



September 2026

POLICY BRIEFING FROM CO-FUNDED PHD RESEARCH FROM
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Sustainability already exists at the margins. Bangladeshi curry houses are already environmental innovators, practising near-zero waste, daily local sourcing, and low-carbon cooking — not through choice, but constraint and necessity

This work doesn't currently count. Formal sustainability metrics were not designed for businesses like these. For these small firms, effective environmental practice goes entirely unrecognised because it does not come with a certificate

Policy should recognise vernacular sustainability. Alternative recognition schemes and culturally appropriate assessment criteria must be developed to validate what these businesses already do

Funding should recognise small business constraints. Micro-grants, sliding-scale incentives, and co-designed financial tools are better than blanket programmes built for large, formally organised enterprises

Governance needs to be responsive to cultural difference. Ethnic food operators must shape sustainability policy as co-designers, not just be consulted on it. Cultural Impact Assessments should precede every new environmental requirement

Sustainability at the Margins

Food Systems, Inclusion, and the Real Economy

Growing the real economy requires engaging the full diversity of participants in the food system, including those at the margins.

Bangladeshi curry houses represent over 85% of the UK's so-called 'Indian restaurants', generating more than £4.2 billion annually and employing tens of thousands of workers across Britain's towns and cities. They are vital to local economies, sustaining communities, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting local food supply chains. Yet they are largely invisible to the policies designed to support the food system.

Doctoral research co-funded by FFCC reveals that **these businesses are already practising sustainability every day.** At Aston University, Daniel Mafulul carried out 65 interviews across 15 Birmingham curry houses, involving operators, farmers, suppliers, policymakers, consumers and community organisations. He found that sustainability mattered to these restaurants because their economic survival depended on it — not because of green ideology or government incentives. Many were pursuing near-zero food waste, daily sourcing of fresh local food, low-carbon cooking techniques passed down through generations, and community-based resource-sharing that held the sector together through Brexit and the pandemic.

Mafulul called this **survivalist sustainability** — environmental innovation driven by constraint, frugality, and cultural embeddedness. The concept challenges a foundational assumption that going green requires capital. In these kitchens, it requires ingenuity.

The problem is that nobody is counting these sort of practices, which means nobody notices them. Green certification schemes, carbon audits, and sustainability grants assume that businesses have digital reporting capacity, formal credit histories, and the capacity to navigate complex systems that micro-enterprises structurally lack. Ironically, **the enterprises most likely to practise resource efficiency on a daily basis are invisible to the very metrics designed to recognise it.**

Structural barriers — financial exclusion, fragmented policy access, cultural trade-offs, labour precarity, and generational disengagement — compound this invisibility, locking a sector that is already doing the work out of the recognition and support it deserves. **To overcome this, policy should recognise what already works, redesign what does not, and build the kind of governance that includes rather than overlooks.**

Sustainability at the Margins

HOW ETHNIC MINORITY FOOD BUSINESSES ARE ALREADY PRACTISING FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION — AND WHY POLICY MUST CATCH UP

POLICY BRIEFING | Based on PhD research at CRÈME, Aston Business School | Co-funded by FFCC

£4.2bn	85%+	65	£298bn
annual revenue from curry houses	of UK 'Indian restaurants' are Bangladeshi owned	stakeholder interviews across food system	annual cost of chronic disease linked to food in the UK

THE CHALLENGE: A £4.2 BILLION SECTOR LEFT BEHIND

The UK food system faces intersecting crises of health, environment, and equity. Food systems account for approximately one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, while the hospitality sector alone generates an estimated 200,000 tonnes of food waste annually — a loss worth £682 million. Simultaneously, ultra-processed foods now supply over half of UK calories, driving a chronic disease burden costing the country £298 billion per year.

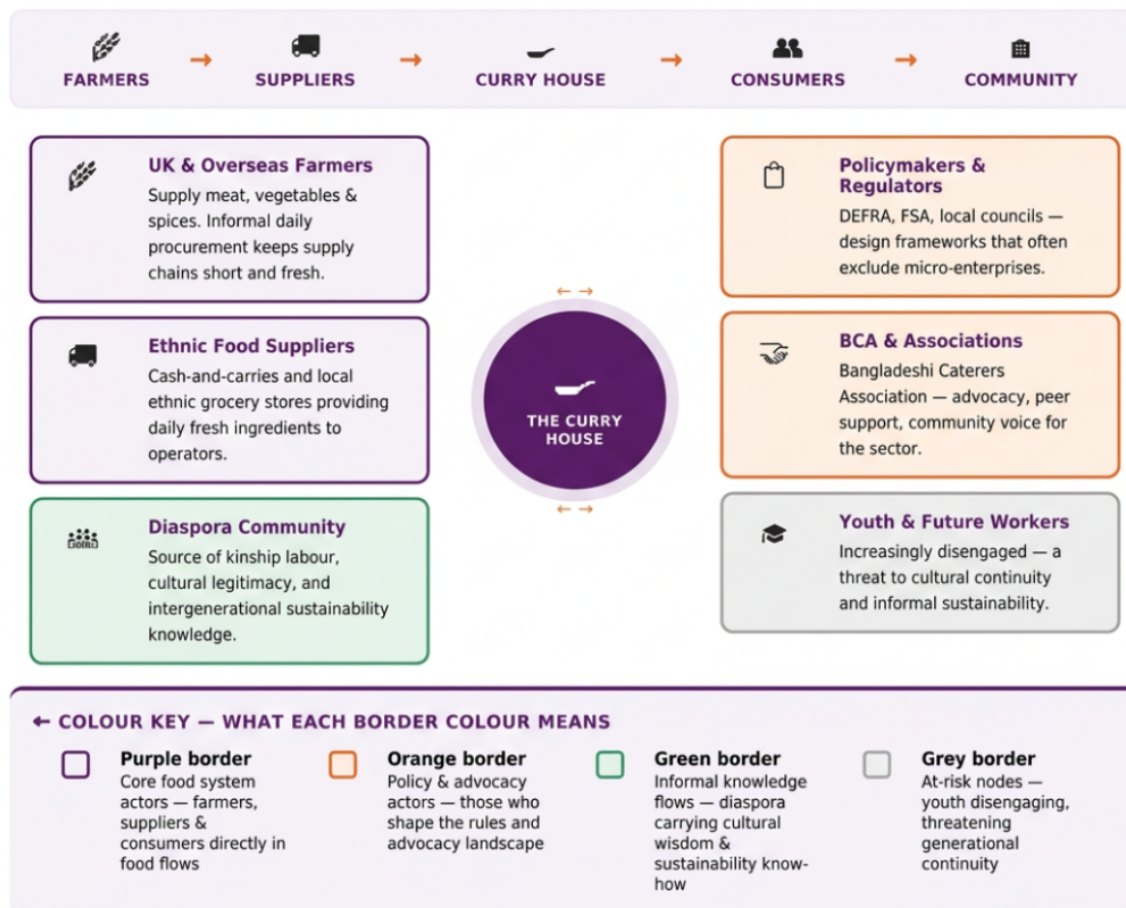
Yet the policy conversation about food system transformation consistently overlooks an entire sector that contributes significantly to UK food culture, hospitality, employment, and community life: ethnic minority food businesses popularly known as 'Curry Houses' and widely accepted as part of British heritage. Bangladeshi-owned curry houses, which represent over 85% of the UK's so-called 'Indian restaurants' that generate more than £4.2 billion annually, are a case in point.

These businesses face an existential crisis. Soaring energy bills, acute workforce shortages, post-Brexit ingredient cost spikes, and declining post-Covid footfall have pushed operators to breaking point. As one Birmingham curry house owner put it at the 2023 Curry Awards: "We are merely surviving, not thriving." Yet, as this research reveals, their survival strategies are quietly producing something remarkable: sophisticated, culturally embedded sustainability practices that formal policy frameworks fail to recognise, reward, or build upon.

Birmingham presents an ideal and richly layered study site due to its historical ties to the curry industry (recognised as the birthplace of British curry), socio-economic conditions, and evolving food policy landscape, including the Birmingham Food System Strategy.

1 The Curry House Ecosystem

INFOGRAPHIC 1 · STAKEHOLDER WEB & FOOD SYSTEM FLOWS



Source: Mafalul (2026) — 65-interview multi-stakeholder study, Birmingham, UK

WHAT THIS RESEARCH FOUND: SURVIVALIST SUSTAINABILITY

This doctoral study is the first comprehensive investigation of sustainability in the UK Bangladeshi curry house sector. It is based on 65 semi-structured interviews with a multi-stakeholder cohort including curry house operators, farmers, food suppliers, policymakers, NGOs, innovation experts, and consumers, alongside focus groups and participant observation across 15 Birmingham restaurants.

The central finding is captured in a new concept. **Survivalist sustainability** comprises the environmentally beneficial practices that emerge not from strategic choice or resource abundance, but from the daily necessity of economic survival under constraint.

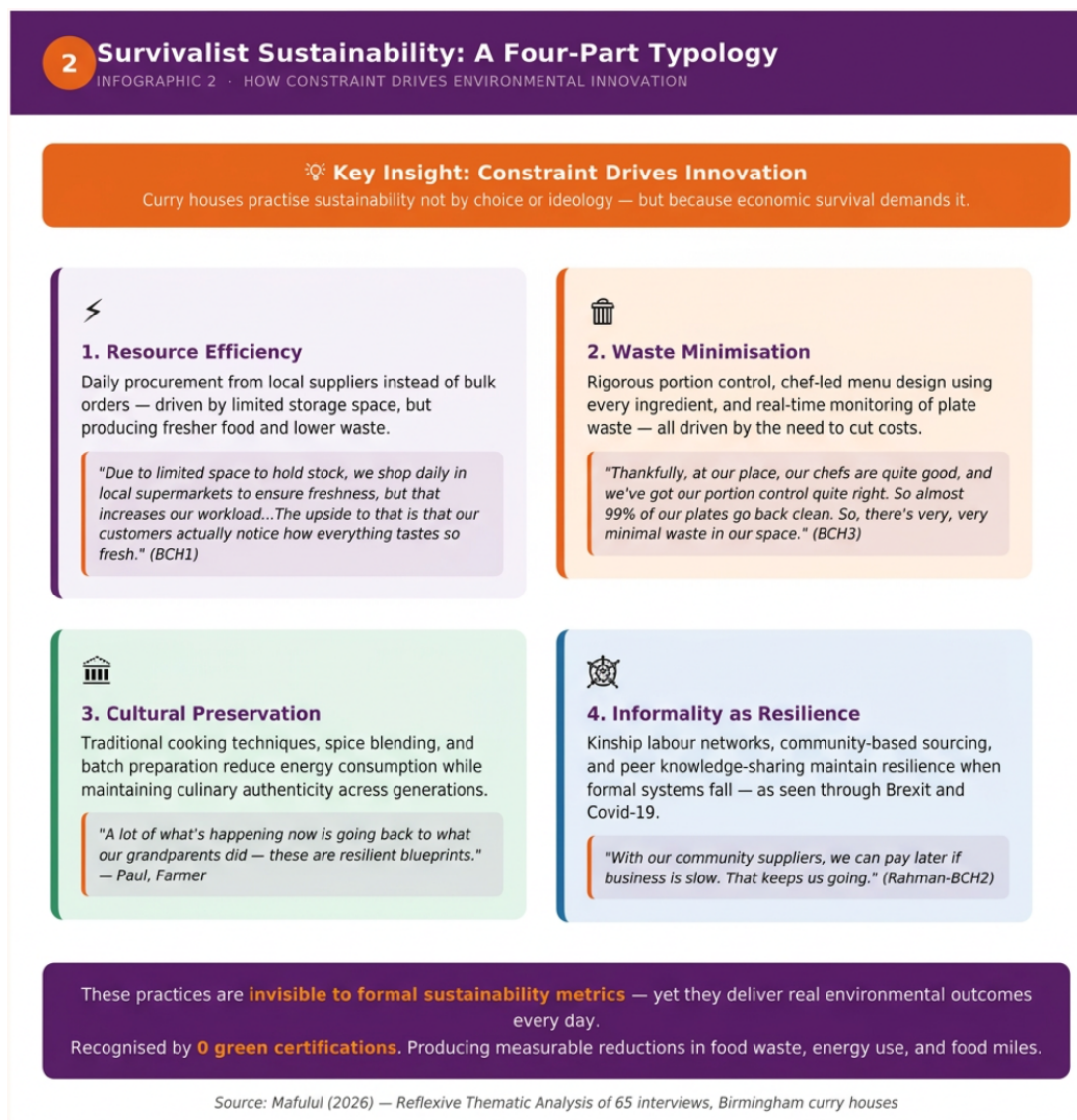
*"We don't waste, not because of climate talk, but because throwing food is throwing money." —
Birmingham curry house operator (Ali-BCH14)*

"We don't use plastic bags because paper ones are cheaper if you buy them in bulk. It wasn't to save the planet... but it helps, I suppose". – Birmingham curry house operator (Ahmad-BCH11)

Survivalist sustainability is multi-dimensional and comprises of five mutually constitutive elements: Vernacular innovations; cultural embeddedness; structural adaptation; relational governance; and institutional navigation.

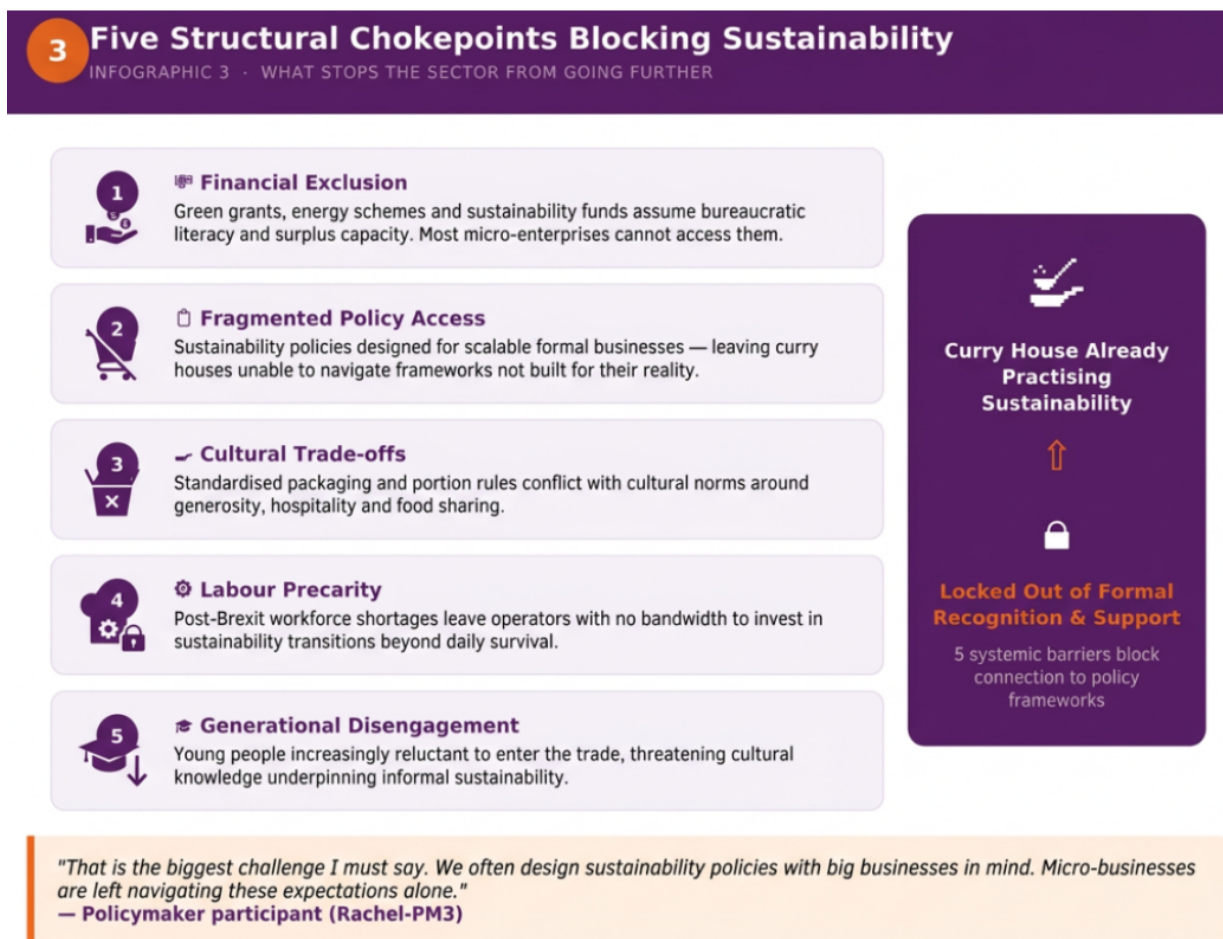
FOUR TYPES OF SURVIVALIST SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICE

The research identifies a four-part typology of sustainability practices operating informally but effectively across the sector:



THE STRUCTURAL CHOKEPOINTS

Despite these practices, five systemic barriers interact and reinforce each other to create what are conceptualised as 'chokepoints', preventing the sector from deepening its sustainability impact or receiving recognition for the contribution it already makes. Chokepoints represent both systemic barriers convergence and strategic leverage points where sustainability transformation can be either throttled or catalysed.



Source: Mafulul (2026) — Structural analysis from multi-stakeholder interviews

WHY THIS MATTERS: FOOD SYSTEMS, INCLUSION, AND THE REAL ECONOMY

FFCC's vision of growing the real economy recognises that genuine food system transformation requires engaging the full diversity of food actors — including those operating at the margins of formal governance. Bangladeshi curry houses sit at a critical intersection of food culture, community resilience, economic livelihoods, and environmental practice. They are part of the real economy: employing local people, sustaining cultural heritage, purchasing from local and regional suppliers, and serving diverse communities across the UK.

This research reveals that mainstream sustainability frameworks systematically exclude ethnic minority food enterprises — not through intentional discrimination, but because institutional design assumptions privilege formal organisation, bureaucratic literacy, and resource abundance. As a result, environmental practice that is already happening at scale remains invisible to sustainability metrics, unrecognised by certification schemes, and unsupported by public funding.

This is not just a missed opportunity for recognition. It is a missed opportunity for transformation. Curry houses, as community-embedded, culturally rooted food enterprises with direct supply chain relationships, are potential leverage points for inclusive food system change. If their existing innovations were recognised, rewarded, and supported, the environmental impact could be significant, and the justice argument is compelling.



Source: Mafulul (2026) — Food Systems Approach analysis; sector data from BCA & Curry Life Magazine (2023)

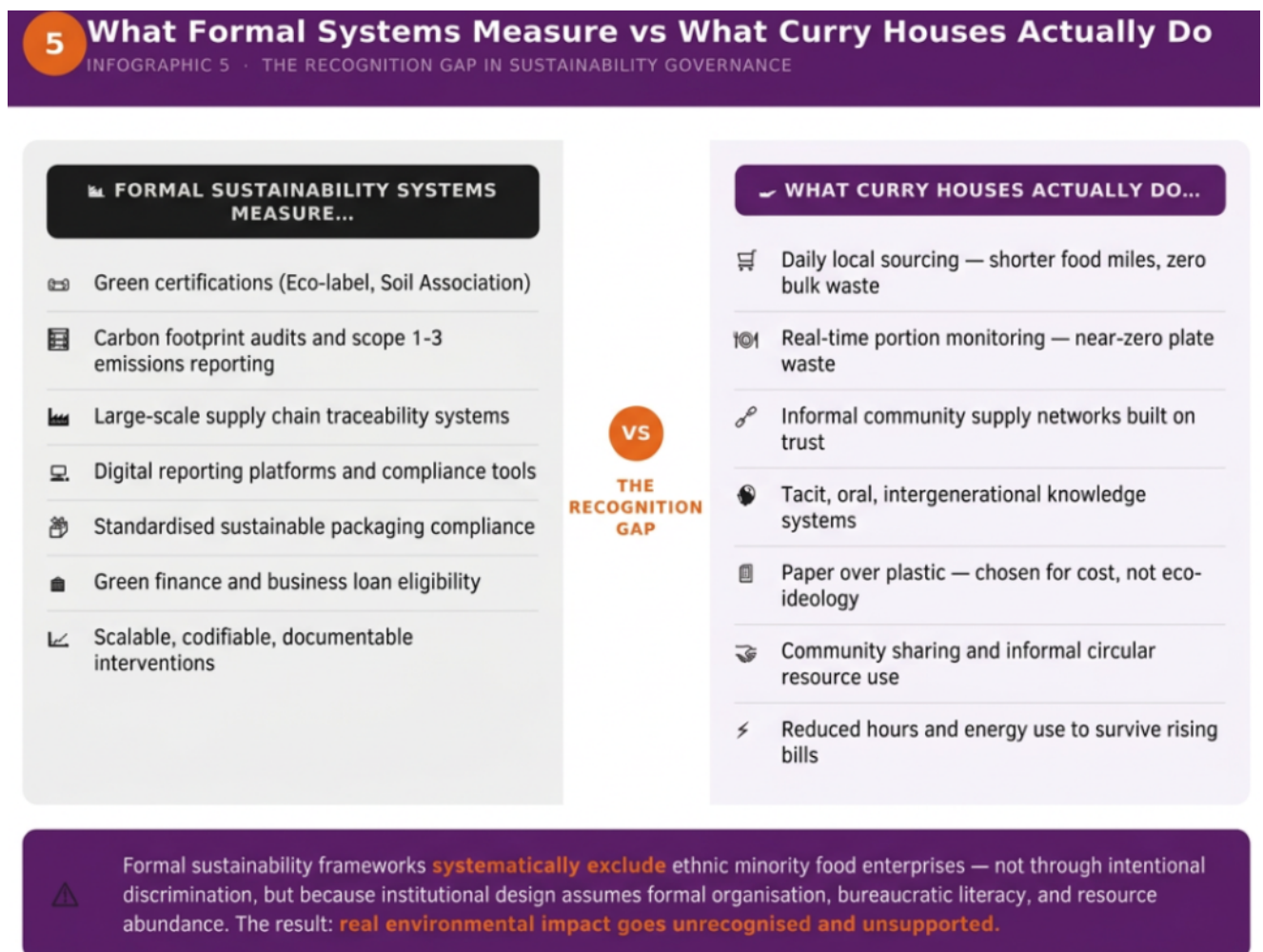
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM RECOGNITION TO TRANSFORMATION

This research proposes six interconnected pathways to unlock the transformative potential of ethnic minority food businesses and create a more inclusive, equitable food sustainability system:

1. RECOGNISE VERNACULAR SUSTAINABILITY

- ◆ Develop alternative recognition schemes that validate environmental effectiveness through community-based assessment alongside formal certification.
- ◆ Create peer review processes allowing ethnic food entrepreneurs to demonstrate sustainability using culturally appropriate criteria.
- ◆ Reform sustainability metrics to capture informal, distributed, and culturally embedded environmental contributions — not just those with green certificates.

“Big chains get awards for sustainability because they print it on their menu. We’ve been cooking fresh daily and avoiding waste for over 20 years. No one notices.”— (Naseer-BCA2)



Source: Mafulul (2026) — Institutional theory analysis: interviews with policymakers and operators

2. REDESIGN FUNDING FOR CONSTRAINT CONTEXTS

- ◆ Create micro-grants, sliding-scale incentives, and equipment-sharing programmes specifically designed for low-margin, high-constraint enterprises.
- ◆ Co-design financial mechanisms with sector representatives to ensure accessibility — rather than imposing blanket programmes that don't fit micro-enterprise realities.
- ◆ Establish 'Survivalist Sustainability Incubators' that develop solutions within existing constraints rather than requiring expensive upfront investment.

3. BUILD CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

- ◆ Embed curry house operators and ethnic food entrepreneurs in sustainability governance through advisory panels and participatory decision-making — beyond tokenistic consultation.
- ◆ Conduct Cultural Impact Assessments before implementing environmental requirements, identifying opportunities for alignment rather than assuming cultural neutrality.
- ◆ Establish Cultural Liaison Positions within DEFRA and local authority sustainability departments, with deep community knowledge.
- ◆ Support ethnic food sector advisory panels within local governance to ensure these businesses shape urban sustainability visions from the ground up.

4. INVEST IN TAILORED TRAINING AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

- ◆ Develop culturally contextualised sustainability training delivered through in-language workshops, peer mentorship, and community-trusted channels including radio and visual guides.
- ◆ Create intergenerational mentorship schemes pairing digitally fluent young people with experienced owners in culturally respectful ways.
- ◆ Make low-cost digital infrastructure — smart meters, tablets, monitoring tools — accessible to small food businesses, with user-friendly multilingual interfaces.

5. REBUILD LOCAL FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPPLY CHAINS

- ◆ Support local food infrastructure investment — mills, markets, specialist suppliers — that connects curry houses with regional and sustainable sourcing options.
- ◆ Develop innovative procurement and supplier partnership schemes enabling curry houses to access British-grown ingredients (e.g. lamb, coriander, herbs) at commercially viable prices.
- ◆ Restore fairness in supply chains through enforced regulation of supermarkets and intermediaries that squeeze small ethnic food operators.

6. ENGAGE YOUTH AND SECURE GENERATIONAL CONTINUITY

- ◆ Develop targeted programmes to attract young people from Bangladeshi and broader South Asian communities into food entrepreneurship — reframing it as a creative, sustainable career pathway.
- ◆ Support knowledge preservation programmes that document intergenerational environmental practices before they are lost.
- ◆ Integrate ethnic food cultures into school food education as examples of diverse, culturally embedded sustainability in action.

Who Should Act – and How

ACTOR	PRIORITY ACTION	TIMEFRAME	FOCUS AREA
DEFRA	Create culturally responsive sustainability frameworks and conduct Cultural Impact Assessments before implementing environmental requirements on small food enterprises.	6-18 MONTHS	Governance
Local Authorities	Pilot Alternative Recognition Schemes for informal sustainability practices in 3-5 local authorities. Embed ethnic food operators in city food policy councils.	IMMEDIATE	Recognition
British Business Bank / Local Enterprise Partnerships	Design micro-grant and sliding-scale incentive programmes for low-margin enterprises. Create revolving loan funds for sustainability improvements.	6-12 MONTHS	Finance
BCA & Ethnic Business Associations	Document and advocate for existing informal sustainability practices. Lead peer-to-peer knowledge networks. Co-design training with community-trusted channels.	IMMEDIATE	Advocacy
UKRI / Funding Bodies	Fund comparative research across ethnic minority food sectors; support action research piloting alternative governance approaches.	12-24 MONTHS	Research

ACTOR	PRIORITY ACTION	TIMEFRAME	FOCUS AREA
	Prioritise intersectional, justice-oriented food systems research.		
NGOs & Support Orgs	Adopt asset-based programme design - map existing environmental capabilities before assessing deficits. Develop cultural competency and brokering capacity between formal and informal systems.	IMMEDIATE	Support
Food Standards Agency	Develop hybrid compliance pathways focusing on environmental outcomes rather than standardised processes, enabling enterprises to comply through culturally appropriate methods.	6-12 MONTHS	Regulation
Schools & Education	Integrate ethnic food cultures into school food education as case studies of community-based sustainability. Support youth-to-operator mentorship pathways.	12-24 MONTHS	Youth & Skills

NOW

Can begin immediately

SOON

Within 6-12 months

PLAN

Requires sustained planning (12-24 months)

CONCLUSION: SUSTAINABILITY ALREADY EXISTS AT THE MARGINS

The central insight of this research is both simple and transformative: marginalised food entrepreneurs are already practising sustainability — not despite their constraints, but through them. The frugality, ingenuity, and community-rootedness that characterises the Bangladeshi curry house sector are not deficiencies requiring correction. They are a resource requiring recognition.

Food system transformation cannot be achieved by a sustainability transition that excludes 85% of the restaurants that most UK communities call 'Indian'. It cannot be led only by those with the capital to invest in green certifications and corporate sustainability reports. Meaningful transformation requires engaging the diversity of food actors who are already doing the work — in kitchens, communities, and supply chains across the country.

This research calls on government, funders, food system organisations, and civil society to shift from a deficit lens — asking what ethnic minority businesses lack — to an asset lens that asks what they already do, and how policy can amplify it. The curry house is not a problem to be solved. It is a blueprint waiting to be recognised.

“It’s important we stop assuming that sustainability means technology or certification. In many ways, these businesses are already doing sustainability, just not in the language we’ve imposed.”— Policy maker participant (Mel-PM2)

The challenge ahead for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is to centre these voices (the missing middle) in conversations and frameworks shaping the future of food systems, recognising that real system change happens only when every voice, from farm-to-fork, is heard, valued, and empowered.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This policy brief draws on findings from a doctoral thesis titled 'Farm-to-Fork: Exploring Sustainability in Ethnic Food Systems — A Critical Case of Bangladeshi Curry Houses in Birmingham, UK', submitted at Aston Business School, Aston University (2025). The research was fully funded by Aston Business School, CREME (Centre for Research on Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship), and the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.

Methods: 65 semi-structured interviews | 1 focus group with 8 Bangladeshi caterers | Participant observation | Multi-stakeholder case study across 15 Birmingham curry houses

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Daniel Mafulul is a researcher and practitioner at the intersection of sustainability, food systems, small agribusiness and ethnic minority entrepreneurship. He holds a PhD in Business and Social Sciences from Aston University and has worked extensively across the UK and West Africa in agri-food development. He is a member of the Food Geographies Research Group (RGS-IBG) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

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