



Comparing local responses to household food insecurity during COVID-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)

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About this report

This comparative report presents findings from a cross-case analysis of 14 local case studies which were undertaken to explore local responses to food access issues between March-August 2020 (the first UK COVID-19 lockdown). Individual case study write ups and a detailed methodological appendix are published at the same time and available on the project webpage: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

This research is part of a wider project designed to map and monitor responses to risks of food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. In addition to the local case study work presented in this report, the project is also examining national level responses and working with a participatory policy panel made up of people who have direct experience of a broad range of support to access food over this time.

We welcome your feedback on the contents of this report to inform the next stages of our research. If you would like to get in touch with the project team, please email us at foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Executive Summary

This case study research is part of a wider project designed to map and monitor local and national responses to risks of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. This report presents findings from a cross-case analysis of 14 local case studies which were undertaken to explore local responses to food access issues between March-August 2020 (the first UK COVID-19 lockdown). Follow up research is being undertaken to explore how these responses evolved after August 2020.

Early signs of food access issues

- Local signs of increasing financial vulnerability and crisis included rising numbers of Universal Credit claimants and evidence of disruption to incomes because of the pandemic.
- Increasing need for local food aid was a key indicator of experiences of acute income crises over this time. Particularly in the early weeks, in some areas, this rising need also appeared to include some households who were struggling to physically access food, for example because of shielding.
- Physical food access issues were also identified early on, including disruption to food supply in supermarkets and other shops, closure of the hospitality sector and other food providers (including schools, day centres and food banks).
- Fear of going out was also seen as a significant contributor to restricted physical access to food at this time.

Three phases of the response

1. The early weeks of the pandemic response (March/ early April 2020) were characterised by a degree of panic and the mobilisation of responses from a range of actors.
2. This resulted in a significant landscape of response in all areas from across sectors which ran and evolved from March through to June 2020.
3. The late June to August 2020 period brought changes to the local food responses with the easing of restrictions (shielding ended at the beginning of August 2020), there was a wind down of some of the direct food provision from statutory organisations, such as the national government grocery box schemes for people who were shielding and local council food responses.

Actors

Various actors undertook a range of roles in providing a response to the pandemic, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key actors and their roles in a response to the pandemic

Key actors	Role
<p>Local councils</p>	<p>Helplines, financial advice or assistance, direct food provision, support for third sector food response.</p>
<p>Local food poverty alliances or food partnerships</p> <p><i>These could be formal or informal. Some existed before the crisis (e.g., some members of the Food Power and/or Sustainable Food Places networks or the Feeding Britain network) others were set up in response to the crisis (e.g. the Swansea Together project or Good Food for Glasgow).¹ In some areas, partnership working was less formalised and involved practices of working together.</i></p>	<p>Co-ordinated food responses, facilitated collaborative working, channelled resources, collated and shared information on available support.</p>
<p>Third sector projects previously providing food</p> <p><i>Such as existing food aid providers, food banks and other community food projects.</i></p>	<p>Established local helplines, promoted support and identified households who would benefit from support.</p> <p>Adapted previous food responses in response to need and guidelines. Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided smaller food packs to minimise shopping trips for people who were staying at home.</p>
<p>Third sector projects newly providing food</p> <p><i>A variety of projects that previously had not provided food support began to offer food assistance for example housing associations, community councils and sports clubs</i></p>	<p>Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided support with shopping (collecting shopping and prescriptions for people shielding or self-isolating).</p>
<p>Informal groups</p> <p><i>Local community, neighbourhood or ad hoc support through social media or local communication</i></p>	<p>Support with shopping, informal, 'neighbourhood food banks', 'pop up food banks'</p>
<p>Local businesses</p> <p><i>Supporting the food response</i></p>	<p>Donations, resources, in kind</p>

¹ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>, <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>, <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>, https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

Targeted interventions

- School food support during school closures varied and additional support was provided to families across the case study areas.
- In several areas particular population groups such as Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups or the homeless population were a key focus for support.

Helping people access information, advice and support

- Organisations worked hard to ensure there were a range of access points (such as telephone lines) and that existing access routes remained open (both proactively identifying people and adapting processes for referral agencies).

Dynamics across the food response actors

- In several case study areas efforts were made to distribute demand across different providers. For example, referral practices or local helplines were designed to signpost people in need to a range of providers, charities and organisations to avoid over-reliance on particular projects.
- The amount of new local and community food provision which popped up in response to the pandemic presented challenges. Including for councils on whether to provide them with funding. Pre-existing projects provided advice and support to new ones, or in some cases sought to channel new efforts into existing work to avoid duplication.
- The end of local and national government food box schemes sometimes resulted in an increase in demand for third sector food projects, but in other places it did not.

Resources for local responses

- Overall, there was a sense that new or repurposed funding was available to support the food response from a range of government and philanthropic sources over the duration of the period (March-August 2020). However, local actors did experience uncertainty about funding early in the response and some experienced problems accessing local and national government funding schemes. Organisations reported increases in levels of financial donations from the public over this time as well.
- Food projects across the case studies reported difficulties sourcing food in the early weeks of the pandemic. They worked hard to secure alternative sources.
- Food projects saw an immediate reduction in their pre-lockdown volunteer base (many of whom were older or had underlying health conditions). Some projects were able to take on staff re-deployed from other companies or organisations and new volunteers joined to support the work.
- Due to increased demand and food volume, food projects across the case studies required additional space for food storage and/or processing, for example using religious buildings which closed for worship.

Key questions raised

- What worked?

It is very hard to map and even harder to comprehensively evaluate local responses to food access issues. Systematic evaluation was beyond the scope of this research, but our data captured participants' reflections on what they perceived to be some of the key strengths and challenges in local responses. A key strength was felt to be the benefits of community

responses that understood the needs in local communities and had ‘people on the ground’, who were established before the pandemic, were known in local communities already and were therefore trusted sources of support. The challenges included providing wrap-around and non-food support over a time when face-to-face activities had to stop. Some of this was lost altogether over this period, some was replaced by telephone calls and some organisations tried to use new drop-off provision as a gateway to supporting people in other ways. Another key challenge was balancing assessment of need verses quick, accessible support and there is evidence of varied approaches to this dilemma in practice across and within case study areas.

- What are the longer-term legacies of this period?

The research has raised some important questions over the legacies of the COVID-19 response in March-August 2020. Given the scale of need and support at that time it will be important to monitor the longer-term impacts for support structures and experiences of food insecurity. For example, following what happens to the projects that newly popped up and the impact of the substantial amounts of funding on embedding food provision infrastructures and potentially reversing pre-pandemic trends away from food aid as a first response.

- Local and/or national responses?

Mapping the response to food access issues during COVID-19 highlights the work of different sectors at (and between) different scales. Our case study data have documented local councils playing a role in the implementation of national government grocery box schemes, and third sector community organisations receiving funding and support to provide food responses in local council areas. This raises important questions about the role for different governments, different actors, and different types of responses. Participants reflected on the challenges with the national government shielding grocery box schemes and the impact of these challenges locally. In some areas, local responses were conceived more broadly, designed to support the local food industry as well as individual households, for example sourcing supplies for food boxes locally. In other areas, where this was not done, it was seen as a missed opportunity to support other parts of local economies and communities during this phase of the pandemic response.

- Cash or food?

There is an important on-going debate around how best to respond to income and food crises and whether the emphasis should be on ‘cash or food’. Our data suggests that many areas offered or supported income-based responses in a variety of forms, at the same time as food provision was made available. Moreover, our research does suggest that there is a lack of clarity and consistency around the term ‘cash first approach’. We found it was applied both to schemes designed to refer people to, or support them to access, the social security system (e.g. sign posting or advice services) as well as more narrowly used to describe the provision of *additional* cash support on top of access to basic entitlements through crisis emergency payments (e.g. emergency finance schemes).

Key takeaways

- The scale of the response was unprecedented.

Local responses to food access issues between March – August 2020 were unprecedented in their scale, operationalisation, co-ordination and the level of resources required. This included work by new and existing food providers, almost complete overhauls in working practices, and partnership and collaborative working across spaces and places. There were levels of funding for food provision that have not seen in recent times and new groups of volunteers, organisations and companies became involved in food support for the first time.

- Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses

The provision of food (parcels / meals) was central to local responses to risks of food insecurity over this time. This provision was operationalised with support from, and input by a range of stakeholders including councils and businesses. It is important to note that some councils set up unprecedented direct food provision schemes. However, food banks and voluntary food aid providers (both existing and new) were pivotal to this local response, and were relied on, and supported by, statutory agencies and local governments. This adds to our project's previous findings, that at a national level the voluntary food aid sector was relied on heavily to support food access for those experiencing economic vulnerability to food insecurity and was offered levels of funding and other support from national governments not seen previously.

- Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives

Across the areas we identified the important role played by several types of food aid provision: (1) food aid projects such as food banks that had been in place before the pandemic and adapted to meet the needs of local communities (2) local third sector organisations that started to provide food aid as part of their work to support communities and groups through the pandemic (providing parcels, hot meals, chill-cook food) (3) and less formal 'pop up' provision, for example on an ad hoc or neighbourhood basis.

- Partnership working and working together was a key enabler of responses.

Across the case study areas partnership working, coordination and collaboration was seen by participants as key to the success of local responses. The areas studied included places with existing formal partnerships, partnerships that were set up in response to the pandemic and areas that worked on less structured practices of working together. Across all areas the risks of failing to collaborate and communicate effectively were identified including the duplication of provision and not being able to identify gaps in support.

- There were clearly distinct challenges in rural locations.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic distinct challenges in rural areas were identified and included concerns over supplies to, and food available in, local rural shops; supporting areas with a high proportion of older people; the economic security of areas reliant on tourism for employment; lack of affordable transport to access shops and reductions made to transport services during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

This comparative report examines some of the similarities, differences, and key themes to emerge in local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic between March and August 2020 in 14 case study areas. These areas were:

England <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Bradford- Herefordshire- Greenwich- Leeds- Merton- West Berkshire	Northern Ireland <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Belfast- Derry and Strabane
Scotland <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Argyll and Bute- Edinburgh- Glasgow- Moray	Wales <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Cardiff- Swansea

Details of case study selection and research methods can be found in the *Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix* document published at the same time as this report, on the project webpage (<http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>).

Overall, 131 participants with frontline experience of responding to food access issues in their local area (either in a policy or practitioner role) contributed to the research through (online) interviews and workshops focused on mapping local responses in each location.

The objectives of the case study research were:

- To understand what forms of help were available to people facing insecure financial or physical access to food before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To understand how the provision of support for people facing insecure food access changed over the spring and summer of 2020, including changes in operations of projects/programmes that had already been operating and the initiation of new projects or forms of support.
- To assess the long-term outlook of these landscapes into the future.

This cross-case analysis focuses on the findings of objectives two and three. The report begins by highlighting similarities and differences in the ways in which food access issues were identified in the initial weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, the different phases of the responses, the role and work of different local actors, access to support and operations. The report ends with reflections on key issues or questions raised for future research, policy, and practice.

Individual write ups of eight of the case studies have also been published alongside this report in July 2021. These areas are Argyll and Bute, Belfast, Cardiff, Derry City and Strabane, Herefordshire, Moray, Swansea, West Berkshire. The reports provide full details of the responses in each area and are available on the project website.

2. Early signs of food access issues

There was consistency across local case study areas as to what participants considered the early indicators of food access issues. These indicators included economic access issues, rising demand for food aid, physical access issues and fear of going out.

2.1 Economic access issues

Across the cases, participants reported that early indicators of rising financial insecurity in their areas included increases in the number of people applying for Universal Credit and increased demand on services providing employment or benefits advice. Participants reported increasing levels of rent arrears and their concerns over financial support in general, as well as for different populations, for example those who were self-employed (and whether this support would be adequate or timely).

Participants also reported that within this group of people experiencing financial insecurity at this time were those who had never sought financial support before and were new to the benefits system.

“The client base changed. We still had our historical clients who would come to us, but what we found was there were lots and lots of people who had been made redundant, had never been unemployed before, and had always managed to pick something up. And then all of a sudden they were losing their jobs and there wasn't alternative work out there, and for the first time they were having to tap into benefits.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

2.2 Rising need for food aid

In addition to these trends in financial insecurity were signs of rising levels of acute financial hardship in the form of increasing need for help with food reported by food banks. For example, the food bank in Moray supported 1,091 people in April 2020, compared to 751 in March and 446 in April 2019. A food bank in Swansea reported:

“I think pretty much instantly we had about three times as many people come in for food [to our food bank]. There were definitely a few weeks where we were holding our breath and thinking, how is this going to work?” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

It was reported that increased demand for food aid also included people who were struggling with both physical and affordability issues, particularly in the early weeks.

“In Hereford [Food Bank], they certainly saw a surge in March, April and May. A massive surge. What they also saw was that the demographic was slightly different. So, for example, they were not used to seeing older people there so much. They suddenly appeared because they did not know how to do online shopping.” (Third sector respondent, Hereford)

The data also suggests that statutory and other agencies who could no longer work to support people in person, and knew that other services were no longer available, were quick to refer people to food aid:

“I think when it was announced it kind of felt like everyone went into panic stations. So, all my referral agencies were suddenly like, “Oh, no, I’ve got all these clients who are now at home and haven’t got any money, and there is no way of getting food. So, all of these referrals were coming in.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

This finding was also reflected in data from community organisations providing a wider portfolio of support (which included food aid):

“One of the key things, and I can recall when our helpline opened back on 18th March, the key thing for us was public sector staff would usually support the most vulnerable within their homes, whether that’s health visitors, social workers etc. They were obviously at home and still had vulnerable clients on their list who usually they would visit on a daily or weekly basis. So, we got an influx of phone calls at a community level to say, “Can you support?” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

2.3 Physical access issues

Physical access to food was disrupted in multiple ways by the response to COVID-19 and the lockdown announcement in March 2020. This included food supply disruptions and shortages of food and other products in supermarkets and shops and the closure of institutions and other settings that served food (schools, day centres, community food projects). The impact of these were identified by participants in their local areas very early on and some responses adapted or upscaled to respond to changing and/or increasing need.

“As we went into the pandemic [and school closures], we realised, “Oh, my God, free school meals, what’s happening to kids who receive these?” (Council staff respondent, Cardiff)

The food bank in Moray noted an increase in referrals from families which they partly attributed to the schools being closed.

“Just with the schools, so as soon as the schools closed it put a lot more pressure on families. We definitely noticed more family referrals coming through compared to what we would normally have.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

One meals on wheels provider in West Berkshire reported a large increase in calls about the service at the start of the lockdown. Some of these were from people who were no longer able to provide their usual support to family members.

“So, there were a few enquiries just before, and then the phone went off the hook for a week or two, after lockdown started in the middle of March. It never stopped ringing. So, we could see it coming, people could see it coming, but it suddenly – “My God, my mum is at home, how are we going to feed her, because I can’t go and see her?” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Respondents highlighted the interplay between physical and economic access issues and the impact of shortages in shops on demand for food aid providers:

“So, this panic buying had really just sparked off for us a massive increase in demand because people were just like we had a family that actually couldn’t even get nappies.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

2.4 Fear of going out for food

A further theme discussed by participants was the fear that people felt in leaving their house, especially in the early weeks, and the impact this had on people’s ability to access food.

“For us there was definitely something in the quite rural area of Moray, there was an unwillingness or an inability of people to actually travel to shops to access food. So there was a limited supply within the local village shop but people were unwilling or unable to travel 30 miles to Elgin and potentially they perceived themselves at a quite considerable risk to go shopping.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

3. Phases of the response

Responses to food access issues can be split into three broad phases across the spring and summer of 2020. The first phase comprised the early weeks of the pandemic response (from March 2020) which was characterised by some early panic and the operationalisation of responses from a range of actors. This resulted in a significant landscape of response in all areas from across sectors which ran and evolved from March through to June 2020. From approximately late June to the end of August 2020 there was an easing of some lockdown restrictions and from the 1st of August (England, Northern Ireland and Scotland) and 16th of August (Wales) a pausing of the guidance to shield. The June-August 2020 period brought changes to the food responses, with the wind down of some of the direct food provision from statutory organisations, such as the national schemes in each of the four countries providing grocery boxes for people who were shielding and food responses from local councils.

3.1 Early weeks (March-April 2020)

In the initial weeks (from late March into April 2020) the unprecedented nature of the situation led to uncertainty and panic.

“If I’m honest, it was panic. It was the unknown. It was almost crashing down together, so will we have enough food? The need will be absolutely huge. How will we deliver the model? What will we do? Will we get ill? The need to prioritise and then not knowing which one was the most important was what panicked us. I think that’s probably right to say, panicked us psychologically to begin with.”
(Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

As well as overcoming these feelings of early panic, organisations had to manage a balance of providing a quick response with setting up new systems and ensuring their activities could be delivered safely.

“I think many of us would have been in positions where we were witnessing and seeing what was needed, but because of the restrictions, it was then about capacity... You knew what was needed, but we service providers, whatever you want to call us, were challenged by being able to safely do that and make sure that we could provide what we needed to.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

As outlined in section nine below, these early weeks were also dominated by issues with, and concerns about, food and resource supplies and volunteer workforces.

3.2 Evolving responses (March – June 2020)

Following this initial phase, a range of actors were providing a varied landscape of food responses between March and the end of June 2020. These weeks were characterised by adaptation and ‘learning while doing’.

“Our planning was done at the same time as we were going live. Our lessons learned were at the same time as our planning for the next phase.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Indeed, over the whole March – August 2020 timeframe, responses were subject to continual review and adaptation to suit the circumstances. For example, in Argyll and Bute, initially free school meal replacements were provided in the form of a hot meal delivered to eligible households, as it was assumed this would be a short-term response and school kitchen capacity was available to produce meals. However, when it was clear the response would be required for a longer term, this was later changed to food box deliveries.

“Initially, free school meals was about getting that hot meal to people, and that sounds crazy because it was, when I look back on it, but it was the right thing at the time. We thought schools would close for three weeks, what would you do for three weeks? We wanted to keep our services going because we had the food, we had the stock sitting in the kitchens, we had the catering staff there willing to do it, and we had the school transport.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute).

Swansea Council’s food distribution centres originally began to support supply of food to food banks, however, as time progressed through the pandemic they also became places from which the Council would assemble and deliver their own food parcels, particularly designed to fill gaps in food bank operating times.

3.3 Late June/early July to end of August 2020

As restrictions lifted, there was a move away from direct provision of food by national and local governments. The national grocery box scheme for people who were shielding came to an end in August 2020 and direct local authority food provision was also wound down. Resources also began to reduce as redeployed staff returned to original roles, volunteers who had been furloughed returned to their jobs and community buildings, such as schools, which had been used as food hubs required preparation for the start of the new school term in autumn 2020. For example, in Swansea, the Council’s Helpline, Food Administration Team, and food distribution centres all ran through to the end of the shielding scheme in Wales (mid-August 2020) because need had lessened but also because of changes in staff capacity. In Leeds, the building that had been used as the food warehouse by the Council was only available for a temporary period:

“As lockdown eased [in June 2020], a lot of council buildings were starting to reopen, and staff were able to go back to their day jobs. A decision was made to start winding down the warehouse facility which we only had on a temporary basis. We managed to acquire it quickly through the Council’s asset management team and it was always the intention it would be for a short-term period. As demand to the helpline started to decrease, around June time and everything started to open up, the decision was

made to wind down the warehouse and to hand over deliveries to the third sector again.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Over this period, preparation was done for the end of some of the direct food provision in local areas. Participants in different areas reported that organisations contacted people who were in receipt of national government food boxes in order to put in place local support beyond August 2020 where it was needed. For example, one organisation in Derry and Strabane, following the end of the national box scheme for people who were shielding or unable to access food for financial reasons reported:

“We still helped and supported maybe 30 or 40 through our own [food boxes], and then it just went back to normal to be honest within a few weeks. We were worried at the time, but it did. We just let it naturally happen. Essentially then, so from August/September time we might have got the odd one. We listened to them and we supported them or whatever. They were subsumed back in under our family support, and if there was any individual that didn’t meet the criteria for family support, you know I am talking one-offs, one or two a week or something, we would liaise and support them like anybody would do, based on their circumstances. That was the situation.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Although the local and national government food box schemes were approaching a wind down phase this varied in practice in different places and for different kinds of provision. For example, in Northern Ireland national food boxes for people who faced financial barriers to accessing food stopped on the 26th of June 2020 whilst food boxes for those who were shielding continued to the 31st of July 2020. The fresh food parcel provided by Argyll and Bute Council stopped at the end of June 2020, but the ambient parcels continued, with the addition of a small amount of fresh produce, until the end of July 2020.

4. Actors in the response and types of response provided

Various actors undertook a range of roles in providing a response to the pandemic, summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Key actors and their roles in a response to the pandemic

Key actors	Role
Local councils	Helplines, financial advice or assistance, direct food provision, support for third sector food response.
Local food poverty alliances or food partnerships <i>These could be formal or informal. Some existed before the crisis (e.g. some members of the Food Power and/or Sustainable Food Places networks)</i>	Co-ordinated food responses, facilitated collaborative working, channelled resources, collated and shared information on available support.

<p><i>or the Feeding Britain network) others were set up in response to the crisis (e.g. the Swansea Together project or Good Food for Glasgow).² In some areas, partnership working was less formalised and involved practices of working together.</i></p>	
<p>Third sector projects previously providing food</p> <p><i>Such as existing food aid providers, food banks and other community food projects.</i></p>	<p>Established local helplines, promoted support and identified households who would benefit from support.</p> <p>Adapted previous food responses in response to need and guidelines. Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery.</p> <p>Also provided smaller food packs to minimise shopping trips for people who were staying at home.</p>
<p>Third sector projects newly providing food</p> <p><i>A variety of projects that previously had not provided food support began to offer food assistance for example housing associations, community councils and sports clubs</i></p>	<p>Common provision included food parcels or hot meals for collection or delivery. Also provided support with shopping (collecting shopping and prescriptions for people shielding or self-isolating).</p>
<p>Informal groups</p> <p><i>Local community, neighbourhood or ad hoc support through social media or local communication</i></p>	<p>Support with shopping, informal, 'neighbourhood food banks', 'pop up food banks'</p>
<p>Local businesses</p> <p><i>Supporting the food response</i></p>	<p>Donations, resources, in kind</p>

Around this local landscape were the national responses, delivery of which was sometimes delegated to the local authorities and the third sector. It is important to note that many of these actors worked together and collectively to provide a response, with significant interaction between the actors. These actors and the types of response they provided are

² <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>, <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>, <https://feedingbritain.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>, https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

discussed below.

4.1 Key Actor: Local Authorities

During the spring/summer 2020 lockdown, local authorities played several different roles in responses to food access issues, described below.

4.1.1 Helplines and support promotion

Councils in all case study areas ran helplines for residents to ring for support which connected people to food support. The structure of the helplines varied across areas. For example, in Moray the helpline was part of the wider ‘Grampian Hub’ which covered two local authority areas and was staffed by people who worked for the two local authorities as well as other statutory and third sector organisations, and in Leeds the Council provided two telephone helplines, the existing Welfare Support Scheme helpline and a specific COVID-19 helpline. It is worth noting that many third sector organisations also established helplines. For example, in Glasgow a further city-wide helpline, named Glasgow Helps, was implemented by Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector.

Regardless of the structure these helplines became a key gateway for people requiring support with food, with this often being the reason for calls to the helplines. For example, the Belfast Council helpline handled 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st July 2020. 7,838 of these calls were requests for support and 6,908 (88%) of these calls related to support with food.³ In Glasgow 57% of calls to the ‘Glasgow Helps’ helpline related to food or shopping support.⁴ In Cardiff the proportion of calls to the helpline reduced over time: over March 23-31st 69% of calls related to food, in April 54%, May 56% and June 33%.⁵

Councils also undertook extensive promotion of these helplines and the wider suite of support that was available. For example, Bradford Council undertook an extensive promotions campaign including letters sent to every household, leaflet distribution, posters displayed in the city and mobile LED screens transported on cars or worn by people, playing videos in multiple languages. In Leeds, communication about the support the Council could offer was also targeted to people living in the more economically deprived parts of the city.

“We did a leaflet drop in deprived areas, looking at the index multiple deprivation for that targeting.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

4.1.2 Direct government food provision

In all four countries national schemes were established to support people who were shielding and unable to access food. In Northern Ireland the national scheme also supported households facing financial access barriers to food. In each country, this food provision was

³Belfast City Council (2020) COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report – August 2020. Available here: <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

⁴ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

⁵ Data provided by research participant

in the form of weekly food parcels delivered to households. Some councils played a role in operationalising this national scheme.

Belfast Council took the lead in coordinating and delivering the national scheme at the local level. Their role included signing people who were eligible up for the scheme, undertaking requirement assessments, receiving referrals and storing food. Deliveries were made by a combination of redeployed council staff and through a partnership with the Red Cross. Due to a number of concerns with the national scheme Swansea Council took over the “last mile” delivery of the Welsh Government’s shielding food parcel scheme in June.

“We found that there were issues, there were parcels going missing or stolen. We knew that we could do, for want of a better way of describing it, a better job of delivery. So we had all the parcels delivered to one location in Swansea and then a council team got involved and they took over the delivery. The beauty of that was that A) they know Swansea, but B) they could add more care to the delivery of the parcels; they could take more time on making sure that that parcel got to the individual... We really, really improved the success rate of getting a parcel to the individual” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

As well as this involvement in the national schemes many councils began providing their own local government food parcels. There were several reasons for this local government provision. These included providing support to a much wider range of eligible households than the national scheme which, with the exception of Northern Ireland, only provided boxes to people who were shielding; providing a wider range of fresh food than the national schemes; providing rapid support in crisis situations; providing food as a ‘stop gap’ before receipt of national government food parcels; and providing tailored support for individual households.

Offering wider eligibility was a common reason for the provision of food parcels by local councils. For example, Argyll and Bute Council provided fresh and ambient food boxes to individuals or households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason, individuals or households experiencing financial vulnerability, households of children entitled to free school meals as well as fresh parcels to households who were shielding. Glasgow City Council provided parcels to a ‘shielding plus’ cohort. Moray Council opted to provide fresh food parcels to people who were on the shielding list and identified by the Council money advice team as also potentially facing financial access barriers (due to being in receipt of benefits, households eligible for free school meals etc). These parcels acted as a supplement to the national boxes.

“Also, what became prevalent was that the Scottish Government food boxes didn’t contain a lot of fruit and veg. So, following discussions at the management level of the assistance hub we agreed that we would further supplement people that were shielded and that were receiving a food box with a fruit and veg bag as well.”
(Council staff respondent, Moray Council)

Herefordshire Council provided food parcels to people on the NHS shielding list as a “stop-gap” until the Government’s shielding food box programme was fully established. This was done in response to concerns that the Government’s shielding boxes were not signed up for fast enough, nor were they distributed fast enough or consistently in the first weeks. For these reasons, this provision ran from the end of March till the end of May 2020.

In Merton and Leeds the Councils provided parcels for people in an immediate need or crisis situation. For example, in Leeds callers to the helplines who required food support were passed onto a newly established food warehouse where they were rated using an established system (RAG rating), based on the level of urgency of need:

“They’d ring the Local Welfare Support line and a referral was made to this new food warehouse. Then from that there was a RAG system, a red, amber, green system, where if it was rated red, they needed support within 24 hours and delivery was done direct by council staff that were working at the warehouse.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Many councils provided boxes that were tailored to specific households needs, such as catering for dietary requirements. Cardiff Council provided a food box to people for who the design of the national shielding box scheme was not appropriate:

“If people couldn’t physically pick up a box from their doorstep, Cardiff Council would provide the boxes for them instead so that social services could go in with an actual box and make sure that it wasn’t just left on the doorstep.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

In some areas the national and the local schemes operated entirely independently. For example, in Moray and Argyll and Bute eligible households would receive deliveries of the food parcels from the two different schemes on different days. One participant reflected that some households that were shielding opted out of the national scheme in preference for the local scheme.

“There were good reasons why that [the national scheme] happened that way, but it then meant people... people wanted to opt out of the shielding boxes and take ours, and that happened, we had people opt out of the national shielding boxes and come onto our programme because they knew it was a better offer.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

In other areas there seemed to be less of a distinction between the operationalisation of the two schemes. For example, Bradford Council initially established a central food distribution hub to distribute the national food boxes, however, the hubs were subsequently also used to provide food parcels to a wider range of people, not only people who were shielding.

4.1.3 Income advice and assistance

We heard examples of local councils increasing both awareness and availability of existing advice services as well as making changes to discretionary financial support.

Increasing awareness and availability of existing local advice services

Derry City and Strabane District Council, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, provided additional funding to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in evenings and weekends. Belfast Council increased their promotion of the advice services to ensure people were aware of their existence and the services offered.

“It was also about promoting organisations. For example, the Council funds the five advice consortia that give out generalist advice. It was about promoting them more

heavily, that these advice services are here to help you access services and advice to what you're entitled to, whether that's through monetary grants or benefits, but also other services that they need. For example, people who had applied for benefits and been turned down, there's the tribunal service, the appeals. It was promoting all of that on a wider level as well." (Council staff respondent, Belfast)

The Money Advice Team at Cardiff Council was expanded over the lockdown period to enable them to take more calls, and they set up a triage system to help direct people towards correct benefit entitlements. They also set up a Cardiff Money Advice website, in the first weeks of the lockdown to provide simple and clear advice on money, benefits, and debt, and it also had a specific COVID-19 advice section.

Some councils were also being very proactive in offering support and advice to people who were newly accessing social security. For example, the money advice team at Moray Council phoned new applicants to explain key details of Universal Credit such as it being a monthly payment and that any advance payments would be deducted from later payments.

Financial assistance schemes

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland prior to the pandemic, discretionary crisis grants were available through national schemes. Changes were made to these schemes at a national level.⁶ Councils continued to refer and signpost people to this support where appropriate. For example, in Swansea, awareness of and referrals to the Discretionary Assistance Fund increased.

"I think the Discretionary Assistance Fund certainly came into its own during the lockdown, doing the pandemic, this would have been widely distributed... It was referred to much more; we could support people with applying for it, that kind of thing..." (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

In England Local Welfare Assistance Schemes which are administered at a local authority level may provide discretionary grants or support with basic needs, such as food. Decisions regarding these schemes are made at a local authority level. We heard of local councils adapting their local welfare assistance schemes in response to COVID-19. For example, Leeds Council relaxed their eligibility criteria, offering support to residents impacted by the pandemic, including those with no recourse to public funds, and households where occupants were self-isolating or shielding.

"We already had the existing Local Welfare Support helpline and during the start of the pandemic we relaxed all criteria, so anybody needing support was able to be supported with food in that time. (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Moray Council used funding from the Scottish Government to provide a flexible food fund. This was a fund established specifically to support households with food expenses in response to COVID-19. This fund was in addition to the availability of the Scottish Welfare

⁶ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

Fund. This fund is described in detail in the individual write up. Briefly, the flexible food fund provided eligible households (defined very broadly) with two cash transfers, one a month to support them with food (and associated costs). The second payment was made provisional on the recipients engaging with the wider support available through the Council's money advice team.

4.1.4 Facilitating support with shopping

Some councils (Argyll and Bute, Glasgow, West Berkshire and Bradford) established systems to support access to shopping for people who were able to afford food but were physically unable to access it. Argyll and Bute Council introduced a scheme which allowed a member of the community to go shopping for somebody and charge that to a credit facility, owned by the Council, at the till. The Council then invoiced the recipient. Bradford Council provided a shopping service for those unable to do online shopping or access a shopping slot, taking payment through the customer service number.

Although West Berkshire Council set up a system to support volunteer shopping they also observed that the community groups providing this support devised their own mechanisms.

“We set up systems where cash wasn't really needed so that we gave one or two community groups what I called a community purse. So, there was a pot of money that they were given so that they could reimburse the volunteer whilst the person who had received the service could write a cheque and it could be banked. Now, most of our community groups didn't even need that. They just worked it out for themselves, how they were going to – they set up a volunteers' pot and things like that.” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire).

Participants in other areas noted that retailers established systems to support volunteer shopping, so input from local councils was not necessary. One participant from Moray noted,

“For example, in Buckie the local Tesco had said, “Right, if you are shopping as a volunteer, do all the shopping, go through the checkout, come to customer services and then we can phone them and do the card transaction over the phone.” (Council staff respondent, Moray)

4.1.5 Partnering with and funding third sector organisations to deliver a food-based response

Rather than, or as well as, providing food parcels directly some local councils took a partnership approach with the Council supporting other organisations to deliver a direct food response.

Support for existing food banks

In some cases, this was support to existing food bank organisations. For example, Merton Council supported one of the existing food banks in several ways, including the provision of funding, and providing staff and vehicles belonging to the Council's team of bailiffs who, combined with volunteer drivers, moved food around the distribution sites and delivered food parcels to clients. The Council also provided vans for “housekeeping” tasks:

“The local council were very helpful. If we needed extra vans, if we needed cardboard removed from the building and stuff like that, they were very, very quick at making things happen for us. I mean, I would say that they prioritised our needs.”
(Third sector respondent, Merton)

In Herefordshire, the Council supported food banks in a substantial way through both funding and in-kind support:

“They are supporting the food banks in a substantial way now where they have never done that before, [providing] some of the COVID funding. Because, in addition to all the other changes, we had a number of food banks that needed to move their premises because the building either couldn’t be used or was no longer suitable, or they needed to grow because they couldn’t store the amount of food that was now needed... so the funding they have been given could be used for rent and things like that.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

Cardiff Council worked with the Cardiff Foodbank to deliver food parcels on their behalf as the food bank did not have the capacity to do home deliveries. In these cases the food bank provided the Council with the food parcels to distribute from the Councils community hubs.

Supplying food, funding and resources to other third sector organisations

As well as direct support for existing food banks some councils provided support for a wider range of organisations providing a food response. For example, Swansea Council purchased food from local suppliers for food distribution centres which were then accessed by third sector providers. Similarly, Merton Council purchased food, and also received regular supplies from FareShare, which was then distributed to the third sector groups providing food parcels. As well as supplying food, Swansea Council supported organisations by providing sites for the public to donate food and storing the food for further distribution in a COVID-19 compliant way. One third sector respondent described this arrangement and how it was used to manage infection risks:

“I coordinated with the Council, I said, “I need these centres all over the city, donation hubs.” So, the public can donate food. And [the Council] did, they opened four of them... So, when Costa shut down, they delivered everything there. And then what happened was I’d call them and go, “What have you got? I need this, this and this,” and then the Council drivers would drop a van of all donations down. We came up with an idea of we needed rotational areas. Obviously guidance [from Public Health Wales] is the bug is 72 hours. So, if we could sit food for 72 hours and have seven stations in that community centre, a big, huge hall, then you know that, on a Thursday, I can take the Monday pile and it’s free and sanitised, self-sanitised, and there has been no-one touching it.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

In other areas the council support with food supplies was channelled through another organisation who took the lead in coordinating the third sector response. These lead organisations purchased food for further distribution. For example, Bradford Council provided funding to another organisation to procure and distribute food stocks for the established food aid organisations. Similarly, Greenwich Council supported another local organisation to establish a food box scheme by providing funding for the purchase of food, enabled use of one of the Council’s community centres and redeployed a nutritionist from

the Council's Public Health team to assist in planning and preparing the content of the food boxes.

In another model, West Berkshire Council acted as a conduit between a supplier, which they funded to supply food boxes, and the third sector organisations and community groups that delivered them to the communities. A member of council staff was seconded to provide the logistics role, which involved taking referrals from the 90 community groups offering support to local communities or neighbourhoods during the pandemic, securing food parcels from the supplier and arranging the distribution of these through networks of voluntary and community groups.

“So they would – the community [group] would ring up our community hub and say “I need a food parcel “so we would then do a referral across to [the supplier] for that, for the food parcel, then they would send me a list every Thursday for the following week on who was on their list for food and in what area. So I would break that down into areas and I would then send an email out to the lead of the community group and say I've these people in this area who need a food parcel, are you able to find someone who can pick it up and take it and drop it off and they would say yes and then...” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire)

Funding designated lead organisations

Rather than funding the food which was then redistributed, other councils provided funding to a designated lead organisation(s) for further redistribution. For example, Edinburgh Council provided significant funding to EVOC (the Council for Voluntary Service for the City of Edinburgh) who were commissioned to provide the governance over the further distribution of funds to other third sector organisations. Derry and Strabane District Council provided funding to the eight local Community Growth Partnerships which appointed an organisation to lead on the food response in each area. Similarly, Belfast Council provided funding to nine 'strategic partners' to provide food and other support at a local community level. As well as utilising the funding to provide services the strategic partners also further distributed this funding to local groups.

“We had nine strategic community partners across the four areas and each of those partners were working with local community organisations in their area. The strategic leads were given funding and they used that to support smaller community groups, more local, to meet the needs in their areas.” (Council staff respondent, Belfast)

In areas where this model was utilised, the rationale for providing the funding directly to the third sector rather than undertake a significant level of direct food provision themselves, was often the belief that the third sector were in a better position to know and respond to community needs.

“We relied heavily on our colleagues within the third sector, because in most cases... the third sector are there in the neighbourhoods working across the city and were able... hundreds of organisations who were within GCVS [Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector], who quickly used their local knowledge, their local skills and their transport, etc.” (Council staff respondent, Glasgow)

4.1.6 Staff support

Councils also contributed significant staff resources to support food responses. For example, Herefordshire Council's Talk Community Response teams had Community Link Workers to 'inform, support, and coordinate the community response'. Similarly, in Moray the existing community support team, whose usual focus was to support capacity building in the community, took on the role of supporting the community response. Each community support officer in the team had an allocated geographical area and they worked with the local people and organisations in that area.

"This was just phenomenal what the volunteers were doing. But, they did need somebody behind them that they could come back and say, "Oh my goodness. What do we do about this? Who can do that?" That allowed them to get on with doing what they were doing." (Council staff respondent, Moray)

The role included supporting funding applications, providing a point of contact for support, connecting people across the areas to share learning and ensuring a collective, joined up response within the community. Swansea Council set up a Food Administration Team made up of 14 redeployed staff that signposted people to help with food and Local Area Coordinators provided signposting to support, help with shopping and were involved in local volunteer coordination.

Some council staff also contributed to third sector responses in a very 'hands on' way. For example, the Swansea Food Administration Team sometimes did deliveries of the food parcels for the local food bank. Moray Council school catering teams supported a local third sector organisation to cook large quantities of food to provide a meals on wheels service. Greenwich Council's Environmental Health team provided food safety training for non-food aid groups and individuals preparing meals.

"...there was a sailing charity that doesn't normally distribute hot food, and they were making hot food in their kitchen and delivering it to people's houses. We just made sure that they had all of the right health, environmental health stuff. But we also put Environmental Health in touch with groups to make sure everything was safe." (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

4.2 Key Actor: Local food poverty alliances and food partnerships

Partnership working was a key characteristic of local responses to food access issues over the spring and summer of 2020. In some cases, these were through existing alliances and partnerships (such as food poverty alliances and food partnerships), in others formal alliances, partnerships or networks were newly formed (including COVID-19 response partnerships) and in others there was looser partnership working.

4.2.1 Food poverty alliances in the Food Power network

As discussed in the methodological appendix four of the case study areas were specifically chosen due to the presence of a food poverty alliance that was a member of the Food Power network, a UK-wide network of food poverty alliances.⁷ These areas were Belfast, Cardiff, Herefordshire and Moray. These alliances played different roles in the response depending

⁷ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/map/>

on the focus of their activity prior to the pandemic. The research did not involve a formal evaluation of the work of these alliances but did provide some important insight into their role and activity over this time.

Food Cardiff sits within the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board's local public health team, and works closely with the Cardiff Council, as well as various community food and food aid organisations working across the city. Food Cardiff played a leading role in the COVID-19 food response across the city. Their activities included use of social media to flag actions being taken by organisations, businesses, and service providers to help link people with food. It was hoped this would reduce duplication of services. They also wrote a briefing note for Cardiff Council, which outlined the key issues they had identified and their recommendations for what the Council should do. The main recommendations in this briefing note were for the Council to establish a COVID-19 Food Response group, which Food Cardiff then took the lead on setting up. In April, Food Cardiff, in partnership with the Covid-19 Food Response Task group, Cardiff Council and Cardiff 3rd Sector Council set up Cardiff's "City-wide food response".⁸

In Moray, the Fairer Moray Forum continued to operate at a strategic level, with a focus on poverty alleviation. They continued to meet during the lockdown but, due to their remit, were not directly involved in any of the 'on the ground' food responses.

In Herefordshire the food poverty alliance had not been active in early 2020 so did not engage in work related to responding to COVID-19 in the first months of the pandemic. However, it was described that as a result of seeing how many different groups were engaging in responses to concerns about food access across the county over the spring 2020, meetings of the alliance were re-initiated in July 2020, particularly with an aim to help coordinate activity.

Belfast Food Network sent out a comprehensive newsletter to all members every fortnight throughout the Summer of 2020 which detailed some of the responses across the city, some of the work the Councils were doing and different funding opportunities. To some extent they also became a contact point for people who wanted to help. They also distributed funding which they had received to provide grants to local food businesses, aimed at alleviating the impact of COVID-19 and supporting businesses to adapt their business models. Belfast Food Network opted to provide this support, rather than a direct food response themselves, describing the provision of food aid in the city as being "*saturated*".

4.2.2 Other existing alliances (non-Food Power Network members)

In Leeds, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Argyll and Bute there were established alliances that played a role in the food aid response. Leeds Food Aid Network included third sector partners engaged in food aid, food waste reduction and sustainability.⁹ Over the spring and summer 2020 they supported network members with volunteer recruitment and help in activities such as transportation, in addition to conducting an audit of food aid provision and recording the activities of partners. During the pandemic, the Food Aid Network gathered reports on progress and challenges from their members. Weekly meetings

⁸ Food Cardiff (2020) Cardiff city wide food response, version 6.1 30th April 2020. Available here: <https://foodcardiff.com/app/uploads/2020/05/30.4.20-City-wide-food-response-6.1.pdf>

⁹ Please note - subsequent to the period of data collection Leeds Food Aid Network registered as a member of the Food Power network.

were held between the Council and their commercial and third sector partners. This provided a means of identifying opportunities to collaborate, and for the different organisations to offer one another support.

“The Food Aid Network and the weekly call was there to try and enable and facilitate them working together and seeing what some of the challenges were.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

The Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance, part of Feeding Britain, was well established in the city. The alliance comprised 70 member organisations. In February 2020, staff members from Storehouse (who were tasked by the Council to provide food supplies to food banks) and Feeding Bradford and Keighley met with the Council to discuss the likely support food banks would need in the face of increased food insecurity. One of the first actions was an audit of food bank use, in order to be able to predict the stocks which might subsequently be required. Subsequently, Storehouse and Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance worked closely together, liaising weekly to ensure strategic supply of food and data reporting. Feeding Bradford and Keighley Alliance also supplied Storehouse with 25 tonnes of food.

Argyll and Bute Council initiated the set-up of the Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum in early 2019 with the rationale of connecting community food providers and building relations between them and the Council. After preparatory work the Food Forum was officially ‘launched’ with an event in February 2020 and members of all food banks in the area were invited to the launch. The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the March – August 2020 period to share experiences and support each other.

Edible Edinburgh, an alliance of organisations working across Edinburgh which works on food issues in multiple domains, including access to affordable food, food growing, sustainability, and the development of a healthy food culture, created a specific COVID-19 webpage providing signposting to the actions being taken in Edinburgh to support people with food access including links to council and third sector support. In Glasgow, the existing Glasgow Food Policy Partnership, supported by the Sustainable Food Places co-ordinator and Glasgow Community Food Network, played a key role in connecting and supporting local groups providing a response.

4.2.3 New COVID-19 partnerships

In some areas, such as Greenwich, Merton, Glasgow and Swansea, we heard of partnerships that were developed in response to COVID-19. These tended to be built on existing relationships or partnerships that were in place already. The partnerships sought to link up and facilitate communal support for organisations that were providing a food aid response.

One of the first actions taken by Greenwich Council was to establish a COVID-19 food response group. This was chaired by the CEO of Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency and included members such as Greenwich Foodbank, council staff from the Public Health and Environmental Health departments, Children’s Centre staff, Health Visitors, Charlton Athletic Community Trust, representatives of community centres and various third sector groups. A clearly defined food response pathway was developed in the first few weeks of the pandemic, setting out the organisational responsibility for different needs and

the criteria for the different forms of support. This group met regularly throughout March to July 2020.

In Merton, over the spring and summer of 2020, a new network of food providers was established called the Merton Community Fridge Network (MCFN). Members of the group included Sustainable Merton, Wimbledon Food bank, Wimbledon Guild, The Don's, Kommunity Kitchen, Salvation Army, Commonsense Community Development Trust, Friends in St. Helier, Association for Polish Family, Tooting and Mitcham Football Club. All these were organisations that were providing some form of food aid in response to the pandemic.

In Glasgow, a newly established coalition was set up, Food for Good Glasgow. The informal coalition was led by Glasgow Community Food Network with partners including Slow Food Glasgow, Strathclyde Uni Food Sharing group with oversight and extra capacity from Glasgow Food Policy Partnership. The coalition was set up to offer community groups support with supplies and logistics.¹⁰ One of the first responses to concerns about rising food insecurity in Swansea during the pandemic was the Swansea Together project. Swansea Together was initiated very early in the pandemic by Matthew's House in response to seeing people who were vulnerably housed being unable to access usual daily meal provision offered across the city. Matthew's House organised a meeting very early (18th March), bringing together their network of people and organisations who they worked in coordination with across the city. This included other meal providers, representatives from the Council, SCVS, an NHS homeless outreach nurse, and other organisations involved in supporting people who are homeless, such as Crisis. The aim was to provide a meal service to ensure that people who are vulnerably housed, many of whom had been moved off the streets and put into temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfasts and hostels, were still able to have regular access meals.

4.2.4 Informal partnerships and working together

As well as the formal partnerships that were in place or established there was also a lot of informal partnership working in many of the case studies.

One participant described the collaboration that took place amongst third sector organisations in West Berkshire,

“The collaboration between the charities in West Berkshire has been incredible. We have all stepped up. We have all built relations where they maybe weren't as strong before. They are strong relationships, and I am very proud of the relationships that we have, sat here today. It has been amazing. And we've all done damned well at it. I'm so proud of us all, it's been brilliant, how we've worked together.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In Edinburgh it was described how stronger partnerships developed over the spring and summer, facilitated by weekly meetings, as described below:

“There are four localities in Edinburgh, and in those localities are all sorts of community groups... But, what happened was, although these localities were known to each other, and there was, kind of, loose working relationships, we set up weekly

¹⁰ Sustainable Food places (2020) Glasgow's local response to COVID-19. 21st May 2020. Available here : https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/news/may20_glasgow_local_response_to_covid_19/

meetings, so people got together and decided what the strategy was and how they would, you know, work together to get funds, get food out, and any additional needs.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

4.3 Key Actor: Existing third sector organisations doing direct food provision

Existing third sector organisations played a key role in the response, including food banks and organisations already providing non-emergency food aid. Some of the local community organisations often set up local helplines, for example, in Derry and Strabane the lead organisation for each of the district electoral areas ran a local helpline for their designated area. Third sector organisations also undertook similar promotion activities to that of the Councils (described above), being proactive in getting the information about possible support out to the community.

Generally, across the third sector organisations the types of food provision were food parcels for collection, food parcels for home delivery, take away hot meals, and home delivery of hot meals. In order to provide these services existing food aid providers made a significant number of adaptations. Referring to local food banks one respondent in Herefordshire observed:

“They went through a huge overhaul, in the short space of time, as well as having to adapt their delivery model... Not all, some of them have [started delivery of food parcels], and have remained with that, some have socially distanced appointments... So a lot of them are offering food parcels that are pre-packed with a set type of ingredients, with different food in them.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

Another food bank in Argyll and Bute spoke of redesigning their services:

“We redesigned the service. We decided that we had a layout and a hall that would facilitate a walkthrough service. So basically people come to the front door. We reduced the amount of information we were going to ask for, because we decided that we would just be a food provider, not an advice centre or a counselling or support service.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

The individual case study reports provide full details of these adaptations which are summarised below.

Means of distribution:

- Providing home deliveries of food parcels
- ‘Collect and go’ model for food parcels
- Reduced the number of food parcel distribution sessions
- Food parcels provided to referral agents to distribute directly
- Other people able to pick up food parcels on someone else’s behalf

Parcel Contents

- Pre-packed parcels (rather than offering choice)
- Parcel content (amount and food stuffs) varying with food supply
- Increasing size and content of the food parcels (e.g. 7 days supply rather than 3)

Referrals:

- Accepting self-referral
- Accepting alternate form of referrals from referrers (e.g. phone calls, emails, e-referrals)

Other:

- Buying food wholesale (to overcoming sourcing issues in early weeks)
- Minimal information collected from people accessing support – simply about providing food
- Changed venues to allow for better social distancing

Other types of community food providers, such as those providing community meals, community lunches and community cooking groups changed as a result of these types of activities not continuing during lockdown. The types of changes made included providing hot meals for takeaway, home deliveries of hot meals, providing food parcels (collect and delivered) and virtual cookery and other support sessions.

“...there is a church, for instance, that has for years provided hot meals on a Saturday for those who were either lonely, homeless or whatever. And that is one that we have advertised for years. And they changed their operation during COVID to producing takeaway meals, and they were then open more than just Saturdays. So, they were inviting people to come and take a meal. And they were not alone, there were a significant number of those things going on.” (Third sector respondent, Greenwich).

We also learned of some organisations providing food packs as a way to reduce the number of times people may have needed to visit the shops, therefore reducing their risk. Such packs were not intended to meet all their food needs, but rather to keep essential supplies topped up.

“I call them pensioner packs because they were like basic supplies to pensioners who probably had maybe food but just needed like bread, the wee basics that they may be picked up from the shop every other day.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

As well as this direct food provision we heard of other types of support being offered by the existing food aid providers including vouchers and cash payments. Some third sector organisation started providing vouchers for shops, either as their main form of support or in addition to food parcels. The Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) reported use of vouchers as an alternative to direct food provision¹¹. Moray Food Plus, for example, distributed vouchers to families who, ordinarily, would have attended the children’s activities programmes, targeted at families who would benefit from this provision for financial or social reasons, during the Easter school holidays. Other vouchers were provided to single people and couples. These were distributed through partner agencies, for example, the Drug and Alcohol team who identified the households who would benefit from this provision. One of the benefits of this approach, for the food providers themselves, was the easing of pressure on the direct food responses.

¹¹ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>

“For us, one of the reasons for doing it was, especially at the beginning, we were so busy and, obviously, we didn’t have our volunteers and we were getting hit with a lot of big family referrals. We could go back to the referrer and say, “Actually, we can actually give you a £50 gift card or £100 gift card if that suits the family better.” Part of it was about giving us a bit of respite as well from these big referrals.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Other organisations provided people with vouchers for fuel. We also heard of one food bank in Argyll and Bute providing all food bank clients with money to cover fuel bills.

“Twice during the summer we gave them money towards their gas and electricity bills. It was funded by grants that we specifically applied for to do that. The general thing was, “Please can we not have things that we have to cook in an oven because we can’t afford the power?” We did it across the board because it’s not for us to judge who deserves it and who doesn’t. Everybody who came in those periods got money for gas and electric. (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Although not an adaptation that food aid providers necessarily intended to make, we learned of times when food banks had to temporarily close due to a COVID-19 case amongst staff or volunteers or to accommodate self-isolation needs.

4.4 Key actor: Third sector organisations newly offering direct food provision

As well as the adaptations made by existing community food providers a number of organisations newly started providing food aid. For example, a survey by the Glasgow Community Food Network that mapped food aid providers during the pandemic reported that of the 95 organisations participating in the survey 18 were new providers of food aid, 14 of which were providing food parcels. Similar to the existing food aid providers the types of food provision offered by these organisations were commonly food parcels for collection, food parcels for home delivery, take away hot meals, and home delivery of hot meals. The switch to food aid was in direct response to the needs that were being witnessed in communities. One participant from Belfast said:

“We found, as well, a lot of our groups are registered charities, with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. And I suppose obviously they have to carry out at least one of the 12 purposes. Their purposes before the pandemic wouldn’t have been delivery of food parcels or collecting medications or whatever, but they have then veered into that way of working. So, a lot of them, they just steered in different directions, just to meet the need of their communities.” (Council staff respondent, Belfast)

The types of organisations newly providing food aid were incredibly varied. This included organisations that ordinarily provided support (but not food support) to specific populations groups, housing associations, community councils, development trusts, churches, faith groups, and sports clubs.

“They changed the project. They completely reprofiled a project basically, to be able to meet the needs of their community, which is basically people with learning disabilities and their families. So, they walked straight into the middle of very regular parcels and actually hot meals and things as well” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

“There was funding for [food aid given to] 28 housing associations out of the 30, I think it was, as well, so quite a few of them hadn’t done any food or food partnership working before.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

As well as this direct food provision often the new food aid providers offered a service to support people with shopping.

“The best service to the elderly was the shopping and befriending service and prescription service. That was the sort of thing that they needed. We would have been doing a lot of that... So, I had the helpline number, which was advertised all around so that everybody was aware of it in the local area. I took the call if someone needed shopping, either I would do it or some of the other volunteers would do it, or a prescription delivered, or if it was a case of somebody had phoned an order through a shop and needed the delivery doing for the shop, all on a voluntary basis, none of it funded. (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Organisations were very proactive in publicising their new food aid services. For example, one research participant talked of a community group in Belfast making posters with their contact details and sellotaping it to the windows of houses in their area. Others did leaflets posted through people’s doors.

“We got some funding as well to get some printing done, so we printed up, we got some leaflets from Elgin and we also got notes printed up to say, “We’re the community association. If you need us, here are the contact numbers. Don’t be embarrassed, everybody’s in the same boat,” and this was way back at the time of the first lockdown, so, way back in March, we started. We rolled that out, and then a group of us, the trustees, went around every single house in the town and put something through everybody’s doors.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

4.5 Key Actor: Informal groups

Another key support for food access during the first national lockdown came from quite informal ad hoc support that was provided at a very local level. This support was often in the form of helping out with shopping, collecting prescriptions or providing welfare calls. Usually this was neighbours helping neighbours or very localised COVID-19 response groups.

“What we found was a lot of community groups had started up their own WhatsApp groups, their own Facebook groups, in order to address the needs of the people who were isolating and shielding and couldn’t get access to food or prescriptions or they arranged welfare calls. That was being established in communities all over the city and the county.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

“The burden of the actual supporting communities was taken by those voluntary groups who were going out and doing the shopping and picking up the prescriptions and delivering them.” (Council staff respondent, West Berkshire)

It was shared by one third sector respondent in our Cardiff workshop that it was important that this response was “neighbour-to-neighbour” and that “keeping it less formalised and more neighbourly” was important to them.

As well as support with shopping some of the informal neighbourhood groups provided free food parcels. For example, in Leeds, where some of the food bank distribution centres had shut, informal and small scale neighbourhood level food bank type activity was established,

“I want to call them, kind of, neighbourhood food banks, but like on particular streets people giving out free food or collecting food and giving it out that way. They’re smaller neighbourhoods. So, some of that provision popping up, a little bit in areas where our food bank centres would usually have been.” (Third sector respondent, Leeds)

4.6 Key Actor: Local businesses

Across case study areas many local businesses adapted to offer delivery or takeaway. Two websites were developed in Northern Ireland to provide a source of information on what business were available. ‘InYourArea’, is a website which allows people to search from businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.¹² ‘Who is delivering? Northern Ireland’ is a Facebook page that shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.¹³

The business response in Cardiff was described:

“In Cardiff, we are really lucky in that there are a lot of organisations that do food delivery, not just the big supermarkets, there are lots of local shops, and a lot of the local shops did actually really meet that head on by adapting their working model as well actually, and moving to deliveries and things like that, which certainly in Cardiff helped.” (Council staff respondent, Cardiff)

Hospitality businesses that were closed for ‘usual’ service also started to provide free or low-cost meals to people in need. For example, a local café in one of the towns in Argyll and Bute prepared and delivered five hot meals a week for £10 for anyone who was elderly and vulnerable. Similarly, in Belfast local pubs started providing meals to the elderly:

“Two of the pubs here just started to do free hot meals for the elderly. They just started to give out the odd hundred meals here and there and stuff like that.”
(Third sector respondent, Belfast)

Other businesses that ordinarily did not provide a food service also became involved in supporting food access in a variety of ways. For example, in Swansea the Mecca Bingo Hall became engaged in cooking for people who are vulnerably housed. In one town in Argyll and Bute a local toy shop became a point of contact for people that found themselves without food. In Greenwich a boiler maintenance company started collecting food and making it available to people in need.

¹² https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

“...there is a shop that belongs to a boiler maintenance company – which may seem strange – and they put a table outside and labelled it as “Food donations for those in need.” They put a basket out there for people to donate into, and then they invited people to call and ask for food... That was a business. (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

In Belfast a local frame maker and gallery started making and delivering soup to people who were isolating in south and east Belfast. A team of local chefs from local restaurants made the soup. Their website describes the initiative, which finished on the 31st of May 2020:

“Today is the last day of our soup project. Over the past 10 weeks, with the help of a team of restaurants, cafes, arts organisations, home cooks, drivers, harassed pals and well-wishers we have produced nearly 14,000 portions of soup to help feed our city’s most vulnerable. We have also supported 10 other charitable ventures throughout Belfast and provided the start-up seed money and mentorship for other soup kitchens throughout our city. We feel incredibly privileged that we have been trusted to do this.”¹⁴

In West Berkshire the owner of a local kitchen company started collecting and delivering food parcels on behalf of the local food bank.

“She [the owner] decided to contact the food bank and say, “What can I do to help? My shop is shut but we are going to sit in our shop every day, just in case, for any mad reason, somebody wants to come in and buy a kitchen because we don’t know what else to do. Can we help you? So, they became a delivery hub. So, we would literally make up the boxes for Thatcham, take them over to [name], and her and her husband would deliver them out in the afternoons, in their Dream Doors van.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

5. Targeted interventions

In addition to support targeted at people who were experiencing low income or were shielding, support with access to food was also in place for other key groups. Including families with school aged children, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers and refugees.

5.1 School food

The response for free school meal replacements differed across each of the four constituent countries and, within this, there was variation across local authorities. Full details of the national schemes are described in two previous reports published by this project.¹⁵ The

¹⁴ <https://www.frameworkbelfast.com/post/619622687522832384/today-is-the-last-day-of-our-soup-project>

¹⁵ Lambie-Mumford, H., Loopstra, R. and Gordon, K. (2020) Mapping responses to risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK, published August 2020; Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

Department for Communities and the Department for Education led on the national scheme in Northern Ireland, providing cash transfers to all eligible households. The Scottish and Welsh Governments encouraged local authorities to adopt approaches that met local needs and many opted, following an initial period of direct food provision, for a cash first approach. In England, schools and local authorities were encouraged to design the scheme although a national voucher system became the most heavily utilised option.

England

In the English local authority areas we heard examples of other support being put in place for families with school children over and above the national voucher scheme. A headteacher from Greenwich participated in the research. They reported that the school where they worked remained open for approximately 25-30% of their registered students. These included vulnerable children, and the children of key workers. Students still attending school were able to collect surplus food provided by FareShare, as they had done prior to the pandemic and, where appropriate, were signposted to food banks. The school also began providing food parcels to the homes of vulnerable students not attending school, but about whom food access concerns were raised when the school made contact with the families:

“Well, they weren’t proactive. They didn’t email us because they were vulnerable, and part of our role during that lockdown was to email them and make telephone contact with the children to ensure that they were still safe. But in that you end up inevitably speaking to parents or with parents, and that way we were able to identify need, and some of them would say about food, and we were able to then deliver packages to parents.” (Education sector respondent, Greenwich)

Herefordshire Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers. To support these households, the Council also engaged with the Rotary who were providing food parcels. Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks who were offering support to families that were in need but not currently eligible for free school meals.

We also learned of food banks providing support to families eligible for free school meals. For example, in West Berkshire one of the food banks reported families eligible for free school meals were contacting them for support, particularly during the early months of the pandemic.

“During COVID, obviously when free school meals during the first lockdown wasn’t organised, we had a huge uptake. And that was obviously something that the families were saying – “We are entitled to free school meals, can you help us?” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In response, in addition to delivering food parcels to families, the food bank also provided parcels to about six or seven local schools for them to distribute as they saw fit. We also

heard examples of food banks proactively contacting schools in the area to let them know the food bank was available as a source of support.

Northern Ireland

In the Northern Ireland case studies we heard of third sector organisations providing additional support over and above the cash transfers provided by the Department for Communities and the Department for Education such as providing packed lunches and activity packs. In Belfast one of the food banks provided lunch bags to school children during the summer school holidays providing 500 bags of five days' worth of lunches. Many of the families who accessed this support were those who were ineligible for the cash transfers that were provided to households eligible for free school meals through the national scheme. Referring to this national scheme the interviewee said:

“Some of our families weren’t getting it because they’re not entitled to free school meals. So, they weren’t getting that support because they didn’t have that entitlement because mum and dad’s income is maybe a wee bit over that.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

Scotland

The response in Scotland differed between the local authority areas, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Free school meal replacement provision in 4 Scottish local authorities

Argyll and Bute	Initially meals were collected from the school (from mid-March), then families received food boxes (mid-April – end of June), provision changed to cash transfers during the summer holidays (July onwards)
Edinburgh	Cash grants were provided to families - £2.25 per day, paid fortnightly
Glasgow	Families with children who were entitled to free school meals were provided with vouchers worth £20 per child each fortnight. The vouchers were for one supermarket chain (Farmfoods)
Moray	Initially grab and go bags collected from schools, changed to provision of vouchers after Easter holidays (from mid-April). Vouchers of £2.50 per day per child were provided fortnightly.

As can be seen from Table 2 Argyll and Bute Council moved from a direct food response to a cash payment scheme at the start of the summer holidays. The rationale for this change was:

“And then as lockdown eased, we felt, at that time, it was the appropriate time to move away from that direct response and to provide a cash payment during the summer holiday period as lockdown eased. So, we have come in for a bit of criticism as to why are you delivering food and not enabling cash? But if you lived in a rural area, your nearest shop is ten miles away, there was no public transport and you had three kids to look after, having cash made no difference. So, that was very much a response for those families, and then when transport started to improve, kids were no

longer at school, we felt, at that stage, it was absolutely the right thing to do, is protect the dignity and choice by providing a cash payment. So, that's what we did." (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute).

The rationale for cash provision in Edinburgh was that this cash would support social distancing measures to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus:

"A decision was made quite early on that those in receipt of free school meals would be given money and not food as a response, for various reasons, but I suppose one of the bigger ones being not wanting lots of families coming to one location, or in terms of trying to reduce the spread of the virus was one of the big concerns." (Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

As well as these cash transfers the Council provided additional food packages once a fortnight to families identified as more vulnerable by school staff. The packages were designed to provide food for two weeks' worth of lunches, breakfast cereal and milk. The rationale for the additional fortnightly food boxes was based on concerns that the money provided would be absorbed by other essential costs rather than food, as shared below:

"But we were also aware that some families, that money, if it goes directly into an account, if there are direct debits, or whatever, needing to come out, the money might, the families would have the best intentions, but it might never actually materialise into food." (Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

In Edinburgh Magic Breakfast provided replacements for some of the breakfast clubs that are usually held in schools.¹⁶

"We also linked with Magic Breakfast, who already run some of our breakfast clubs, and they wanted to continue providing that food to the clubs that they, or to the schools that they normally provide it for, which, initially, was a little bit difficult. But, again, it was mostly taken on by the schools and managed by the schools, and then, eventually, they managed to do direct delivery to houses through, I'm sure it was through Amazon. So, it was very much their normal breakfast provision, so cereal, bagels and beans type thing." (Council staff respondent, Edinburgh)

In Moray, schools and school link workers were proactive in contacting the eligible families to make sure that they were receiving the vouchers and explained how the vouchers would work and how to use them. Being rural, there was some concern regarding the travel costs that families would incur using the vouchers.

"What we noticed regarding the food vouchers in our area was actually the cost of the travelling to go to Asda or Tesco. Up here obviously our bus fares are really expensive, so for a mum to take her two kids for instance on the bus to Asda, you're maybe talking about £10 in bus fare. So the way they were seeing it they maybe

¹⁶ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>; Magic Breakfast (2020) Amazon home deliveries, <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/news/amazon-home-deliveries>

have £25 voucher but had a big outlay on bus fares.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

To counteract this, one local organisation made an arrangement with Stagecoach, the local bus operator, to provide free travel on the bus for families who needed it. Through the community organisation families would receive a code which they could use on the Stagecoach app which gave them an all-day travel ticket. About 70 free passes were provided and used.

Wales

The schemes in the two case study areas in Wales evolved from initially being direct food provision to then taking the form of cash transfers. In Swansea, initially, replacements were provided in the form of cold lunches for pick-up. However, it was found that the take up of this provision was very low, possibly because of the difficulty of having to go to the school to pick up the lunch and because of safety concerns. This was then changed to schools providing a weekly shopping bag for families to pick up on Mondays, or it was delivered, enabling them to prepare food themselves at home for the week. This food bag system was only in place for a short period of time, as the Council then started providing a cash replacement instead, depositing money directly into parents’ or guardians’ bank account.

As Swansea is a City of Sanctuary, there is a significant population of asylum seekers and refugees.¹⁷ Ensuring a system of free school meal replacements for these families required a different response than money being deposited into bank accounts because these families may not have debit cards or because they may have limitations on funds they are allowed to have in bank accounts. Sandwich-type food parcels were also recognised to not provide culturally appropriate foods for many of these families. The Swansea Council for Voluntary Service and local authority and other organisations lobbied the Home Office for the following:

“We did manage to lobby and put pressure on the Home Office to actually allow the free school meal allowance go onto their Aspen Cards, which meant that they could then also have food, shopping, that way as well. So that I think was a big, well, we were all really rejoicing, we were thrilled with that.”¹⁸ (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

The scheme in Cardiff went through a similar development, initially starting with a “grab bag” programme, where parents could come to a school and pick up a takeaway lunch bag. In response to concerns with this approach, regarding the safety, stigma and people not wanting to go out, this was changed to vouchers. However, quickly this was changed and a system that was then offered was a direct cash payment system was introduced. Families received a direct money transfer to their bank account via ParentPay (an online payment system already established for paying school fees). The voucher system was also still offered, but it was shared that most parents opted for the ParentPay option. The value of support was £19.50 per week per child, covering both free school meal provision and breakfast provision. It was noted that in some cases, food parcels may have been provided (i.e. in cases where a family was self-isolating or where children were known to social services).

¹⁷ <https://swansea.cityofsanctuary.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

5.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups

In some areas the support provided to different population groups was discussed. The extent to which Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups were accessing the available support was a cause of concern. During the online workshop in Glasgow, whether different ethnic groups may have faced additional barriers to accessing food over the spring and summer in the city was discussed. This prompted reflections about whether such barriers were caused by culturally insensitive food provision, or resistance to seeking support from food aid. Respondents shared their knowledge and perceptions of barriers experienced by these Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in the following quotes:

“We have had a significant amount of feedback from ethnic minority populations in the city that they haven’t always felt able to access white services. I think that is really critical in a city that has as high a population of ethnic minorities as we do... I do actually think it is important to capture and how we think about it going forward.”
(Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

The subject of provision for Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities was also a theme running through the stakeholder workshop for Bradford. Some participants questioned whether the support from the food banks had reached Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities:

“...because what we have found in Bradford is that we haven’t had the call on the food banks from some of our Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities that we would’ve felt was appropriate, and, actually, [names] are currently looking at how that can be redressed, and looking at the possibility of specific satellite groups and food bank provision.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

This perspective was, however, challenged by one of our food bank respondents:

“We haven’t found that. Although our origins are faith-based, we’re a food bank, first and foremost, and we serve the whole community, and we have a huge percentage of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community accessing our services, and we have lots of referrals from different agencies who support Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, as well as asylum-seekers, as well as young mums/families. So, it’s not our experience that those people aren’t accessing our services or have limited access to our services.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Similarly, the work of other organisations to ensure different faith and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups were reached by food aid initiatives were described:

“...we have examples here, in Keighley, of good practice around this which have been led by the Keighley Food Poverty Group and [others], and they’ve done a lot of work with the mosques to get mosques involved, to also get imams to try and break down some of the barriers to people accessing food from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

In Edinburgh one organisation, Edinburgh Community Food conducted research to better understand the needs of these communities over the course of the spring and summer 2020 and tailored their response accordingly:

“We did a whole survey with Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, because we realised really early on that they weren’t engaging. They wouldn’t engage through the Council helplines... They were phoning us directly, and we were saying, “Well, you need to go through the Council to get this.” They were saying, “We don’t really want to do that.” We actually ended up getting a new piece of funding. We did a survey to find out what their eating habits were, what they needed, and then we built a tailored box round it.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

In the Belfast workshops participants highlighted how migrant workers or people working on temporary visas may have been disproportionately impacted by food access issues. One participant highlighted a reduction in public transport which impacted people on temporary work permits who may not have access to a car. They observed that this exacerbated access issues for some people in Asian communities due to the reduced opening hours of some of the Asian food retailers.

“[People who are] here only for a temporary basis, I mean, we’ve got six months or one year with your work permit, they don’t have cars to be able to drive down to the shops. There wasn’t enough transport either.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

Another respondent voiced concerns that the needs of migrant workers who were impacted by the closure of hospitality businesses were not considered in the responses to supporting food access. A submission by email following the workshop stated:

“Finally, the impact of many people’s jobs, particularly in the hospitality and catering industry, and migrants and diverse communities in this sector are severely also impacted. They may provide food to others but they need to be considered about who provides them with food?” (Third sector respondent - email submission, Belfast)

5.3 People experiencing homelessness

In West Berkshire the responses that were put in place to support people experiencing homelessness who had been provided temporary accommodation by the Council were discussed. Those providing food to this population group highlighted a challenge with this particular community was matching their needs with the type of products with which they were being provided. In addition to lacking food storage and preparation facilities, many people lacked food preparation skills:

“And that was quite interesting on the food side of it as well, because an awful lot of the people that we rehoused hadn’t really been catering for themselves for some considerable time, so there had to be some other things put in. Because a lot of the foods we were supplying, I think the classic line was, “No, when I said I wanted some food, mate, I meant ‘food’ food.” So, essentially, we were trying to supply fresh fruit and everything else and, in a way, there was a bit of a mismatch between what people wanted out of the ‘food’ food and what we were actually supplying, from our point of view, being a balanced diet as best we could make it, with a lot of fresh produce. Whereas an awful lot of the people we were supporting, who had been

long-term, either in temporary accommodation or had been homeless, whether it be street-homeless or whatever, didn't actually have the skill set to do that. So, at the time, we did have to do an awful lot of ready meals, which is not exactly what we set out to do. So, that of course meant that we had to go and try and source different items as well." (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In Herefordshire, before the pandemic, a number of organisations provided hot meals to people who were experiencing homelessness or vulnerably housed. They offered various breakfasts and hot meals over the week, all coordinated so that there was something on offer each day of the week. These providers faced challenges around volunteers having to shield or self-isolate and their premises were also not of sufficient size to accommodate social distancing. Whilst one existing provider was able to make adjustments and continued to offer a Sunday takeaway meal most of the other hot meal provision was coordinated centrally through the Salvation Army:

"Over the peak of it all, we managed to get a single provision, if you like, a single provider centred around the Salvation Army who had a mobile unit. Then the volunteers that were able to still help worked together with that unit."

No referrals were needed or requested for this provision and it was open to anyone to attend.

5.4 Concern for groups who may not have been adequately supported

Whilst there were population groups that may have received targeted support there was still concern about other availability of support for other groups. For example, in Cardiff one respondent noted:

"I think it is still people who are most vulnerable who have been affected the most, and I think they fall through the net a bit on some occasions. We had people who had sensory incapacities, who use BSL communication, etc., who were missing out on a lot of information... they did not know what was happening. We also had engagement with people with learning disabilities as well, who really felt let down by not being able to access the information. Sometimes that relates to food as well, because they are not able to communicate in the same way." (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

6. How people accessed support

Across case study areas there were a number of access points to receiving support.

6.1 Phone numbers for people seeking support

As noted above, both local councils and third sector organisations ran helplines, from which callers would be provided with or directed to appropriate support. These helplines became a key access point for food support.

In areas where there was a number of helplines running, one participant reflected that this may have caused some confusion, although organisations were subsequently trying to overcome this:

“That was a bit of confusion, to be honest, I have to say, because people in [island name removed], they had so many phone numbers they could possibly phone, there was some confusion, which we are now trying to pull together and trying to point people to the food bank. It was getting very complicated and people were getting quite confused.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

6.2 Referrals

As well as these centralised support lines to which people could self-refer, providers also accepted referrals from other organisations. This included referrals from statutory agencies, other third sector organisations and local community groups. Organisations that already had well established referral pathways noticed changes in the volume and type of organisations who were referring to them.

“Some [referral partners] were not so good at working from home, so initially, some really just went off the radar and we did not seem to get any referrals from some of the Council departments that we used to get referrals from.” (Third sector respondent, Edinburgh)

Alternate referral options were also provided to referrers. We heard examples of existing food aid providers adapting their referral methods to ensure their services remained accessible despite the changes referrers were having to make, such as working from home and no longer seeing clients face to face. New options included providing referral partners with a standardised email template. We also learned of a partnership between the Trussell Trust and Citizens Advice to create a national helpline for people struggling to afford the basics.¹⁹ One participant told us they received referrals through this national helpline which overcame challenges of local Citizens Advice offices being closed.

Recognising there may have been uncertainty around the availability of the service, the food bank manager in Merton proactively contacted all referral agents to reassure them that the food bank was still operating, despite the fact that some statutory agencies were no longer seeing their clients:

“We spoke to all our voucher holders the first week that we realised there would be a lockdown. We told all of them we would be serving the community throughout the whole time. So, that’s over 230 organisations that have all got, I don’t know, 30, 50 or maybe 100 people sometimes, that all knew that if they had people that were talking to them about the lack of food that they have, they could then refer people to us.” (Third sector respondent, Merton)

6.3 Identifying people in need

Some organisations were also very proactive in identifying households who might require support. For example, the Salvation Army in Merton engaged with the organisation that ran a

¹⁹ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/advice-partnerships/help-through-hardship/>

local adventure playground and local schools to identify families likely to need extra support. They contacted the families, identified their needs and established a food donation and distribution system at the borough's adventure playground.

“Right at the very beginning, we were aware of how this was going to impact our local community, so we contacted the adventure playground and the local schools. Between us, we highlighted families that we were pretty sure were going to need some extra support. We then contacted those families direct, either through the schools or through the adventure playground, or through ourselves, and spoke to them about some of the needs that they might have.” (Third sector respondent, Merton)

In Belfast, knowledge of families who may need support, led to one organisation pre-empting food access issues in some of their existing clients:

“We kind of pre-empted, a week before lockdown we had already realised that this is going to be a struggle. And because people were panic buying, we were able to start making – I’m going to say - we had already identified the families we knew that would impact on the most, so we actually, the week before lockdown we had put out about 200 parcels to what would be our struggling families. We had already identified them.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

6.4 Informal word of mouth

There was also some evidence of more informal sharing of knowledge of support amongst recipients which may have led to people accessing the support. For example, new population groups were observed in the food bank in Merton. One respondent shared serving people from the Tamil, Portuguese and Spanish communities for the first time. These were not unique individuals, but “whole communities” suggesting there may have been a cascade of information about available help within particular groups. One respondent involved with the food bank shared:

“When they couldn’t help each other, they started finding ways to get help instead, just like they would usually have supported each other. When they were unable to do that and they found a way to get a bit of help, they would tell others in exactly the same situation as them.” (Third sector respondent, Merton)

Despite all these efforts participants expected that there would still be people reluctant to seek support. This was perhaps exacerbated by the responses being provided at a very local level.

“One of the problems we find within [village name removed] was that we had self-referrals but mainly referrals from other people because I think people are very reluctant, I think it’s maybe a north-east culture thing, but people are very reluctant to come forward and say, “I need help.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

7. Dynamics across the food response actors

A wide range of actors therefore responded in a variety of ways to food access issues during the COVID-19 pandemic between March – August 2020. Across the case studies we identified key dynamics between these actors including interaction and shared working, the role of new food providers and local responses to changing national provision.

7.1 Distribution of demand across actors

There was evidence that the demand for food support was distributed across the actors. This was perhaps most clearly exemplified in Leeds, where callers to the Council COVID-19 helpline were directed towards different actors depending on the urgency of their need, based on a newly established system (RAG rating):

“They’d ring the Local Welfare Support line and a referral was made to this new food warehouse. Then from that there was a RAG system, a red, amber, green system, where if it was rated red, they needed support within 24 hours and delivery was done direct by council staff that were working at the warehouse. If it was amber, it was they needed support within 2 to 3 days and that referral was distributed by the third sector that had partnered with us on this response. Then if it was green, I think that was four to seven days and that would go to the community care hubs for them to distribute the food or supplies.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

There were significant concerns about the impact of the pandemic on demand levels for existing food aid providers, many of whom saw an immediate spike in demand in the early weeks of the pandemic. However, as more actors came on board the demand was more distributed across actors and interventions. For example, one food bank in Leeds attributed reduced demand to both council interventions (direct food and Local Welfare Assistance) and other third sector partners. In addition, the food bank was very active in signposting people to these alternative sources of support. The food bank in Moray reported a similar experience:

“I think the reason we got quieter is because, obviously, we were signposting people to the [Council] money services ... and they were also able to get support locally as well.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

7.2 Provision by existing and new actors

A further dynamic emerged between the existing food aid providers and the new actors in the field. Whilst existing food aid providers welcomed the sentiment and the support of the new third sector and informal actors who were providing food aid there was some concern regarding this particularly around duplication of services and a lack of expertise.

For this reason, some of the existing organisations offered their support to the new actors. For example, despite some reservations about new ‘pop up’ food banks in the area the existing food bank in West Berkshire offered their support.

“So, these are very, very community-focused, and tend to be without criteria and tend to be without any of the signposting or the long-term. So, we’ve had conversations with all of them regarding food dependency and creating food dependency. Some of

them get it, some of them don't. Because they just want to help. So, we have very much stood back and have turned around and said, "If you need support, we are here. If you get a complex case that you are worried about, let us know." We have, obviously, all the safeguarding, training, and connections..." (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

One food bank in Argyll and Bute tried to discourage other new actors establishing their own food aid project, but rather offered to work together and provide the support which was needed.

"We had one group from another community who wanted to come to us just to get supplies of food, so they could set up their own wee food bank in their own back yard. We discouraged that and said, "Well, look, we are here, and we are happy to help. Why don't you get people to come here? If they can't come themselves a neighbour can come or another volunteer." (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute].

Being aware of both existing and new actors Bradford Council was very deliberate in its decision as to where to channel funding, preferring to support established providers, particularly where there were referral mechanisms in place, rather than ad hoc interventions:

"We had confidence in our food bank network. The spontaneity was at risk of precedent-setting, so we didn't feel confident that we could give Mrs Smith £200 for food when she was opening a Facebook site saying, "Come to my garden and you can have a food parcel," because, at the same time, we had a mosque that was cooking hot meals for 200 or 300 people a week, or a businessman who'd got together with a group of businessmen that was providing hot food. And because they didn't have a referral system, we didn't know whether that was providing to the most vulnerable or to anybody that turned up at the door. So, it gave us a really difficult issue of how we supported all of our communities when our relationship was through the food bank network... And there were dozens and dozens of people setting up, and if we'd have invested in each of them and it wasn't needs-based, it would've taken resource away from the food bank network that was absolutely needs-based. So, that was the challenge." (Council staff respondent, Bradford).

As a counter to this we also heard frustrations from those who found it hard to access funding for this reason. For example, one participant in Belfast said:

"In my view, it [funding] definitely wasn't available to organisations like myself who were not registered, but, you know, we really work at the grassroots. We've really done a lot. What we found was that there were families who are vulnerable, but were too shy to come forward and ask for help, and they're still out there...However, with no access to the funds, or without a centralised place where we could approach, I think all the vulnerable people were left out." (Third sector respondent, Belfast).

In some areas we learned of some tensions between new and existing food aid providers. We heard from participants who were concerned that this may have resulted in resources such as food donations, being channelled to the new food aid providers, impacting on the

usual supplies to the existing food aid providers. Others had concerns about the levels of expertise of the new food providers and the short-term nature of their intervention.

“And once the pandemic hit, what we found was that the existing network was basically thrown to the side, and then what we had was the community wanting to come in and tell us about how we should do this and how we should address it. And here, I’m not saying that the community shouldn’t play a role, but at the end of the day, you know, pop-up food banks lasted for 12 weeks, and here the existing networks of food banks are still here, still going on.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

7.3 End of government food box delivery schemes (local and national)

As noted above the large-scale direct food provision through local and national food box delivery schemes came to an end around July and August 2020 (with some variation). The rationale was that by this point, shielding was coming to an end and people receiving food boxes were better able to access other support as restrictions around friends and families visiting had been eased to some extent and retailers delivery capacity had increased. If there were still needs, our data suggests councils and other local providers worked to ensure ongoing support was provided by linking people in with other services.

In Leeds this wind down of the Council’s involvement in the food box scheme was described as being ‘handed back’ to the third sector:

“We put plans in place as demand started to decrease, around June time, to wind down the warehouse and to hand over deliveries to the third sector again.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

7.4 The evolution and future of the new food actors

Due to the timing of the data collection (winter 2020/2021) in which the pandemic was still very present, data on the intentions and plans of the new actors in the field was still ‘live’. However, some participants did provide insight into their plans for the shorter and longer term.

In Moray we heard from a Community Association which had started providing food aid as a result of the pandemic. This was something they planned to continue doing for the foreseeable future.

“We’ve been waiting for a time when we could scale down our support initiatives or food support initiatives. It’s never really happened because I suppose there’s never really been a change in the statistics really where we could relax. We have kept rolling out our food support pretty much the same way all the way through... So basically we are carrying on rolling that out and, as I say, we’re looking for funding now which we think we’ve got to keep us going right throughout the winter. The winter is going to be not just in terms of the physical hardship but I think psychologically people are going to be much more down as well. I think we’ve just got to keep that initiative going basically.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

One of the Community Trusts on one of the islands in Argyll and Bute that provided welfare boxes during the pandemic has undertaken to continue supplying these for the next 5 years highlighting how some of the initially short-term responses are to continue.

8. Resources for local responses

Across many of the case studies funding, food supplies and human resources were identified as key resources for ensuring a food response was delivered. The availability and challenges of these changed over the course of the period under study (March-August 2021).

8.1 Funding

Reflecting back across the whole period, many organisations that took part in the research who were delivering responses to food access felt they were able to access sufficient funding. However, the early weeks following mid-March 2020 was a period of significant uncertainty, when organisations were acting quickly and hoping they would get funding to cover this at some point. For example, in Swansea, when we discussed funding with council staff representatives, they described the approach within the Council was to fund upfront and count on funds being provided by the Welsh Government later:

“The Council fronted up the funding to do things quickly, with the hope that the Welsh Government would be able to see us right at the end. And the priority was “we’ve got to support people, we need to do this.” Do it, and we’ll worry about how to log that later... Subsequently, we have had funding from Welsh Government, COVID response funding.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

Some third sector organisations reported a similar approach.

“At a neighbourhood level we set up all our own. We were all set up come mid-March at a neighbourhood level, because that is what we do. That is what we are there for. We could see the need on the ground and we reacted, regardless of who is giving us what, where or when. We set it up and we hoped for the best, in the sense of the generosity and the goodwill of our neighbourhoods and communities.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

A number of funding sources were utilised, including the funding pots announced by the national governments to support this type of community activity. As an example, funders that community organisations in Moray utilised included National Lottery Awards for All, Tesco Groundworks (distribution of the carrier bags charge), Martin Lewis Charity Fund, Highland and Islands Enterprise, Benzies Foundation and Neighbourly. In addition, a range of local businesses and organisations provided donations to organisations providing a food response. Participants also reported that funding applications were found to be less burdensome with easy processes and quick turnarounds.

We also heard reports that organisations were able to reallocate some of their funding, which could not be used for the original purpose, to fund the COVID-19 response. For example, in Swansea food banks were allowed to adapt the way they used funding they had

previously received from the Council (funded by the Welsh Government) for Brexit preparedness. In Greenwich third sector organisations were able to repurpose the funds received via public health contracts and organisations in Glasgow repurposed funding received for activities around holiday hunger that could not go ahead due to lockdown restrictions.

“...it was helped in a way by city council saying that people could use their holiday hunger money that was due to them in a way that helped, you know, in a way that was flexible. They were able to just realise funds for purchasing food, because they knew it was the first issue.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

As well as the availability of grant funding many organisations reported an influx of financial support in the form of personal donations. This may have been new donors and from those who would ordinarily provide food switching to cash donations instead.

“What we actually found was that we got a significant increase in financial support. An awful lot of people who previously would have bought food and dropped it off started either a Bacs, a direct debit Bacs bank transfer, or sending a cheque or coming in with an envelope with money. It has been quite staggering, actually, the amount of money that people gave us. That wasn’t much of a feature of the food bank before. It was mainly food that people gave. But we found that a lot of people would be giving you £20, £40, some more than that.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute).

Participants in West Berkshire described significant fundraising efforts:

“In the same week we created the hub, Greenham Trust launched for the first time we’d ever done this, we launched the coronavirus appeal fund. We put in £200,000 of our own trust money as matched funding to attract public donations, other charitable donations, and corporate donations. We raised, pretty much, another £200,000 through doing that. We got high net worths, we got charitable organisations locally, we got the general public donating. You know, anything from £10 to £10,000 from individuals to corporates to you name it. They put money into this. We used this, to deploy, to support the various food agencies and other people who needed support during - you know, whatever need throughout it. So that was running at the same time.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Some participants reported problems accessing funding. In Herefordshire, some food providers felt that the Defra Food Charity Grant was ill-matched to their needs, reportedly too complex and not designed for small organisations. One participant in Moray felt that when accessing funding it was:

“Almost impossible to navigate the vast array of [funding] sources for the non-professional.” (Third sector respondent, Moray).

Furthermore, whilst the easement of some of the usual application and reporting requirements was welcomed, due to less time and fewer resources needing to be dedicated towards securing funding, there were some concerns about the accountability and the due diligence of the funding processes. For example, in areas where funding was further

distributed through coordinating organisations there were some challenges in getting data on how the funding had been used by the organisation to which it was disbursed, as they were very focussed on delivering the response.

“I know that there was a difficulty for some of the strategic partners in terms of trying to report back on the activity because everyone was so focussed on meeting need, but they were meeting needs in different ways.” (Council staff respondent, Belfast)

Another participant reported concerns that a lack of due diligence by funders lead to some duplication in services.

Following on from the uncertainty around how long responses would be required some organisations also noted the funding was provided with specific end dates. However, when these end dates were reached it was apparent that the response was still required. Although, often, extensions of funding periods were then announced these came quite late, which created some uncertainty for the organisations.

Finally, whilst the availability for the funding during the pandemic was welcomed some organisations were concerned on the impact of this for the future. Such concerns were shared by a participant from Derry and Strabane:

“Generally speaking, there seems to be a lot of money about in the community sector for- we have been contacting different departments just to say, “Can you get money out to the local groups in the ground to deliver services to do this?” The concern would be what happens come the next financial year? It seems to be heading towards a cliff edge... So what happens then the next financial year we turn around and say, “There’s no money now so we can’t provide any services.” That would be a massive fear of ours.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

8.2 Food Supplies

Food projects across the case studies reported difficulties sourcing food in the early weeks of the pandemic. This was due to a combination of reduced public donations and food shortages in the shops.

“Because obviously, it was physically quite difficult to buy food at the beginning, wasn’t it? So, you couldn’t buy any bulk food, because all the supermarkets were prohibiting that. So, individuals were not really giving us food, because a) they don’t want to leave the house, and b) they couldn’t physically buy it anyway, because it was actually quite tricky.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Some food banks discussed in the early weeks how limits on bulk purchases in the supermarkets where they usually purchased food meant they had to set up trade accounts with alternate suppliers or wholesalers or shop in the cash and carry. However, this was more expensive than their usual food supply.

“We used them [wholesaler] more. It worked out being an awful lot more expensive because most of their stuff is branded whereas, when we go to Tesco, we’re getting Tesco’s own.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Over time a number of mechanisms were put in place to overcome some of these supply issues. In many cases this was in partnership with the main retailers. Examples include Argyll and Bute Council working with Morrisons who allowed them to “buy wholesale”, supermarkets in Greenwich allowing bulk purchase of certain items and the partnership between the Trussell Trust and Tesco and Morrisons.

“Through the Council, we got in touch with the store managers of the large supermarkets within the borough and a number of them enabled us to go in and do an out of hours shop in their store for things that they had that were on shortage. So, they let us have a proportion of the things that they were rationing elsewhere.” (Third sector respondent, Greenwich)

Aldi also allowed food aid organisations to submit orders to their distribution centres which could then be collected directly. However, as collection was not an option for the food bank in Moray (due to the distance to the distribution centre) Aldi offered to deliver their order to the local store.

One retailer in Derry and Strabane ordered, stored and delivered the food needed by one of the food aid organisations in the area.

“I have to say local businesses were amazing. Being able to order in stock for us, store the stock. So that was a real asset that we had down here ... we were able to order through our local Super Value, for instance. They done our orders for us. They stored our deliveries. Then they delivered the food from their warehouse as and when we needed it on a daily basis. This was a daily operation, every morning throughout that whole period from mid-March right through to the end of July.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

In Bradford it was highlighted that some of the smaller food banks were more reliant on the food provided through the scheme which Bradford Council put in place rather than sourcing food through national partnerships. These different sources were described:

“[Food banks] have had different experiences. Some of them are still very, very reliant on that central food [from the Storehouse/Council supply], and I know that Trussell [Trust] [food banks have] probably found it easier to access food and had additional sources that weren't open to some of the smaller independents. And I know some of the smaller independents are still relying, about 50% of their food, from this centrally-provided fund. So, it really varies from one food bank to the other, but it's brilliant that big players like [the] Trussell Trust have brought in lots of food to the system, as well, because I think the Council money just wouldn't have lasted if [the Trussell Trust food banks] had been as heavily reliant on council food as some of the smaller food banks have been.” (Third sector respondent, Bradford)

Alongside these more formal partnerships we heard reports of organisations supporting each other more informally with food supplies. For example, third sector organisations were able to contact Argyll and Bute Council if they were low on a certain item and the Council would add it to the order with Morrisons (noted above). In Derry and Strabane one food bank collected food via FareShare and distributed that amongst the other organisations providing food aid.

Some organisations sourced food through FareShare and this was an important source of supply. One respondent provided mixed reports on FareShare as a source of food.

“It doesn’t live up to its name. It’s neither Fair nor Sharing in our experience. Oh, my goodness. When it all hit and we couldn’t get food, a couple of our food banks were persistent in trying to get some food out of FareShare, and boy did they have to work and work and be persistent and persistent. They had to send vans up to Birmingham [FareShare depot] to load up whatever they [had]... They sometimes got some useful things, and they worked jolly hard, and just now [November 2020], FareShare has started doing a delivery to South Shropshire and Herefordshire.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

As well as these food sources available through retailers, over time food donations from the public also increased.

“Our food donations picked up. As soon as the supermarkets were allowing people to buy items. People were incredibly generous financially, but also were fantastic about donating food as well. We were I suppose a bit concerned that wouldn’t continue... We were generally fine supported by our donors. It was really good.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

8.3 Human Resources

Volunteers

Many third sector organisations, particularly food banks, experienced an immediate change in volunteer availability at the start of the pandemic. Organisations reported a shift in their volunteering workforce, most commonly an initial decline in volunteers who were older or had been required to shield.

“They [the food banks] were managing really well, and then when the pandemic hit there was a whole sea change because of the way COVID focused on the elderly. A lot of our food banks were run by older volunteers, either leading them and/or volunteering in them. So, in a very short space of time, a lot of them had to reinvent themselves and find new leadership, etc. That was quite a challenge.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

However, generally the loss of existing volunteers was compensated for with new members of the public volunteering.

“[The food bank] took the decision, even before the government said, to offer over 70s to step back for a season. It was causing much distress around the families because it was that unknown. They’d heard the virus hits older people... Then we were concerned that from a logistics point of view, we wouldn’t have sufficient volunteers. But the brilliant thing was those that were furloughed then came forward. Some of them are now carrying on, in their spare time, to volunteer.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

In many areas an established third sector support organisation took the lead on recruiting volunteers across the COVID-19 response, and many of the recruited volunteers supported the food aid responses. For example, the Swansea Council for Voluntary Service put out

calls for volunteers which had a significant impact on the volunteer resources of food initiatives and projects in the city. Voluntary Action Leeds led on recruiting and coordinating volunteers, receiving offers of help from 7000 volunteers.

“When COVID hit, Leeds City Council went to Voluntary Action Leeds and said, “We need to join together and create a volunteering system so everybody is supported. So, literally overnight, Voluntary Action Leeds developed this citywide, hub-based – community care hub-based – volunteering programme.” (Third sector respondent, Leeds)

As well as this new cohort of volunteers the work of existing volunteers was extremely important. In Glasgow, it was reported that due to some of the necessary processes of recruiting new volunteers it may have actually been the increased efforts of existing volunteers which lead to some of the increased capacity.

“But the feedback we have had from a lot of organisations is that the capacity to engage new volunteers in systems that were quite complex and changing at a time that you couldn’t sit down really and meet with people first face-to-face was quite limiting, so a lot of the extra capacity in the sector, I think, has actually come from existing volunteers doing more.” (Third sector respondent, Glasgow)

Existing volunteers also had to adapt their usual working practices to ensure their own safety.

“... my volunteers talking about staying in bubbles, and we knew that, if we stayed in bubbles, it would mean that everybody would have to work set weeks, or set days in a week, we’d have to work harder than we expected to. Everybody committed to that.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Redeployed staff

Another source of workforce that became available to organisations providing a food response was staff being deployed from other teams.

“Then there was a team of not only core staff, the Department for Communities was really good and allowing us to redeploy all staff in our area that’s currently funded through the Department for Communities. So that was a good maybe 25, 30 plus staff and then likewise we have probably the same, if not double, the amount of volunteers on a daily basis.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Alternatively, staff from other companies were able to spend some time supporting COVID-19 responses. For example, one of the third sector organisations in Moray utilised a national initiative offered by Scottish Gas where staff who were not furloughed but were not as busy as usual were able to use spare hours to support community responses. Scottish Gas employees helped to pick up donations from supermarkets.

8.4 Premises and storage

One of the other challenges that organisations faced was an increased need for space, particularly for food storage and distribution. This was often overcome by repurposing existing space, which was possible due to other activities not taking place, or by moving into

other premises. For example, the independent food bank at the Al-Ikhlās Centre mosque in Cardiff used their main prayer hall, which was not being used as the mosque was closed, for food storage and sorting.

“The main prayer hall became a big food storage/sorting facility. It was quite amazing to see and quite emotional that it became such a vital space.” (Third sector respondent – written submission, Cardiff)

Others reported a benefit of many churches not operating their usual activities, such as services and nurseries, was that this gave the food bank distribution centre more room to operate, which was beneficial in light of social distancing requirements and the need to store more food at their centres.

One food bank in Argyll and Bute changed locations so they did not have to share space with others. Due to the cleaning and safety requirements necessary at their existing food bank venue they decided to move premises to a local hall which they had full use of and, therefore, did not need to “*worry about other people in the building*” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute). In addition, their food used to be stored in an unused room in the back of a care home but as the care home was closed to visitors it was decided to move the food store as well.

9. Key questions raised by the findings

9.1 What worked?

The research has provided a rich and detailed insight into food responses in the 14 case study areas. It gathered data at a time when the pandemic was still ‘live’ and these actors continued to work at full capacity in the challenging circumstances of COVID-19.

Whilst providing a strong evidence base, the research also highlighted how difficult it is to comprehensively map local responses to food issues. The complexity and small scale of some elements of the response make it extremely challenging. Similarly, assessing what was effective is also difficult. Robust, systematic evaluation is required which is beyond the scope of this project.

Participants in this research did provide their reflections on the responses in their areas and highlighted a number of issues which could be explored further. Namely, the drawbacks from not being able to provide wraparound support (social or signposting) as effectively over the pandemic, benefits of frontline charitable sector responses and challenges in deciding how to manage need.

Challenges of providing wraparound support during this time

Some participants highlighted that the adaptations that were necessary during the pandemic made the provision of wraparound support more challenging. Often, this related to the loss of social interaction or signposting opportunities which resulted from the ‘grab and go’ or home delivery models that had to be adopted. Where there was a loss of a social engagement this was keenly felt by participants.

“We knew that we had to change what we were doing in that normally, when you have your voucher, you’ll come to the centre, you come in, you have a cup of tea, a chat, sometimes mums in particular would be hungry and sometimes we had to give people, we’ve always had to do this, food themselves because they haven’t eaten for a few days or something just as terrible. Then they would see the money advice person if they wanted to, etc. They would be with us for maybe up to an hour or something. [During the pandemic] we couldn’t do any of that. We basically had to close the doors and have the voucher handed in almost around the door and the food handed out... for our volunteers in the distribution centres, it broke their heart. They were in tears all the time.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

Where possible some organisations put other activities in place to try and counteract this loss of social contact. One food bank in West Berkshire made weekly calls to the food bank clients. Volunteers who were shielding and therefore unable to fulfil their usual role made the phone calls.

“So, we put in process a welfare call system. So, our volunteers - it tended to be our older volunteers that were shielding, who couldn’t come and help anymore and were desperate to help, making phone calls to our clients weekly. Not offering them food – offering them support, offering them comfort. And that is something I’m incredibly proud of. Because a lot of those clients were only talking to one of our volunteers once a week, and they hadn’t spoken to anybody since then. For safeguarding purposes, we very quickly gathered the information of people living alone, and made sure that we did contact them weekly. And if we hadn’t got hold of them, we kept trying, until we did get hold of them.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

In addition, some participants highlighted that the provision of food by home delivery provided some opportunity to do additional welfare checks. In Glasgow it was reported that:

“many third sector organisations who became involved with food provision did not aim to simply drop off food parcels or cooked meals. Many organisations used food as the lead offer to open up conversations with people which led to households receiving other relevant support, such as access to Wi-Fi or additional devices, referrals to welfare rights services, etc.”²⁰

However, despite these alternative efforts to provide social support many participants reported looking forward to a time when their usual face to face activities could return.

The benefit of a community response and having people ‘on the ground’

Participants reflected on some of the perceived benefits of having people and organisations who were already known in their local community spearheading the response. Firstly, this had the benefit of these organisations already being a known source of help.

²⁰ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

“We’re here 25 years operating, so our local people and our local communities and neighbourhoods are aware of us. It’s a trusted phone line.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Another benefit was having locally known people leading the response, which may have made it easier for people to access the support and for organisations to provide a wider suite of support.

“The most important bit was that the folk on the ground were folk that the community knew. It would never have worked without that because for somebody like me to wade in, you know, I’m that woman from the Council, it wouldn’t have worked. When you have got your [name removed] in Portknockie and your [name removed] in Buckie, your [name removed] in Portgordon, it is folk they know and trust. That is the difference. They are known in their community and folk can trust them.” (Council staff respondent, Moray)

This may have led to people being more likely to engage with the support provided within the local community, compared to that provided by statutory agencies. In Leeds it was perceived that, despite the Council relaxing eligibility criteria for support, some residents may have been more willing to access support offered by non-statutory organisations.

“I think we do know that there were still a lot of rich relationships that happened where people accessed food from their trusted local partner and they didn’t engage with the system.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Another benefit of having responses designed and provided locally, by people and organisations in the community, was that they could see what the need was and respond appropriately. For example, the response in Herefordshire, the Herefordshire Council Talk Community Hub programme, was premised on a local community first basis.

“Local communities just got on with it according to need and assessed as they went along.” (Council staff respondent, Herefordshire)

In Swansea it was also expressed that local communities can find their own solutions because they know the needs of their communities best:

“Trusting communities to find their own solutions, to know what their own response should look like. [Local Area Coordinators’] job is to facilitate that, grease the wheels as they get things in order. I think it shows trust in the communities of Swansea. The hope is that it will encourage even more people to become resilient, part of their communities and to be contributing citizens.” (Council staff respondent, Swansea)

In other areas it was hoped that the ability of local communities to respond, which had been demonstrated during the pandemic, would allow further delegation of tasks in the future.

“I think that it shows the flexibility and the responsiveness that we [have] got within the sector at the moment, that as a sector we were able to take this on. It’s something that maybe traditionally sat with the local authorities is now very firmly in the hands of the community which is really positive.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Challenges of balancing assessment of need verses quick, accessible support

Across case study areas, participants highlighted a difficult balance between responding at speed during a crisis whilst assessing the need for support. In some areas it was purposely decided that there would be a less detailed assessment of need for the Council provided support.

“So, a lot of people [are] working zero-hour contracts, working in the grey economy. Anecdotally, some of our communities are earning £30 a day and those people were really, really struggling for food. The Council took a decision that it would rather see a small degree of inefficiency and make sure that everyone was fed than not provide food and have people go hungry. So, the system that we had internally was geared towards a less-detailed approval process that, whilst it did have needs-based questions within it, didn’t perhaps have the same level of rigour, because we were more conscious that we wanted to make sure everybody got fed than people didn’t get fed.” (Council staff respondent, Bradford)

This approach was replicated by some of the third sector organisations. However, where there was little or no assessment of need, some participants voiced concerns about this. Some voiced concerns about recipients of this food building up a dependency on a temporary service. The lack of needs assessment also made it challenging to determine the level of need for food support which was a result of people experiencing financial or physical access barriers as opposed to people making use of a service that was being provided.

“For me, it’s made it really difficult to evaluate what the need was in the area because I don’t know how many folk were genuinely in need and how many folk were just like, “We’re getting free food, why not?” (Third sector respondent)

Some participants from Glasgow voiced their concern that the lack of needs assessment had led to duplication, although the scale of this duplication was not measured. Participants reflected that this may partly have been a result of a lack of coordination across some of the new providers. The following excerpt from the report produced by Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network reflects on the issue of duplication of food provision, highlighting that partnership working minimised this duplication:

“In some areas of Glasgow – but not all - duplication in food deliveries has been identified as a concern. Where there were strongly-led collaborative partnerships, any duplication was quickly dealt with. Referrals were crossed referenced against other organisation’s lists. Where organisations who had never been previously involved in food work, or who did not have a footprint in local communities, became involved in food delivery duplication was more likely.”²¹

9.2 What are the longer-term legacies?

The research has raised some important questions over the legacies of the COVID-19 response in March-August 2020. Given the scale of need and support at that time it will be

²¹ Glasgow Third Sector Interface Network (2020) Beyond the covid crisis, lessons from lockdown. Available here: <http://www.gcvcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Beyond-the-Covid-Crisis-Lessons-from-Lockdown.pdf>

important to monitor the longer-term impacts for support structures and experiences of food insecurity. For example, following what happens to the projects that newly popped up and the impact of the substantial amounts of funding.

The future of food aid landscapes

Some concerns were expressed by research participants about the direction that food aid was heading, potentially representing a reversal of pre-pandemic trends to move away from this type of provision.

“In fact, most of the food banks were starting to enter into a dialogue to shut the food banks down because everyone’s starting to recognise that surplus food certainly isn’t the answer to this, and we don’t want an American model. Otherwise, we’ll be doing this for eternity. Yes, that debate was just starting to gather pace here actually, which is really good... Then post or during the pandemic, literally nearly every other organisation did something around food. Yes, I mean, I suppose in a way, it’s the easiest response, isn’t it?” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

We heard concerns in Northern Ireland that the provision of direct food aid through the national food box delivery scheme could represent a more substantial shift in the type of response to food insecurity supported by government away from, for example, a social supermarket approach which they saw as a more progressive approach. One participant said:

“The department did a complete U-turn. The department are the ones that fund the social supermarket and then we were going like, “Where are you going? You are turning back and you are just going backwards here.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Similarly, although existing food aid providers welcomed the sentiment and the support of the new third sector actors who were providing food aid there was some concern that this would embed a ‘food first’ approach, whilst not providing wider signposting or support.

“And I think we need to get back to actually – you know when you look at the organisations like [name removed], their ethos is around protecting people and confidentiality, and all of that, and that’s so important for people who are in poverty because what you want is to build trust, and you want to build that trust in order to move them on, you know, you don’t want to keep people in poverty, you want to put the services and the right support in place, and I kind of feel like some of that has got lost.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

However, as previously noted there was, in many places, a continuing focus on income-based response as well as the direct food aid with promotion of advice services and support for people newly accessing social security. Another example is the flexible food fund introduced by Moray Council, described earlier. Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum also worked to foreground an income-based approach. A key output of the Forum during the pandemic, working in partnership with the Council, the local housing association, Citizens Advice and the Bute Advice Centre was the development of a leaflet providing information on the different sources of financial support and referral routes. This project was developed in collaboration with the Independent Food Aid Network as part of their cash first project (for information see here: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>). The options for

support detailed in the leaflet include Scottish Welfare Fund, maximising income, debt advice, benefit advance, hardship payment, and challenge a decision.²²

9.3 Local and/or national responses?

The response to food access issues during COVID-19 highlighted the different scales at which work was carried out, the interactions between those scales and their effectiveness. For example national government food box schemes for people who were shielding, local council food box schemes and local charitable food provision; as well as the role of local councils in the national government box schemes. This raises important questions about what scale and level is most effective. Understanding this fully would require systematic evaluation, but our participants provided reflections on two fronts in particular relating to their local perspective, challenges with national schemes, and the use of and impact on local food systems.

Challenges with national schemes

Participants voiced their concerns regarding the food boxes provided through the national schemes. These included concerns about suitability and nutritional quality.

“They [boxes] were very restricted and I suppose here in neighbourhoods and the areas across the city and across the North we spent the last 15, 20 years trying to educate people about healthy eating. Then these hampers were coming out and they were all full of processed foods.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

“I haven’t got any empirical evidence, but, anecdotally, we heard that people were saying, “Oh, the food that was coming in the boxes wasn’t necessarily suitable for, you know, dietary reasons...” There was one chap who’d got tins and he was disabled and couldn’t open the tins.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

In some of the rural areas we heard anecdotal stories of the large delivery lorries being unable to navigate the more remote country roads, thereby making deliveries very challenging. In other areas there was concern regarding time lags between people being told to shield and them either receiving their first box or getting access to online delivery slots. In Swansea, in this period, the Swansea Council for the Voluntary Sector mobilised their volunteers to help people do their shopping:

“We had volunteers who were supporting people with doing their shopping for them, because we did have quite a lag between the food parcels being available and the shielding list having come out.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

In Derry and Strabane third sector organisations did the ‘last mile delivery’ of the food parcels provided by the Department for Communities whereby the third sector organisation leading the food response in each area were provided with a set number of food boxes and referrals for households eligible for the box. Some organisations “dissected” the boxes and added in additional products to make them more tailored to each individual household.

²² https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/sites/default/files/worrying_about_money_a4_argyll_and_bute_17.07.20.pdf

“There was no thought put into whether it was a household or whether it was an elderly person. The same standard box was going to everybody. So you could have an 80-year-old getting a massive box full of pasta and pasta sauces and shower gels every week that were never going to be used, and then a family of four or five were getting exactly the same and they’d have gone through the box in a couple of days. So there was no thought put into it.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

We also heard from food banks that some of the contents of the boxes were being donated to them. This seemed to be happening most explicitly in West Berkshire with one participant reporting:

“We called them Boris boxes. We used to collect about 40 Boris boxes a week, from donors that were being sent them and they didn’t need them, so they donated them to us. So, we had Sky engineers, because Sky engineers, as we all know, were stood down the first time around. They used to go out in their vans and collect the Boris boxes and bring them to the food bank” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Local food system responses

Recognising the potential impact of the pandemic on the wider food landscape, including suppliers and local hospitality businesses, some local area responses were designed to provide support that benefitted the local economy, as opposed to only focussing on households.

This strategy was most deliberate and explicit in the food box scheme by Argyll and Bute Council who made the strategic decision to source supplies for the food boxes locally to the extent this was possible. They sourced local suppliers for items to be included in the boxes which was dubbed ‘for Argyll from Argyll’.

“I had, kind of, got ‘Argyll for Argyll’ which was me saying, ‘As much of that food money that I got from government is going to feed people in Argyll and Bute, it will do that through the Argyll and Bute businesses where possible.’ Kind of a ‘From Argyll for Argyll’ first approach.” (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

As well as this quite formal inclusion of local business in the large-scale council responses other areas incorporated local businesses into the suite of support by sharing funding that had been granted. For example, the community support officers at Moray Council supported community groups to apply for funding, which was then further distributed amongst the community organisations and businesses.

“Initially we got in touch with the local - there was only one local hotel who was working at that time and they put out fresh meals to basically the same people every fortnight. Then we got the second tranche of money to keep that going and we gave that to the café within the village just to spread the support for them.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

In other areas some respondents noted that the influx of food being provided through the national food parcel scheme was having a negative impact on the local shops.

“There was a lot of displacement out there. I even heard local shops when the department boxes come in that they were doing maybe £500, £600 a week [less].” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

This was something that Argyll and Bute Council actively avoided by planning a tailored response on the inhabited islands of the area.

“What we did in the island communities was, we didn’t just send food from the mainland to the islands, we worked with the local shops, because what we were conscious of was, if we didn’t work in partnership with them very quickly, they could close. And if we started sending food to doorsteps on islands, that makes fragile economies even more fragile.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Where local supply systems were not integrated into responses this was a source of disappointment for some. One respondent in Belfast expressed disappointment that local suppliers were not utilised in the supply of the nationally provided grocery boxes for the shielding population.

“The thing that I found the most shocking was the utter disconnect from any locality or local supply systems, supply chains and stuff like that... There is no reason why those very localised, very, very important links in a sustainable food supply chain couldn’t have been supported to be the delivery mechanism for this township.” (Third sector respondent, Belfast)

Accordingly Belfast Food Network included in their response, in which they deliberately avoided any sort of direct food provision, support for local sustainable businesses through the allocation of grants. As noted previously the Food Network received funding from the organisation Necessity to provide grants to local food businesses. The grants aimed to help alleviate the impact of COVID-19 and support businesses to adapt their business models. Twenty-seven microgrants were awarded to small sustainable food businesses and were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock.

9.4 Cash or food?

A final question raised by the research reflects upon what can be learned from the pandemic around the question of the ‘cash versus food’ debate. Previous research at a national level highlighted that where cash was provided as an alternative to free school meals replacements this was widely welcomed.²³

The data highlighted different responses to food insecurity grouped under a ‘cash first approach’. Some participants referred to ‘cash first’ approaches as those that pointed people to, and supported people to access, existing benefits, often through the provision of or signposting to advice services. Other participants considered ‘cash first’ more narrowly,

²³ Lambie-Mumford, H, Gordon, K., Loopstra, R. (2020) Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK, published December 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>; Child Poverty Action Group (2020) The cost of learning in lockdown family experiences of school closures. Available here: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/cost-learning-lockdown-family-experiences-school-closures>

referring to additional cash support on top of people's basic entitlements through crisis emergency payments.

As noted in the previous section many areas offered or supported income-based responses in different forms. It was perceived that the Flexible Food Fund introduced by Moray Council led to reduced demand on the food bank, indicating the potential efficacy of cash-based responses in reducing the need for food banks.

However, whilst recognising the benefits of a cash first approach participants remained mindful that there is not a 'one size fits' all solution with some noting the need for tailoring depending on particular circumstances. This was raised in particular in relation to the rurality of some of the case study areas. As previously noted, Argyll and Bute Council initially provided a direct food response as a replacement for free school meals due to limited public transport restricting access to shops. Another participant raised a concern regarding the higher cost of living in rural areas which meant cash responses would not stretch as far as in the more urban areas.

"I hear that it's better for people to have money in their pockets but I would just remind people who live in the big cities and the towns around here, the huge gap between doing your shopping in a wee shop in Tomintoul or Dufftown compared to shopping in Tesco or Lidl's in Elgin. So money in your pocket is sometimes fine but actually the pound in your pocket out here does not go as far as folk like to think in the big towns. Just a point I'd like to make." (Third sector respondent, Moray)

10. Key Takeaways

As well as these key questions, we reflect here on some key takeaways from the case study research. The first of these are observations on the local response mapping, including the unprecedented scale of the local response to food access issues, the central role played by voluntary food aid providers and the range of initiatives that work to provide this food assistance. The last two takeaways present further reflective data from participants on the experiences of these responses and importance of partnership working and the distinct challenges facing rural populations.

10.1 Mapping observation 1: The scale of the response was unprecedented

The actors identified in this research adapted and mobilised in response to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a scale and operationalisation of local level support for food access not been seen before. As this report has set out, many existing food aid providers undertook significant work to adapt, as much as possible, to continue to provide their service and scale up where needed. National and local governments started providing direct food aid often on a large scale. Other third sector organisations and much smaller scale neighbourhood networks also provided food access support. At the same time, new means of coordination developed and partnership working, utilising both existing and new partnerships, was key. Unprecedented levels of financial, food and human resources went into the local food response.

10.2 Mapping observation 2: Voluntary food aid providers were pivotal to local responses

The national mapping we previously conducted for this project evidenced that the voluntary food aid sector was heavily relied upon to support food access at that level.²⁴ This has also been found to be the case at a local level, with data showing that third sector food aid providers played a key role in responding to food access issues in the case study areas over the March – August 2020 period. The third sector responses were organised both in partnership with statutory bodies or as a more independent sphere of food access support in local areas.

Dynamics between voluntary and statutory sector responses evolved over time. In the early weeks of the pandemic in many areas participants reported that third sector organisations were quick to respond, while the statutory organisations adapted to a move away from face-to-face working. This led to significant concern amongst participants, at that time, about the capacity and sustainability of the third sector as a core response. Later, as statutory services were mobilised, participants observed how the third sector continued to play a key role with significant funding and logistical support provided from the national and local governments.

10.3 Mapping observation 3: Food aid was provided through both existing and new initiatives

Across the areas we identified the important role played by several types of food provision:

(1) food aid projects such as food banks that had been in place before the pandemic and adapted to meet the needs of local communities. These organisations adapted their practices and often drew on new or alternative forms of resources and support.

(2) local charities that started to provide food aid as part of their work to support communities and groups through the pandemic (providing parcels, hot meals, chill-cook food). These organisations had not been providing this form of support before. Some, such as community cafes may have been serving or working with food before but not on a food aid / delivery basis. Others, such as housing associations had not been providing any kind of food before the pandemic.

(3) less formal 'pop up' provision, for example on an ad hoc or neighbourhood basis. Some of this was organised on social media (WhatsApp or Facebook), some targeted very locally (one street or neighbourhood), other examples we came across included a local café or business providing food assistance using their premises.

10.4 Partnership working and working together

The local case studies highlight the extent of partnership and collaborative working that went on in local areas and the importance that participants held in that. We have reflective data from participants on these aspects, which we present here.

²⁴ Lambie-Mumford, H., Loopstra, R. and Gordon, K. (2020) Mapping responses to risk of rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis across the UK, published August 2020. Available here: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

The areas which had existing strong and active food poverty alliances or food partnerships considered this a significant enabler in the speed and coordination of the approach. In Cardiff, where there is a very active food partnership with a track record of taking action on food insecurity, various stakeholders talked about the influence of these pre-existing relationships on the responses enacted over the spring and summer and how this enabled their response. Many of these existed because of the Food Cardiff partnership. It was felt that this partnership meant that a COVID-19 Food Response Group could quickly be established and allowed for greater coordination and clear roles to be delineated, as shared in the following quotes:

“Objectively, [if I] think about what would’ve happened if it wasn’t for the partnership in place, I think there would be a lot less coordination and there might be a bit more tension between groups, like between the local authority and the third sector and the grassroots.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

“That taskforce that was set up right at the beginning was hugely helpful, the Food Cardiff one, because not only did it alleviate anxiety but you knew that 1) you weren’t duplicating what somebody else was doing, 2) the gap was identified and then a solution was found. Then we knew that what we were doing was alright. We didn’t have to expand into it.” (Third sector respondent, Cardiff)

Similarity, in Leeds, pre-existing relationships and partnership working was considered a strength in the city’s response.

“I think when we’ve been asked, “What has been the strength of Leeds?” I think having the Food Aid Network and the existing relationship with partners has been something that we could build upon because the Council has always been seen as an equal partner in the discussions rather than a leader. Obviously, there have been certain asks of the Council during this time and we’ve tried to work as much as we can, but I think in terms of leadership, when COVID hit the Council realised that we had to bring partners together. We’ve built upon the Food Aid Network infrastructure that was already there, but more probably from a council leadership perspective.” (Council staff respondent, Leeds)

Where it was felt that there had been a co-ordinated approach, with a range of organisations working together, this was warmly received and positively reflected on by participants.

“I think what has been really outstanding in Swansea is the way that from the early days, certainly through to the middle of the first lockdown, how there was incredible will between sectors to work together, which was quite new. Obviously, we’ve done it before, but we were really successful.” (Third sector respondent, Swansea)

The food aid providers group meetings, and the relationships that were established as a result of the collaboration between organisations in West Berkshire was felt to have contributed to a coordinated response:

“It beautifully came together really that every... We, just, were able to corral the whole group together, whatever they were doing in the food provider space, get them talking, get them sharing food in terms of the various sources of food that were

available. You know, whether it be restaurants that had closed or whether it be FareShare or whatever it was, we got this collective really working together in different parts of the community whether it was those in general food poverty families or whether it was those living on the street or, by then, in hostels because that's what the government... You know, wanted everybody to be under a roof." (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Communication was key to establishing this coordination and many areas spoke of regular meetings across providers. In Derry and Strabane, for example, regular meetings occur between both local groups providing a response and between the co-ordinating organisations from areas across the wider area.

"What we did was, I suppose at a local level, we had those meetings but we also had meetings, collectively to make sure that we were all on the same page and across the city we plan to deliver the same message." (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Alongside these positive reflections there were observations that the response could have been better coordinated, and this was particularly in the early days of the response. Where responses were not coordinated this led to problems with potential duplication of services and households receiving support from a number of routes.

"At a local level, sometimes some of the independent groups were specifically set up just as needs arose. There were, for example, maybe elderly people getting two or three food boxes. I don't think there was integration enough between the groups saying, "We've already given to that person." (Council staff respondent, Belfast)

On the other hand, another consequence of a lack of coordination was that gaps in responses could not be identified and filled.

"I was just going to say that [The Rotary Club] started [food parcels] in the pandemic because I think they wanted to respond in some positive way. [They] jumped in and started this provision, which we didn't know much about until we heard it was being rolled out. So, it was difficult to coordinate with and understand exactly how it was fitting and who was getting [what] to make sure we weren't either, you know, missing people or the opposite." (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

Better and stronger connections across sectors and between organisations was considered by participants to be one of the positive legacies to emerge from the pandemic responses over spring and summer 2020.

"I think we can come back from it very strong because of the crossover from government and I think that's a massive legacy that we have to build on. I think at a local level, the barriers between public and the third sector have been just completely flattened down in a very positive way." (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

10.5 Responses in rural areas

Case Study areas were selected to provide a mix of urban and rural geographies. This provided insight into the differences and challenges arising in providing responses in rural areas.

The case study areas of Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenwich, Leeds, Merton and Swansea were predominantly urban. Argyll and Bute, Moray, Derry and Strabane, West Berkshire and Herefordshire, whilst having been selected for their rurality, had a mixture of urban and rural characteristics.

In some areas this rurality impacted on who provided responses in different areas. For example, in West Berkshire it was described how there was some informal geographical division of responsibility, with the residents of the larger towns supported by the established organisations, and the smaller villages and hamlets relying instead on the community groups which were established in response to the pandemic.

“We predominantly found that we were dealing with people in the towns of Newbury and Thatcham and that, in the surrounding villages, local people at a village level and a smaller town level, initiatives were kicking off and helping people.” (Third sector respondent, West Berkshire)

Data evidenced the continued impact of factors that are associated with food access challenges in rural areas.²⁵ Such factors include the demographics of rural communities which generally have a skew towards an older population. For example, the high proportion of an elderly population impacted the form of the response provided in one of the small villages in the Moray case study.

“The other thing I would like to say about the village is that we’ve got a very peculiar demographic where in the last census it said that we’ve got 50% more over 75s living in the village. And we became aware very early on that there were people who were self-isolating were at the very worst crisis for our demographic because there were people who were living on their own who were self-isolating even within the village. So, we basically then had to go out to them and actually what has been the basis of our response ever since is that we’re going out to people rather than having them coming even to our food hub in the village because they’re elderly. A lot of them are very frail as well and a lot of them, as I say, are living on their own.” (Third sector respondent, Moray)

Access to affordable transport can also present food access barriers and this was exacerbated during the pandemic. For example, in Argyll and Bute there was a reduction in the usual public transport services that were available potentially making it extremely difficult for some residents of rural communities to access shops.

“A lot of our public transport systems are based around the school buses. So, once school closes that means that run doesn’t operate anymore, so it’s the same even during the summer holiday period, access to very small villages just is non-existent, or there might be one bus a day. Now, if you’ve got kids and you’re taking them to the Co-op ten miles away and it’s three and a half hours between buses, what do you

²⁵ Food Power (2019) Tackling food poverty in rural communities. Available here: https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/FoodPower_RuralFoodPoverty_FINAL.pdf

do with them? There are no cafés or shops open...So, that's where the access to food was very, very challenging because even if you could get the one bus in, what do you do for the rest of the day?" (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Furthermore, many rural areas have relatively low wage economies, with low paid sectors disproportionately represented.²⁶ For example, Argyll and Bute relies heavily on tourism for employment.

"Employment was really impacted. Also, within our area, tourism is a huge thing, and there were a number of people, individuals who had secured employment and were all set to start jobs and then those jobs were then retracted because the jobs no longer existed. So that's really difficult when people are relying on seasonal work that just didn't happen." (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

While these issues are not necessarily exclusive to rural communities they highlight some of the factors that shaped the responses in the areas. Some of the responses were designed to minimise these challenges including third sector organisations opting for a delivery model due to the elderly populations staying at home, tailored food packs suitable for elderly people who were not receiving the usual support from family and friends with meals, and responses that provided vouchers for travel on public transport so to support people accessing the shops. In some respects, the increase in deliveries of food to households (through either the Council or third sector schemes) perhaps made food more readily accessible to certain groups with these communities than would be the case in 'normal' times.

As well as these existing factors impacting food access in rural areas the pandemic brought others to the fore. In Argyll and Bute the shortages of food in rural areas was a particular concern, and a key driver for the Council's decision to undertake a large scale food box delivery scheme.

"The rest of Argyll and Bute is not well serviced with shops anyway. Now we've got panic buying, we've got national food shortages, and we've got a failure, even by the distributors, to get stock to these shops to meet that demand. So there's a real concern, very, very, real concern that food isn't flowing into Argyll and Bute like it was." (Council staff respondent, Argyll and Bute)

However, within this local authority area there are five large towns which may not have faced the same food shortages of other areas. One participant reflected that the direct food provision response that was necessary for the more rural communities was, perhaps, not so necessary for the larger towns:

"I wrote to the Council to ask why they had decided to use parcels rather than either vouchers or money, because some other areas had gone for that choice. And they said it was due to the rurality of the area. They thought that there weren't enough shops with enough food. That might have been the case in some areas, but it wouldn't have been the case in Helensburgh, Dunoon. There are quite a lot of places in Argyll that are reasonable-sized towns. I don't think that argument would have

²⁶ Food Power (2019) Tackling food poverty in rural communities. Available here: https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/FoodPower_RuralFoodPoverty_FINAL.pdf

held. It would have held for some of the island communities maybe.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

Whilst the response was not tailored to cater for differences in the mainland areas of Argyll and Bute, the Council implemented responses on the inhabited islands that accounted for their particular characteristics. Rather than sending food from the mainland to the island, which would negatively impact the local shops operating on the islands, the Council worked in partnership with these shops so they supplied and delivered the food parcels.

This example shows the challenges of providing an authority wide response and the need for tailoring to subsets of the community which have different requirements.

In contrast the approach by Derry and Strabane Council, who did not provide any food directly but rather channelled funding to the local growth partnerships in smaller geographic subsets of the local authority level naturally tailored the response to the more localised needs. However, this too brought challenges as the infrastructure in the rural areas was less well developed than that in the urban areas.

“Something that’s been highlighted for us is that the meals on wheels services in rural areas are not as well developed as urban areas. The meals on wheels are delivered by the health trust, it’s the Western Health and Social Care Trust in that area. Again, the majority of referrals for meals on wheels from social workers and GPs are in urban areas for some reason.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

This put pressure on the organisations that operated in the rural areas which were usually staffed by volunteers and did not necessarily feel like they had the experience or resources that their urban counterparts had.

“I think the resentment came towards the urban groups, they had paid workers on the ground, they were there set up and ready to deal with these things and had experience dealing with, not the exact same thing but these types of things, whereas we were starting from scratch, totally voluntary, and floundering about at the start, thinking we were doing good and maybe not in some cases.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Having a range of actors providing food aid across the rural communities may have also led to a less co-ordinated approach as noted by a participant in Herefordshire:

“There are lots of things happening and did happen, which is fairly typical of our rural area, in that communities get on with it and respond to the crisis, but it’s not necessarily very well-coordinated or linked up.” (Third sector respondent, Herefordshire)

The need for a tailored response depending on the particular geography, in areas with a mix of urban and rural areas, was exemplified in Argyll and Bute where the local council adapted the scheme to be appropriate for the island communities. In the more urban areas, however, the food shortages and access issues may have been less significant and more quickly rectified, suggesting other approaches may have also been an option in these areas. The more localised focus of the Derry and Strabane were inherently more tailored, as responses were designed and provided at a more local level, but this became more challenging for the

areas which had less developed infrastructure in place prior to the pandemic. The balance of local authority wide provision verses more localised tailored responses brought, therefore, both advantages and challenges.

11. Post-August 2020 support and future research

Many third sector organisations spoke of an increase in need at the time of data collection (November 2020 - February 2021) and concerns about the joint impact of the pandemic and winter.

“Just recently I have noticed the demand is going up a bit, and I'm relating that to fuel bills. People are now paying for fuel, which they weren't in the summer, and there's now a conflict between people's ability to pay for heating and pay for food. Just in the last couple of weeks really, we have had a few more referrals of people saying, 'I've had a fuel bill. I can't afford to do the shopping' We've responded to that.” (Third sector respondent, Argyll and Bute)

For some this was a cause of concern as they were feeling a real sense of fatigue having provided such demanding services through spring and summer of 2020.

“But obviously, we were fearful of another lockdown, what happens and what will we all do again? Because under no circumstance, I made it clear, we are not going back to where we were, because we relied solely on Neighbour Renewal funded staff to operate it and volunteers, individuals. I had volunteers, young girls in from Monday to Friday volunteering for us. I had, you know, sporting organisations helping out, because as and when the two community transports were inundated, we had individuals from clubs coming and doing the deliveries for us. I was out at seven/eight o'clock at night doing deliveries sometimes, you know...I made it clear to the department there and then, 'Regardless of your plans we will be shutting the doors if you expect us to continue to do what we did.' We made that clear from the start. There was no way we were going back. We wouldn't have the volunteers. We don't have the staff to cover it. We were just exhausted and burned out to be honest.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Although they followed this by saying that they would provide the response if it was necessary, due to their commitment to the local community.

“I know I said it but I know we would have done, because it's our people, we would have done it anyway, but it was just letting the department know that enough is enough.” (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane)

Some organisations talked about a real fear for the future when they anticipated the longer-term consequences of the pandemic would increase demand for their services.

“It's just we're now in the third week in February and the government hasn't come to talk to us about it and it's scary, there are lots of people on the ground, how are we going to support these people and continue on or help fix this problem? Just because we're coming out of lockdown or because things are easing off. It's going to

take years for people to get back to normal. It's going to take at least until this time next year for people to get into a routine and get their bills and their wages sorted out to get into a routine again and free up some cash. So it's really, really scary times for all of us...I think this is worse than it was last year. I think we were all fearful last year and we really didn't know what was happening but now it's a different fear." (Third sector respondent, Derry and Strabane).

The next phase of the research will involve revisiting the case study areas to explore how the responses evolved from Autumn 2020.



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