act boldly to ensure practical, scalable solutions for all Australians:

- Use plain language that resonates with everyday Australians. Noting approx. 28% of Australian residents are born overseas and 24% speak a language other than English at home.
- Ensure robust interpretation to not just language but cultural appropriateness and situations. Ensure engagement of all abilities.
- Avoid analysis paralysis—act with a bias for action with practical, scalable solutions.
- Invest in pilots and prototypes, and other impactful programs that can scale deep as well as scale up /out and that can be refined through community participation.

Recommendation 2: Be transparent, open, and independent

Trust is built through openness. We recommend:

- Transparent, consistent data sharing on food access, nutrition, and supply chain resilience, Government investment and funding streams – supported by a strong community of practice.
- The strategy is owned by an independent body that can inform cross-Government policy and publicly challenge decisions when needed in the interests of Australian consumers.
- Clear accountability mechanisms that track progress and adapt to emerging needs.

What timeframe should the strategy work towards – short (1 to 2 years), medium (5 to 10 years) or long (10-plus years) term, and why?

Recommendation 3: Transcend political cycles and establish independent governance

Food security is a long-term, systemic issue that requires continuity, not reinvention with each new administration. While we recognise that governments and ministers change, a national Food Security Strategy must be designed to transcend political cycles. To achieve this, the strategy should be anchored in a risk-based model, with clearly defined outputs linked to certainty and timeframes. This approach ensures accountability and progress, regardless of political shifts.

The strategic intent is already well-articulated across multiple forums. What's needed now is a shift from planning to operational implementation—with a focus on delivery, measurable outcomes, and community impact. This includes embedding food security into local systems, education, and infrastructure.

To safeguard the integrity of the strategy, we strongly recommend establishing independent governance within the first year. This body must have the authority to inform cross-government action, while also retaining the ability to publicly challenge or disagree with government decisions when necessary. Transparency and accountability are essential to public trust.

Finally, we urge a bias for action. The time for analysis has passed—what's needed now is bold, coordinated implementation that reflects the urgency and complexity of food security in Australia.

Are there examples of current or planned initiatives by you or your organisation to improve food security in your sector?

Evidence shows that pleasurable food education delivered through the Kitchen Garden Program and our community place-based projects address preventable inequities, including food insecurity. By working with children and young people we address community challenges early.

Our Strategic priority 1: SAKGF support Australian schools and early childhood services to deliver pleasurable food education and the Kitchen Garden Program to children and young people.

Research has shown that SAKGF strengthens regenerative and resilient community food systems, with the ripple effects of the Kitchen Garden Program impacting the lives of students, educators, parents, volunteers, local business and local producers.

Our food education model builds social cohesion, community pride and connections through sharing food, reinforcing a sense of place, and reinforcing acceptance/inclusivity and belonging. The program has been effective in supporting community capacity building to strengthen resilience before disasters as well as shaping community recovery after a disaster.

Over 50% of our work takes place in rural or regional communities. We prioritise partnering with communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage and address inequities in food access, preventative health and wellbeing and foster opportunities to build intercultural understanding through the cycle of growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing fresh, accessible food.

Our Strategic priority 2: SAKGF work alongside communities to support children and young people through community place-based projects that address inequities

SAKGF is the implementation partner for the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) in the Our Food Connections Project. This project focuses on strengthening community and food system resilience through the Culture+Kinship Model, a strength-based prevention approach based on Aboriginal Culture, Kinship, Community, and Country.

Two years into the project, nine Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) are supported by SAKGF to achieve their self-determined goals towards building food knowledge and skills to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Walking alongside local leaders, we established community gardens and cooking programs, improved access to fresh food, supported exchange of knowledge and skills, connected people to place and culture, and promoted healthy eating for 1100+ children & young people, families & community members.

Building on the success of the government-funded Healthy Kids Advisors initiative (VIC), SAKGF has continued with a place-based project in the Western District of Victoria. Regional children, young people and their families across Southern Grampians Shire, Glenelg Shire, Moyne Shire, Edenhope, Lake Bolac and Willaura are supported to develop practical, empowering life skills through positive food education.

Our locally based Project Lead works alongside local leaders, community groups and organisations including the Western District Health Service, Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation, GenR8 Change and community houses to build community capacity around food knowledge and skills. More than 28 schools and community-led organisations have benefitted from place-based support to enhance their food and drink environments with over 3,000 children and young people engaged.

Following community consultation with Walking Together for Logan’s Children, the Logan Kitchen Garden Project is a one-year project based on Yagara and Yugambeh country in Logan, Queensland, delivered by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation. Aimed at addressing local health inequities, the project positively impacts close to 2700 children at eleven schools and early childhood services, giving them the opportunity to learn positive food, health, wellbeing and sustainability skills for life. The Logan community receives food education support through two in-person Professional Development days for educators, and two local community activations based on local priorities and needs.

In NSW, in the Blacktown Local Government Area, SAKGF is working collaboratively with the Western Sydney Local Health District Centre for Population Health on a community project to empower children to develop practical life skills, an appreciation of seasonal produce, and a positive, confident and healthy relationship with food — for life. Over five years, 16 primary schools will be supported to implement the Kitchen Garden Program to enhance food literacy, food access and agency for local populations.

Do the proposed key priority areas and whole-of-system considerations adequately represent the actions needed for an effective food security strategy? If not, what is missing?

In principle, we support the priority areas outlined in the strategy. However, we believe greater clarity is needed around what is explicitly stated versus what is implicitly assumed within these categories. For example, the foundational actions of *Grow, Cook, Buy, and Eat* are only referenced in the introduction, yet they underpin the entire food system and deserve more consistent visibility throughout the strategy, highlighting the need for food education/literacy and food-based core competencies to be regarded as of higher critical strategic importance.

Additionally, while the discussion document references the *National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030*, we are already five years into its implementation. This proposal would benefit from more explicit linkage to outputs, including measurable milestones and timeframes that reflect the urgency of the current food security landscape. Strengthening these elements will ensure the strategy is not only visionary but also actionable, transparent, and accountable to communities and stakeholders.

Recommendation 4: Invest in a national framework for food education and training pathways

Developing food-secure communities is not just about systems and supply—it’s about people with the skills, knowledge, and values to grow, cook, distribute, and advocate for healthy, sustainable food. A generational investment is needed, from early education through to compulsory food education in schools and revitalised training pathways to vocational and tertiary training.

Research shows that food education improves dietary habits, academic performance, and resilience, while reducing obesity risk and health inequities. Yet, most Australian schools lack consistent, high-quality food skills programs, and teachers report that they have insufficient training and resources.

Embedding a structured, age-appropriate framework across all learning years would address these gaps, enabling a more food-literate and food secure generation, with the interest and foundational skills to play an active role in food systems transformation and security.

SAKGF is well placed to catalyse this effort nationally, connecting grassroots initiatives with national frameworks to ensure the next generation is equipped to lead.

Without a skilled and supported workforce, food security remains aspirational rather than achievable. This must be a central, not peripheral, component of the strategy.

In 2022, there were six jobs for every agriculture graduate, with the 2024 Rimfire Resources 2024 Agribusiness HR report showing job vacancies remaining significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

The strategy must clearly outline how workforce development will be embedded across sectors, including agriculture, education, health, logistics, and community services. While the strategic intent is clear, the operational matters of workforce planning must be made more visible.

Community-based employment pathways that empower codesign, cocreation and coeducation build first-choice careers, create and inspire innovation and support future generations and reskilled communities in entering a critical workforce.

SAKGF are leaders in community place-based projects that centre on food system solutions driven by local knowledge and priorities. With the continued support of corporate philanthropy and government funding, we are well placed to deepen our employment pathways for students and to bolster practical training pathways and employment on-the-ground in communities of need.

What actions could the strategy take to address challenges under each key priority area?

We have covered some of this in the previous information and in the answer to question 6, however we have additional points below:

Key priority area: Resilient supply chains

Recommendation 5: Maximise urban land for food production

Through our 21 years of operation, we conservatively estimate that 28,000 m² of productive gardens have been established at schools and early childhood services, increasing access to hyper-local produce for communities.

We also know that school gardens green underutilised spaces, creating nature corridors, improving air quality, and reducing urban heatwaves, while also providing habitat for pollinators, enhancing biodiversity including genetic diversity through cross-pollination.

Opening up urban land — especially school grounds — to increase food production zones minimises pressure on green belts and reduces reliance on industrial agriculture to feed growing urban populations. This application can also be applied to rooftop gardens and vertical growing within schools and other urban settings.

Independent evaluation shows that the Kitchen Garden Program in schools:

- Improves food literacy and skills through explicit teaching of cooking and gardening skills, dissemination of easy-to follow vegetable focused recipes and resources.
- Increases exposure to fresh, simple vegetable focused meals.
- Engages children at risk of disengagement and children with challenging behaviours.
- Establishes children as advocates for the vegetable focused recipes they know and enjoy.
- Improves parental motivation to prepare food they know their children will eat.
- Creates links between schools and the community with the transfer benefits to the home environment for a positive flow-on impact.

Key priority area: Productivity, innovation and economic growth

Recommendation 6: Support sustainable and modern practices

As per the concept of wellbeing economics, there can be no increase in productivity, innovation and economic growth without consideration to, and support for, the health and wellbeing of both people and planet.

The population health and wellbeing benefits of food education programs are well established, and poor health statistics point to an ever-growing need for preventative action through food education.

When children and young people are connected to nature, they are more inclined to respect and protect it. With more children and young people learning circular and regenerative practices, pro-environmental practices are strengthened, reducing pressure on planetary boundaries.

The Kitchen Garden Program is simultaneously a catalyst for planetary health and wellbeing. Our approach is a model for change, teaching children, young people and their communities safe, modern, natural and regenerative agriculture methods, boosting food resilience by restoring soil health, enhancing biodiversity, conserving water, and creating sustainable, climate-adaptive farming systems that strengthen local food security and ecological stability.

For example, through the Kitchen Garden Program, children experience firsthand how food waste can be managed through composting, and how that supports a healthier, richer ecosystem.

Conversely, they understand that many common materials cannot be broken down and returned to the earth, leading to greater awareness and care around consumption practices.

The program enables the experience of local food production that requires no packaging, no large-scale storage and no cold chain logistics. Food is grown on-site using sustainable methods and is 100% free from packaging with zero emissions from transport. Children are taught various methods for food preservation and storage including fermenting, pickling and dehydrating, reducing food loss and food waste.

School food gardens have been shown to support and share traditional growing practices and Indigenous food knowledge. Incorporating indigenous knowledge of Caring for Country is an essential part of education for communities and growers. This includes prioritising drought-tolerant and fire-resistant plants and perennial food sources that enhance human nutrition, biodiversity and soil health.

The full cycle of growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing fresh, accessible food empowers the next generation with essential skills for human and planetary health through sustainable food systems and circular, regenerative practices.

Key priority area: Competition and cost of living

Recommendation 7: Ensure ease and transparency for consumers

Subsidise essential food items for low-income households to reduce financial strain, create transparency in food prices and expand food voucher or cash transfer programs targeted at vulnerable populations, perhaps via Social Prescribing methods.

Invest in community food programs such as food co-ops, school meal initiatives and evidence-based food education programs like SAKGF, as recommended by the Victorian State Government response to Food Security.

Tackling the issue of Food Deserts across Australia is critical – this requires a system wide consideration of planning decisions by retailers and landlords with Government consideration of rent rebates or low cost investment opportunities for fresh food outlets, the encouragement of more “People Supermarkets”, “Coops” and localised solutions with a clear strategy for suburban and regional areas that supports the “within 20 minute movement”.

What actions could the strategy take to address challenges under these whole-of-system considerations?

In addition to points raised previously, the following actions are paramount to the whole-of-system considerations:

Health and Nutrition

- Consideration of Food Based Skills Competency Framework across primary and secondary education settings.
- Consideration of social prescribing pathway to food upskilling programs, fresh culturally appropriate food items via central Medicare funding.
- Every school community has the Stephanie Alexander Foundation Kitchen Garden Program (and/or a placed-based variation) provided as a catalyst for improving knowledge, health prevention, improved social connection and positive change.
- Consideration of more individualised approaches to the food security requirements of those living with disability, both physical and non-physical, specialist diets, and the hidden food security needs of those choosing to go without to feed others in their community.

Climate Change and Sustainability

- Consider whole school community programs and an intergenerational investment

In many of our program schools, garden-grown produce is used to support the whole school community from preparing nutritious foods in the school canteen, feeding time-poor school staff, and setting up free produce boxes or seed swaps for the community.

School gardens encourage seed saving and sharing of locally adapted plants, including heirloom varieties which support species diversity.

Children's connection to nature and contact with soil also promotes healthy microbiome with all its protective benefits. Our work improves resilience by promoting and supporting consumption of a wide variety of foods, with diverse diets known to be correlated with healthy microbiome. This resilience would be lost/compromised without opportunities such as the ones that SAKGF provides.

- Strengthen inclusive and accessible learning

The Foundation's programs are inclusive, supporting diverse learners, including those from refugee backgrounds and special schools. This ensures that climate resilience education reaches a broad demographic, empowering all communities to adapt and thrive.

- Highlight the impact and investment in food activities that show high impact as a social cohesion and connection program.

Kitchen gardens serve as hubs for community interaction. They foster social connections, improve wellbeing, and build local resilience—especially in areas affected by climate-related events like floods. By embracing diversity in these spaces' conversations can be had that nurture local activism and problem solving.

Trade and Market Access

- Always ensure consumer choice when considering access and trade – including the consideration of support to access items aligned to a wholesome diet.
- Avoid protectionism policies (IMF support this) such as export bans and import controls unless they are to a mandated criteria with independent scrutiny and decision making
- Promote stronger Australasia trade relationships with foods.
- Reduce the burden and challenge for small holders and small businesses to access marketplaces and to be sustainable.
- Look towards improved and meaningful public procurement policies that are fair and equitable for small and entry level businesses and that add value and improvements to the ability to access a healthier diet.
- Create an eco-system for localised business to business opportunities that have social outcomes at their core.

People

- We know young people want food education – so let's provide it. More than 1400 schools and services submitted grant applications to join the Kitchen Garden Program. That's roughly 274,000 children who are standing by to receive our food education! If it's wanted it can work!
- Consider embracing principles of Doughnut Economics and the nurturing of human nature.
- People need support to develop direct capability around food - not all food security issues should be framed as "how to make external provision more efficient". Giving communities direct control of their food improves access and resilience.

National and Regional Security

- It should be a Legal requirement to feed people healthily during an Emergency with Local, State and National Governments having clear outlined legal responsibilities and resilience frameworks in place.
- Mandatory and inspected Federal Food Based Standards established for all public sector institutions
- Implementation of Universal Primary School Meals with priority for those facing most social economic hardship but considering the avoidance of stigma.
- Implementation of infrastructure investment into educational setting teaching kitchens, community kitchens, and dining room spaces that reflect the value and importance of good food and healthy living.

Conclusion

Food education does not need to be reinvented. Government should support existing food education and food security initiatives.

An independent evaluation report was commissioned in 2024 for the horticultural sector as part of the Plus One Serve initiative. SAKGF's Kitchen Garden Program was the strongest performer of 10 food education programs rigorously assessed against the following criteria:

- Relevance “Solving the right problems” (Consumption barriers)
- Strategic appropriateness “Strategic approach is suitable to address the problem”
- Execution effectiveness “Using the right methods that are achieving results”
- Efficiency “Use of resources”
- Impact and investment return “Realised increased consumption”
- Legacy “Ongoing utilisation”

Kitchen Garden Programs become a hub for local communities, encouraging participation from community members who might otherwise be marginalised. School Kitchen Garden Programs improve access to traditional and culturally appropriate foods, and incorporate indigenous knowledge in education for communities and growers.

A message from our Founder, Stephanie Alexander AO

‘Food is a fundamental human need and an essential part of our daily lives, providing sustenance vital for health and wellbeing’

I established the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation (SAKGF) in 2004 because I believed the above statement. I also believed that children and young people were not being given the most effective education to help them make the best choices for their health. I also believed that this education had to be enjoyable, and reflect the skills and flavours present in our diverse communities.

Currently, our adaptable curriculum-related materials and hands-on practical classes in kitchens and edible gardens are used in over 1000 Australian educational settings, including schools for students with diverse needs, rural and remote populations, and schools with primarily First Nations enrolment.

We know that the younger a student is when first introduced to achievable preparation of fresh food, the more likely it is that they will continue.

We watch daily young people growing simple crops and harvesting them. We see them learn new skills, from turning the compost to rolling out fresh pasta and making simple

vegetable-based dishes for themselves and their friends. Perhaps most importantly, we watch their delight, enthusiasm, and willingness to try something new. I believe that our globally-recognised Kitchen Garden Program produces food lovers who are open to the best seasonal foods. Who appreciate freshness. Who will support our farmers, fisheries and local food systems throughout their lives. And who are dedicated to sustainability and reducing waste.

We just need to make sure that more children can access this program. We cannot expand our reach and guarantee that all Australian children will have access to the life-changing Kitchen Garden Program without significant government assistance.

Stephanie Alexander AO, September 2025