



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Argyll and Bute Case Study

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About this report

This report presents findings from local case study research undertaken as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project designed to map and monitor responses to concerns about food access during the COVID-19 pandemic across the UK. Details about the research and project outputs are available at <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>.

This report is one of eight area-based case study reports examining local-level interventions put in place in response to risks of rising household food insecurity during the pandemic between March – August 2020. These are being published alongside a comparative report, '*Comparing local responses household food insecurity during Covid-19 across the UK (March – August 2020)*' looking at some of the similarities, differences and key themes to emerge in these responses in the different areas. A comprehensive '*Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix*' for this case study research has also been published. This appendix, the comparative report and all 8 area case studies are available on the project website.

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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Abstract

Pre COVID-19 a number of third sector organisations were responding to households facing financial barriers to accessing food in Argyll and Bute, which is situated in the west of Scotland. All these organisations responded to the pandemic by adapting their services where necessary. For example, the food banks adopted a 'grab and go' approach, offered home deliveries, extended contact times and accepted self-referrals. Community cafes offered a takeaway service. Most continued to focus on households experiencing financial barriers to food access although they also accepted requests (referrals and self-referrals) to support people facing physical barriers to food access. The 'community food forum', which sought to provide a conduit for these organisations to network amongst themselves and with the local council and advice services, was in its infancy at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but the connection has been significantly strengthened as a result of it. Some of the existing food aid providers experienced a spike in the need for their services at the start of the lockdown, although after peaks in late March and April this subsequently reduced. Others anticipated an increase in the need for their service but this did not materialise. This was attributed to the range of other food aid available in the area, primarily weekly provision of food parcels by the Council to a range of population groups, which operationalised early in the lockdown, but not immediately at the start. In addition to these existing organisations a number of community and neighbourhood groups which had not worked with food previously, started providing food aid and local hospitality businesses adapted their services.

Argyll and Bute Council also became a key actor in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rurality of the area, characterised by fragile supply chains, fewer major food retailers and limited public transport meant physical access to food was a major factor in the Council's response, as well as concerns about financial barriers. The Council allocated a significant proportion of their Scottish Government Food Fund funding, which provided funding to local authorities to support people with access to food, to provide food parcel deliveries to three population groups: fresh food parcels to people who were shielding; fresh food parcels and ambient parcels to people who were experiencing barriers to accessing food; and fresh food parcels and ambient parcels as a replacement for free school meals.¹ If required, frozen food parcels could be provided as an alternative. As well as providing this support to households the service was designed to support local businesses and food suppliers and this was achieved by sourcing the contents for the parcels locally wherever possible, presented as 'for Argyll from Argyll'. The immense geography and the rurality of some areas of the local authority meant significant resources (people, vans, storage) were required as well as thorough strategic oversight. More tailored solutions were developed for and with the communities on the 23 inhabited islands of the area.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

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Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Argyll and Bute

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in Argyll and Bute before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are summarised below and described in more detail later in the report.

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic

Argyll and Bute, located in the west of Scotland, has an expansive geography which includes 23 inhabited islands. It has the fourth sparsest population of the 32 Scottish local authorities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Argyll and Bute Council supported people experiencing food insecurity through their Money Advice Team. This service helped clients who had money worries, providing advice and support on a range of financial issues such as debts, welfare assistance and crisis payments from the Scottish Welfare Fund. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Argyll and Bute Council had no provision for school food during holiday periods, with food banks providing support for those in need of immediate and direct food provision.

As well as the in-house council advice services an independent advice service was available on the Island of Bute through the Bute Advice Centre, supporting people living in the Bute and Cowal area of the local authority. Operating for over 30 years the advice centre is now an independent organisation reliant on local and national funding and funders include Argyll and Bute Council and the Scottish government amongst others.

The Council website identifies 13 community food projects operating in the Argyll and Bute area.² The services and operations of these organisations differ and include emergency food parcel distribution (food banks), pay what you can community meals, community cafes, community lunches and community fridges/cupboards. None of the food banks are part of the Trussell Trust network.

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and following preparatory work in 2019 the Argyll and Bute Community Food Forum was launched in February 2020. The Forum was initiated by the Council with the rationale of connecting community food providers and building relations between them and the Council. Regular meetings between members of the Food Forum were planned, although these have moved to a virtual format since the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the meetings is to allow the organisations to share their experiences, advice and concerns.

² <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/untitled-c20s2>, <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/food-banks-argyll-and-bute>

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Argyll and Bute Council

Argyll and Bute Council undertook a wide range of actions to support people with access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset the Council identified three priority groups in the area. Firstly, the shielding group who, it was agreed needed additional support on top of the national shielding grocery box scheme. Secondly, 'other vulnerable groups' which included older people, those on low incomes, and those in receipt of free school meals. Thirdly, the island and remote populations. Food support for these groups was provided by the newly assembled 'Food Response Team' which was made up of a number of redeployed council staff, supported by a wide range of volunteers who were recruited either through a volunteer portal which the council HR team set up for staff members who were furloughed or had a reduced workload and through a third sector interface ran an appeal for volunteers. Upon receiving a request for support the Food Response Team worked to provide a bespoke solution that suited each individual household's needs.

A key focus of the food response team was the set-up of the operation of a weekly food parcel delivery scheme. The remit of the food box provision evolved over time, resulting in three different types of parcels being available to different population groups at different times. Each type of parcel was delivered on a weekly basis although on different days from each other, meaning people received food twice per week. These council provided food parcels were delivered entirely separately from the Scottish Government that provided ambient food parcels for people who were shielding.

Type of weekly food parcel	Eligible households
Ambient food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals/households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason• Households of children entitled to free school meals• Individuals/ households experiencing financial vulnerability
Fresh food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals/households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason• Households of children entitled to free school meals• Individuals/households experiencing financial vulnerability• People who are shielding
Frozen food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provided to any of the above population groups if required

People in need of the parcels were identified through a combination of self-referral through the local helpline and through referrals from other organisations, such as other agencies, social work teams, third sector organisations and local community groups. Due to the geography and rurality, delivering the parcels across the region was a "momentous operation". Forty council officers worked on the 'back office' roles such as maintaining the database of recipients and planning delivery routes. About 200 vehicles a week were utilized to collect supplies and make deliveries, a combination of the school transport fleet, the council fleet of 20 electric vehicles, local delivery vans and vehicles of businesses and

organisations, including refrigerated vans for the fresh food, that were not operating due to lockdown. Due to the specificities of the island communities a different process was set up to provide the food parcels to the households living on one of the islands, for example, often the council funded the local shops, based on the island, to supply the food and make the deliveries.

In addition to the provision of food the scheme was designed to support local businesses. This 'From Argyll for Argyll' approach meant local businesses were used as the suppliers of produce for the fresh food boxes as much as possible.

The food parcel deliveries initially ran from the end of March through till the end of June, which was the period for which the first tranche of funding from the Scottish Government Food Fund covered. At the peak about 3,400 households were receiving a parcel each week. The decision was taken to end the fresh food parcels at the end of June. Ambient parcels were still being delivered during July and August and a small amount of fresh produce was added to the parcels. During these months actions to scale down the food parcel delivery scheme were taken, also coinciding with the easing of lockdown restrictions which meant people were more able to access other support such as going to the shops for themselves or visits from family and friends. The decision was taken to replace the food boxes, provided to households eligible for free school meals, with a cash payment from the start of the summer holidays.

As well as this direct food provision the Council also supported volunteer shopping that was happening within local communities through the establishment of a credit facility where members of the community go shopping for somebody and charge that to a credit facility, owned by the Council, at the till. The council then invoiced the recipient. This facility was introduced in the co-op and other retailers had their own schemes in place. The council also supported the existing food aid providers primarily to ensure they had sufficient food, buying food for food banks through their own supply chains if required.

Food Banks and Community Food Organisations

The existing community food organisations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting their services in a number of ways. For example, the food banks adopted a 'grab and go' approach, offered home deliveries, extended contact times, accepted self-referrals and increased the volume of food in each food parcel. Community cafes offered a takeaway service. Some organisations changed venue to allow for social distancing. In most cases the focus became providing people with food, meaning some of the wider wrap around care or social activities had to be paused. Although the organisations were concerned about their food supply, most were able to secure stock levels to meet demand, including starting to buy food from national wholesalers and retailers, securing grant funding used to purchase food and through increased financial donations from the community.

Demand for their services varied, some organisations reported an increase in need in March and April. For example, Helensburgh Food Bank saw a 32.5% increase comparing March 2020 and 2019, and a 62% increase comparing April. These peaks in demand reduced in May and the following months. Other organisations anticipated increased need for their service but this did not materialise, which was attributed to the range of other support available, including that from the Council.

Community Food Forum

The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to share experiences and support each other. In addition, a key output of the Forum during and 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.³

Other Support

The Bute Advice Centre continued to provide advice services throughout the COVID-19 crisis, supporting people to maximise their income. This support was being provided to both existing clients and people who were applying for benefits for the first time. Other existing organisations started newly providing food aid, including an existing elderly befriending organisation, a mental health support charity and a Burgh Halls in one of the towns. Very localised groups, such as community councils or informal neighbourhood groups, also started providing services to support food access. A range of local businesses also provided low cost or free food support. The “small and supportive community” on the islands also provided a range of support to residents including food support from local businesses, support from a local resilience group and family and friends supporting each other.

³ <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-project>

Data overview

The full methodology for the local area case study research has been published alongside this report in the Local Area Case Studies – Methodological Appendix. This is available on the project website. Details of the data collected for this particular case study is reported below.

The case study draws from the following data sources:

- Two interviews with representatives from Argyll and Bute Council, one interview with a representative from a third sector advice service and one interview with a representative from a food bank.
- One workshop conducted with 5 participants of whom:
 - 1 worked for Argyll and Bute Council (previously interviewed)
 - 4 worked or volunteered with third sector organisations or voluntary groups (one was a different volunteer from an organisation previously interviewed)
- A brief informal phone conversation was held with someone involved in another food bank who was unable to participate in a full interview or attend the workshop.

In addition to these attendees a further 6 third sector organisations were invited to participate in the research but did not do so.

As well as primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify further sources of information about activities and groups active in responding to food insecurity before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, during the workshop, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Argyll and Bute

As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, areas that were either predominantly urban or rural, and evidence of economic impact on the population, as reflected in rising claimant rates. The claimant rate reflects people either receiving Jobseeker's Allowance or receiving Universal Credit and expected to be looking for work. Argyll and Bute was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly rural. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 153%.

Argyll and Bute is located in the west of Scotland. On 30 June 2019, the population of Argyll and Bute was 85,870. 25.9% of the population were aged 65 and over.⁴

By area, it is the second largest local authority in Scotland and it has the fourth sparsest population of the 32 local authorities. The area stretches from the points in the east, which borders with local authorities of the more urban and densely populated 'central belt' of Scotland to the west coast of the mainland and across to the islands. Argyll and Bute has 23 inhabited islands and 17% of the population live on the islands. Almost half of the population live in areas classed as 'remote rural'. The five larger towns in the area are Helensburgh, Dunoon, Rothesay, Campbeltown and Oban, with populations between about 5,000-15,000. Almost half the population live in settlements smaller than 3,000 people, or out with settlements altogether.

32.8% of employee jobs in Argyll and Bute are in 'public administration, education and health'. The proportions of people working in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors and tourism-related activities are far higher than Scottish averages, all being industries characterised by seasonal work. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Argyll and Bute was 1.7% in January 2020, but this rose to 4.3% in July 2020.

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is a relative measure of deprivation across Scotland. Of the 125 data zones in Argyll and Bute, thirteen were identified as being amongst the 20% most overall deprived data zones in Scotland in 2020. These thirteen data zones all located in the towns of Rothesay, Dunoon, Campbeltown, Helensburgh and Oban. None of Argyll and Bute's rural data zones fall into the 20% most overall deprived data zones in Scotland.⁵

One interviewee described the area:

"What is really interesting about Argyll and Bute is we're incredibly rural. Our geography is immense, we're the second largest of the local authorities in Scotland...we're smaller than Highlands but we're still huge from a geographical view and we have 23 inhabited islands. That is more than other authorities including the island authorities. So we have this incredible geography with no central location in Argyll and Bute. We're, kind of, five main towns but they're all at the ends of peninsulas almost. So they don't, obviously, connect. That's something we're very, very, used to delivering services in. That's our... this is what we do, this is our geography, this is what we know." (Council staff respondent)

⁴ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/argyll-and-bute-council-profile.html>

⁵ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/info/home>

Contracted Meals on Wheels

Prior to March 2018 Argyll and Bute Council contracted the Royal Voluntary Service to provide a Meals on Wheels service in the area. Local volunteers delivered the service. The service was withdrawn in 2018 due to a national policy change for Royal Voluntary Service.⁸ Since then there has been no council provided meals on wheels service, although the Council can signpost people to commercial providers if appropriate.

The community based third sector organisation Cùram Thiriodh provides a meals on wheels service on the Isle of Tìree, which they set up following the withdrawal of the Royal Voluntary Service. Meals are prepared in the kitchen of a local care home and distributed four days a week to clients identified as requiring the service by Social Services. Clients pay £5.50 per meal.⁹

Community food organisations and food banks

A number of community food projects operate in the Argyll and Bute area. Both the Council and Bute Advice Centre web pages list these organisations.¹⁰ Some provide emergency food parcel services only whilst others run a range of community food activities. None of the food banks are part of the Trussell Trust network and they all operate differently. Convening the Food Forum highlighted the range of ways in which services operate and provide support.

“Although it’s Argyll and Bute, it’s entirely different depending on which area, and that was a bit of an awakening for me as I started to liaise, that the food banks I was most closely associated with here on Bute wasn’t replicated anywhere else in Argyll and Bute.” (Third sector respondent)

Eleven of the thirteen organisations listed on the web pages at the time of the research were invited to participate (email contact could not be made with the further two organisations). Of the 11 organisations invited, 5 participated, one as an interview, three as part of the workshop and one as a brief telephone conversation. Data on seven of the other organisations listed on the website came from desk-based research only (shown below with a *). No data could be found for one further organisation listed on the website.

Name, website, location	Emergency Food Aid	Other Services	Other Organisational Features
Bute Oasis (Isle of Bute) ¹¹	Food Bank – open every day 10am – 4pm.	Signposting to advice services and other support services.	The food bank service is funded by the profits from accompanying second-hand shop. A local person decided to set up the food bank after the local advice service, which had a small amount of food to distribute to people in need, reported increasing demand for this food.

⁸ http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_49552.html

⁹ <https://www.curamtiree.co.uk/Meals-on-Wheels/>

¹⁰ <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/untitled-c20s2>, <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/food-banks-argyll-and-bute>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/buteoasis2/>

Helensburgh and Lomond Food Bank ¹²	Food Bank – 4 sessions a week. 3 in Helensburgh (Mon & Fri 10.00-12.00, (Thurs 18.00-20.00) and 1 in Rosneath (Wed 13.00-15.00). Parcels can be delivered to the Health Centre in Arrochar for collection.	Signposting to advice services and other support services. Gas and electricity top ups.	The sessions run as a ‘cafe like environment’ with clients encouraged to stay for a cup of tea and a ‘chat’. Referrals and self-referrals accepted but self-referrals are much more common.
Hub Grub and Dunoon Food Bank (Dunoon) ¹³	Food Bank - two sessions a week (Thurs 17.00-18.30 and Friday 10.00-12.00)	Friday cafe providing meals on a free/pay what you can basis aiming to support people experiencing loneliness and social isolation. Monthly lunches held in partnership with local befriending organisations.	Operates predominantly on a self-referral basis. A referral is needed if the need exceeds the usual provision of one food parcel covering 7 days. Most food is donated by the community with a small amount purchased with funds raised from fundraising activities.
Moving on Mid Argyll, (Mid Argyll)	Provides food parcels to people in need via referral agencies. Weekly food parcels are provided for three weeks (or more if necessary).	Recipients provided with a financial award at the same time as the food parcel.	Originally supported homeless people making the transition into their first accommodation by providing a starter pack of essential items. Over time adopted a broader purpose of addressing poverty in the community. Works in partnerships with other agencies to support people transition to “ <i>a position of stability</i> ”.
Islay Food Bank ¹⁴ (Isle of Islay)	Food parcels delivered to households in need.	Signposting to advice services and other support services.	Referrals from other agencies, such as social work and Carr Gomm, a Scottish charity supporting people in need with a range of services, are accepted. ¹⁵

¹² <https://helensburghlomondfoodbank.org/>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/Dunoon-Foodbank-324045001773009/>

¹⁴ <https://www.islaybaptistchurch.org.uk/community-store-cupboard>

¹⁵ <https://www.carrgomm.org/>

	Up to three parcels provided in a 3-month period.		<p>Self-referrals accepted via a confidential phone line open on Mondays and Fridays between 10am – 5pm.</p> <p>The food bank was initially set up in response to a request from the Council's social work team who were sometimes supporting clients by buying food <i>“out their own pocket”</i> (Workshop Attendee, Third Sector).</p>
*Hope Kitchen (Oban) ¹⁶	Food Bank open daily (11.30-13.30) accepts self-referrals and referrals from other organisations.	<p>Community cafe open for lunch every day. Customers are asked for a £1 donation (although this is not obligatory).</p> <p>Community hub running a range of activities (knitting groups, recovery groups, creative writing groups and music groups).</p>	Accepts referrals and self-referrals.
*Mull and Iona Community Trust (Isle of Mull) ¹⁷		Community fridge. Located in a community hall, open 9.00-17.00 every day.	<p>Core aim is to reduce food waste.</p> <p>Surplus food is provided by local businesses or members of the public.</p> <p>Food can be accessed by anyone who feels that they can use it.</p>
*Solar Project (run by third sector organisation Cùram Thiriodh (Isle of Tiree) ¹⁸	Deliveries of food parcels or vouchers for the Co-op.	Community cupboard in an old telephone box.	People can self-refer by email or phone or be referred through the local medical practice.

¹⁶ <https://www.hopekitchen.org.uk/>

¹⁷ <https://www.mict.co.uk/projects-services/rethink-mess/community-fridge/>

¹⁸ <https://www.solartiree.com/>

*Kintrye Food bank	Food Bank – two sessions a week (Tue & Fri 10.30-11.30).		
*Jean’s Bothy, ENABLE (Helensburgh)	Mental health hub which provides food aid to members.	Community cafe. Community groups and activities.	
*Tarbert Pantry/ Soup Group	Emergency Food Supplies.		Self-referral. Ambient and fresh food. Food supplied from Fareshare.
*Maxie Richards, Kings Court	Food provided in-house to resident.	Recovery centre for people experiencing drug addiction.	

Bute Advice Centre

As well as the in-house council advice services an independent advice service is available on the Island of Bute through the Bute Advice Centre, supporting people living in the Bute and Cowal area of the local authority. Operating for over 30 years the advice centre is now an independent organisation reliant on local and national funding. Funders include Argyll and Bute Council and the Scottish government amongst others. Bute Advice Centre offers a wide range of support and advice on welfare rights including government support schemes, child winter heating allowance, universal credit, Best Start, Funeral Support, warm home discount, Scottish Welfare Fund, Job Start payment, school and education grants and Scottish child payment.¹⁹ As well as these statutory schemes the Advice Centre explores all possible avenues of support, seeking to provide a holistic suit of support.

“We just try and keep an open mind. So in our first interview with a client we’re trying to gather as much information about where they’re living, how they’re living, their family setup, all of that kind of thing, so that it’s not just about the legacy benefits or Universal Credit or Scottish Welfare, but we’re trying to look at them holistically, if you like, to see if there are maybe other things we can tap into for them as well.”
(Third sector respondent)

Since January 2019 the Manager of Bute Advice Centre also facilitates the Community Food Forum (see below).

Community Food Forum

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. At the time the Council were concerned about the anticipated impacts on food vulnerability due to Brexit and, therefore, sought to become more involved with and provide support to existing local community food work. The Council commissioned and funded Bute Advice Centre to facilitate the process. Prior to the set up the Council explained the rationale to the Advice Centre:

¹⁹ <https://www.buteadvice.org.uk/>

“[Name removed] from the Council phoned me and said, ‘We would really like to have this initiative. We’ve got lots of food banks all over Argyll and Bute. We’re not really sure how many there are, but we know they exist in all their various forms and are all entirely independent. None of them were part of some of the bigger institutions, if you like. They were all very small independent food banks.’ ... so [Name removed] said, “Would your organisation like to put in a bid for this work?” and I said, “Absolutely. This is something that is very close to heart, I just didn’t have the capacity to do it within my role before,” but yes, this was something I really wanted to do. So this was set up.” (Third sector respondent)

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:

“To come together and share with each other their experiences of who they were, what they did, how they delivered their services. What were the challenges they were facing, what were the problems, and see if there could be an interchange of advice and information.” (Third sector respondent)

Regular meetings between members of the Food Forum were planned, although the meetings moved to a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the meetings were to allow the organisations to share their experiences, advice and concerns. As well as these opportunities to share and network, the Forum also created a webpage on the Council website listing all the organisations providing support with food in the area (see <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/food-banks-argyll-and-bute>).

Meal providers

As noted in the section above a number of community food organisations ran a community cafe and a number of lunch clubs operated in the local authority area. Meals for the lunch clubs were often provided by school kitchens or care home kitchens and the charge for lunch clubs varied from club to club.

Early signs of food access issues in the COVID-19 pandemic

The early signs of food access issues in Argyll and Bute during the COVID-19 pandemic related to both financial vulnerability and restricted physical access to food.

Financial vulnerability

Increasing financial vulnerability was highlighted in increasing numbers of people applying for Universal Credit, in many cases for the first time.

“Ooh, boy, our numbers escalated. Basically, because we deliver money advice as well as welfare rights support, what we discovered was that we had reached our usual annual target six months in because of the number of Universal Credit new claims that we were having to make for people who had no knowledge [of it]. 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)

Advice services were also supporting people who were furloughed and therefore had their income reduced by 20%.

“Also there were lots of people who were down to 80% of their salary and where they had always been able to muddle along on 100% of their salary, they could just about make ends meet, all of a sudden on 80% they couldn’t, and in actual fact they were entitled then to a Universal Credit top-up, so we were able to support people who were really on very low incomes, particularly part-time workers.” (Third sector respondent)

One of the drivers of the redundancies and use of the furlough scheme was the heavy reliance on tourism in the area. Due to the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic many people would have secured prospective and seasonal employment in advance of the tourist season, but these jobs were no longer available due to the lockdown. Interviewees reported that this is particularly problematic for people who work long hours over the spring, summer and autumn in anticipation of working considerably reduced hours over winter. The lack of opportunity to save in this way will have a lasting impact over the winter. Seasonal work also affected people who were shielding.

“Also, those that were needing to shield but couldn’t get access to work in the way that they would normally have done so, so they’d been on Universal Credit, they were anticipating getting back into the workforce and then because of shielding they weren’t then in a position to do that.” (Third sector respondent)

Physical barriers to food access

A number of threats to physical food access became apparent early in the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly the case due to existing food retail offering. Two of the larger towns in the local authority area have more than one of the big supermarkets with the remaining areas primarily serviced by the co-op and other smaller, local retailers.

“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)

Further discussing the challenges with distributors one participant stated:

“It was a very real challenge – for instance wholesalers became difficult to get hold of, they couldn’t always get access to supplies, leading to longer term food shortages in some places.” (Council staff respondent)

As a result of this and as an additional concern there was limited, if any, online shopping availability across the local authority area.

“We’re telling people to stay at home and the advice is to utilise online shopping, how do you do that in Bute? You can’t because there is no such thing.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition, there was limited public transport as public transport systems are based around the school buses. Therefore, when school buses are not running public transport, in some areas, is extremely limited.

Food supply to the islands was a particular concern given the reduction in transport, which required efforts from the Council and the Scottish Government to resolve.

“So, our food supply, what it showed us is our retail food supply chain is very fragile anyway, and one thing like this was enough to actually knock it over. It took Scottish government involvement to get food to islands, there was no doubt about it. Ferries stopped running, you know? How do you get food to an island if you’ve not got a ferry? So, we ended up, yes, can we commandeer ferries, and can we commandeer planes?” (Council staff respondent)

Key actors and activities to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

A range of existing and new actors provided food support during the first national lockdown and beyond.

Argyll and Bute Council

The local authority undertook a wide range of actions to support people with access to food. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic the Council identified three priority groups in the area. Firstly, the shielding group who, it was agreed needed additional support on top of the national shielding grocery box scheme. Secondly, ‘other vulnerable groups’ which included older people, those on low incomes, and those in receipt of free school meals. Thirdly, the island and remote populations. The response was tailored to meet the needs of these three priority groups.

Caring for People helpline

A helpline and online portal were set up for people requiring support. People could request support with, for example, medicine, dog walking, befriending or food, by calling the helpline or submitting requests on the portal. Requests for food support would be directed the newly designated food co-coordinators.

Resourcing and planning a food response

Existing local authority staff were utilised to work on the responses to support food access. Two staff members led the food response, redeployed from their existing roles as ‘commercial manager of catering and cleaning services’ and ‘business support manager’. From the outset the Council recognised that project management skills were required. One of the leads of the food response described the early days of planning the response, which was built from a blank canvas:

“My background is totally different. It is around programme/project management and change management, that’s my skillset.

Anyway, the money that came from Scottish Government, that was- we were told that was coming. It was really a case of, “Right, scope out a piece of work to allow us to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities, those that were suffering.” (Council staff respondent)

Recognising that physical access to food was severely restricted the project leads were:

“Given a mandate to establish a food supply and distribution network which we knew could be scalable, sustainable and adaptable.” (Council staff respondent)

Eight food coordinators were also recruited to join the food response team, largely drawn from the education service (education managers and headteachers) as they had good understanding of their own communities and experience with “problem solving on the spot” (Council staff respondent). Once a need for food support was identified, part of the food coordinator’s role would be to liaise with the households to find the best solution for their needs.

“We were far from a one size fits all response, and if people had specific needs due to their diet, medical conditions or location the coordinators were able to provide bespoke and individual responses. That was the benefit of it being education managers/head teachers who were in the food coordinator roles – they knew and understood those local and individual needs and were able to make those kinds of local, person centred decisions.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition, two lead officers were appointed with specific remits: one to liaise with the food banks in the area to ensure they had access to the food, supplies and networks that they required; and another to focus on supporting the islands and liaising with supermarkets and shops. Other council staff, many from the education services, were involved in the food parcel deliveries (see below).

As well as these temporarily appointed roles the food responses were supported by a wide range of volunteers who were recruited either through a volunteer portal which the Council HR team set up for staff members who were furloughed or had a reduced workload and through a third sector interface who ran an appeal for volunteers.

Food parcel deliveries

A key focus of the food response team was the set up and operation of a weekly food parcel delivery scheme. In the early stage of the pandemic the key issues with food access in the area related to physical accessibility, which led to this decision to provide deliveries of food parcels to people in need. This was primarily funded by the funding provided to local authorities from the Scottish Government through the Food Fund.²⁰

“When it came to the food deliveries, and we didn’t go into this blind, we only developed the food delivery when we realised that there was a need for it, because it wasn’t about cash, it was about getting food.” (Council staff respondent)

People in need of the parcels were identified through a combination of self-referral through the helpline and through referrals from other organisations, such as other agencies, social work teams, third sector organisations and local community groups. The Council hoped that

²⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

liaising with this wide range of organisations they would be able to identify people who needed support and who may not be accessing their usual forms of support due to lockdown.

The target group and contents of the food parcels evolved. Initially the scheme was not intended to support people who were shielding, as there was a national scheme in place for this group, or as a replacement for free school meals, who the school catering and education team was supporting. Therefore, initially the scheme delivered ambient parcels to the other populations of people in need.

“So this was not for shielding, this was for our vulnerable, our elderly people, our people who couldn’t leave home, people who just couldn’t access food. So, the local shop shut, how do they get it? Or they couldn’t get a bus because the buses stopped running, how could they get food? Or they couldn’t get to the Co-op because they had three kids that they were trying to home school, so how do they get food? So, we knew that this was about how we get food to those people.” (Council staff respondent)

However, early in the lockdown the Scottish Government recognised the need for fresh food, in addition to the ambient parcels that were being delivered through the national shielding grocery boxes, and suggested the local authorities were well placed to provide these fresh food parcels. Argyll and Bute Council then decided to deliver fresh food parcels to the shielding population and everyone else who was receiving one of the local ambient food parcels.

“Scottish Government’s view was, ‘Yes, we agree, if we’re providing food to shielding households as a government, it would be a good idea to provide fresh food.’ Otherwise, it was all going to be ambient parcels and tins. ‘Yes, we agree that should happen. Over to you, local authorities, to make that happen.’ We’re like, ‘Woah, what do you mean we’re now doing fresh food. Yippee, excellent.’ So we’re thinking we’re doing parcels and tins to the group the Scottish Government aren’t but now, suddenly, we’re doing fresh food to just about everybody. So we’ve got shielding who are having fresh food. My view was, “Do you know what, that’s absolutely fine, we’ll do that, but if we’re giving fresh food to shielding households, I’m giving fresh food to everybody that is having a parcel from us.” So a council parcel, rather than a shielding parcel.” (Council staff respondent)

Finally, it was decided that after the Easter school holidays families eligible for free school meals, who initially received hot meals delivered to their home, should receive both the ambient and fresh food parcels rather than the hot meals (see later section for more discussion of this). Therefore, in a short space of time the extent of the scheme increased considerably.

For households which the ambient and the food parcels were not appropriate, for example, people who had limited cooking skills and equipment or people who may usually rely on family or friends to cook for them, a frozen food parcel was provided. These food parcels provided frozen meals that could then be kept in the fridge and cooked in the oven or microwave.

“We had a final food parcel which was frozen food, and that was really for people who were particularly vulnerable who had low cooking skills and low equipment. So

we were also conscious that providing people with a box wouldn't necessarily equate to good food." (Council staff respondent)

This evolving of the scheme meant that three different types of parcels were available to different population groups (shown in the table below). Each type of parcel was delivered on a weekly basis although on different days from each other, meaning people received food twice per week. These council provided food parcels were delivered entirely separately from the Scottish Government provided ambient food parcels for people who were shielding.

Type of weekly food parcel	Eligible households
Ambient food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals/households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason • Households of children entitled to free school meals • Individuals/households experiencing financial vulnerability
Fresh food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals/households experiencing restricted physical food access for any reason • Households of children entitled to free school meals • Individuals/households experiencing financial vulnerability • People who are shielding
Frozen food parcels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided to any of the above population groups if required

Whilst this increase in remit of the scheme was challenging in itself, the team also had to work hard to combine the data on these three different population groups to ensure everyone in need was supported.

"It meant that our distribution lists which 'spat' out our data lists, because of our geography we had many distribution lists, had to be merged in Excel. We had an enormous amount of time put into managing and cleansing data but done in Excel and done manually. That level of detail, because it had to be right because that was ultimately the parcel on the door of the vulnerable person." (Council staff respondent)

Different supply and distribution systems were set up for the fresh and the ambient food parcels. Four distribution hubs, hosted in local schools, were set up for the ambient food parcels and food was purchased through the existing council supply chain and through a partnership agreement with Morrisons.

"We were very, very, fortunate that Morrisons supermarket came on board and we, in effect, became another branch of Morrisons - you know, a retail branch of Morrisons' wholesale operations. We were able to buy wholesale from Morrisons from the Central Belt. They set us up as a customer incredibly quickly. That, I'm very, very, very, grateful for, because we wouldn't have managed otherwise. It also gave us incredibly good value. They were very, very, good at what they did." (Council staff respondent)

Two distribution hubs were set up for the fresh food parcels, again in local schools, although different from those used for the ambient food parcels. Food for the fresh parcels was sourced in partnership with local suppliers. This was a strategic decision to support these local businesses (see section below).

“So 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)

Another benefit of using local suppliers was the ability to vary the contents.

“We varied the contents of those regularly, so that people didn’t get bored of eating the same food, that was one thing we were really conscious of, we wanted people to feel valued, so we also made sure that we included things in those parcels that they would enjoy. So, for instance, when they were in season, we included strawberries and cream a couple of weeks, so that people could actually have something nice, because just because you were isolating I didn’t think that meant you should live on a tin of beans.” (Council staff respondent)

Although the ‘From Argyll for Argyll’ approach was applied mostly to the fresh parcels, occasionally it informed the supply of the ambient parcels too.

“We’d give them digestive biscuits, a packet of rich tea biscuits or digestive biscuits, usually bought from Morrisons so Morrisons’ cheap brand. Yes, they might... I don’t even know how many biscuits are in a packet, say 24 biscuits in a packet. Some weeks they didn’t get 24 biscuits in a packet but they got really luxury Island Bakery organic shortbread from the Isle of Mull -gorgeous stuff. We had, suddenly, that appearing in their boxes. Yes, you get less biscuits but, my God, the biscuits you got were so much more tasty.” (Council staff respondent)

Due to the geography and rurality, delivering the parcels across the region was a “momentous operation” (Council staff respondent). 40 council officers worked on the ‘back office’ roles such as maintaining the database of recipients and planning delivery routes.

“At one point I had almost 40 people working for me so it was an absolutely enormous team we brought in because we needed to set up a model of food parcel delivery that met our geography. So, it was reactive to, and met the needs of, our smallest and most remote and rural communities, but also would be scalable to deal with the likes of Helensburgh. You know, our biggest towns. So, we needed to have something that would do that, so it met both those requirements, but also would be able to be scaled up and scaled down on demand.” (Council staff respondent)

About 200 vehicles a week were utilized to collect supplies and make deliveries, a combination of the school transport fleet, the Council fleet of 20 electric vehicles, local delivery vans and vehicles of businesses and organisations, including refrigerated vans for the fresh food, that were not operating due to lockdown.

“We got a fleet of vehicles because we had every vehicle that could possibly carry parcels co-opted into this. So we had our own school minibus drivers. In some cases, we took all the seats out of them and turned them into transit vans. We had construction companies working for us, we had blue light services, so the

coastguard, the mountain rescue service, the fire service, they were delivering parcels for us. We had hauliers on board, they were delivering parcels for us.”
(Council staff respondent)

This distribution network was established to operate on the mainland. A different process was set up to provide the food parcels to households on the 23 inhabited islands. In these cases, often the Council funded the local shops, based on the island, to supply the food and make the deliveries.

“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. So, we worked with the shops to purchase... they made up the food parcels for us, so the fresh food parcels were made up by the shops and delivered fully using their own networks and we paid for it.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council made the shops aware of what needed to be included in the parcels as well as acceptable substitutes and the shop supplied and delivered to everyone requiring support on the island. In other cases, a local transport company was contracted to do the deliveries. The businesses involved invoiced the Council on a regular basis. This model varied to some extent on each the islands, depending on what suited each individual location.

As well as food, the parcels contained cleaning and personal care products as well as a recipe book and food safety information. Other agencies also used the parcels as an opportunity to distribute information, for example, the police included leaflets about staying safe in lockdown. Information on available financial support was also included such as referral pathways if people have financial needs and information about the Scottish Welfare Fund.

The food parcel deliveries initially ran from the end of March through till the end of June, which was the period for which the first tranche of funding from the Scottish Government Food Fund covered. At the peak about 3,400 households were receiving a parcel each week. The decision was taken to end the fresh food parcels at the end of June. Ambient parcels were still delivered during July and August and a small amount of fresh produce was added to the parcels. During these months actions to scale down the food parcel delivery scheme were taken, also coinciding with the easing of lockdown restrictions which meant people were more able to access other support such as going to the shops for themselves or visits from family and friends. Practically this also meant the schools, which had been converted to food hubs, could be prepared for pupils returning after the summer holidays. The voluntarily redeployed council staff were also gradually returning to their original roles.

Recipients of the parcels were regularly contacted through the months and April – July. As the scheme was being wound up everyone still receiving a parcel was contacted to discuss other options.

“So, every single person who was in receipt of food deliveries got a phone call and were spoken to about what was the right support for them. So, it was a bit of a welfare call as well, to check in that they were okay, they were doing okay, what was their personal situation and whether there was a better fit for them? And for most of

the people who were receiving the deliveries that was the case, they wanted to move on from deliveries and do things for themselves.” (Council staff respondent)

From this call, if necessary, the appropriate support in the longer term was organised such as a referral to the social work team to ensure peoples ongoing support needs were being met. The connection with longer term support is a key legacy of the project, in which new pockets of rural poverty were identified.

“It gave us a really strong map of rural poverty in Argyll and Bute, food poverty in Argyll and Bute that we’d never had before, never seen before because...

Our legacy was our most vulnerable were moved over to health and social care. That meant some people who were unknown to us, or whose situation had significantly changed, are now getting the support that they had. So our ongoing vulnerable populations are being taken care of, and that’s really important.” (Council staff respondent)

Although the food parcel deliveries were predominantly funded by the Scottish Government provided Food Fund, there was an overspend on the scheme which the local authority funded.

Facilitating volunteer shopping

At the start of the pandemic the Council liaised with local supermarkets (Co-op and Tesco) to investigate the feasibility and support for increased online shopping in the area as well as finding ways to overcome some of the barriers to people helping others with their shopping.

“The problems, early on, were... yes, there wasn’t much food in our supermarkets. The communities, all of them, were brilliant. They wanted to go shopping for their neighbours, their relatives, their friends, their street, their whatever. When they pitched up at the supermarkets, the supermarkets were saying, “No, you can’t have more than 2 tins of beans. I don’t care if you’re shopping for 10 people, you can only have 2 tins of beans.” (Council staff respondent)

In many cases the local community groups were also working with the supermarkets to overcome these issues and this was supported by the Council to ensure partnership working between the Council, the supermarkets and the people providing support on the ground.

“There were also community groups and others working locally with store managers and with us...We can’t tell a supermarket how to run, we absolutely cannot, but what we can do is we can work with them, so we did that.” (Council staff respondent)

As well as working together to overcome issues with restrictions on purchases the Council also supported community member shopping for others by introducing a payment facility at the co-op. The scheme 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. Other supermarkets had introduced responses across the network so the credit facility was only required at the co-op.

“We felt that we had to be a conduit for those who were unable to access online shopping but had a community network in place, but they didn’t have the cashflow to make it work.” (Council staff respondent)

Supporting food banks

The Council also worked in partnership with the existing food aid providers primarily to ensure they had sufficient food and, when needed the Council would buy food for the food banks. As their Food Fund funding from the Scottish Government was coming to an end in September, the Council also 'frontloaded' the purchasing of food to allow an ongoing supply to be provided to the food banks should it be needed beyond September. As well as this practical support the Community Food Forum (see below) allowed further forging of partnerships and some "really good working relationships emerging with our community food forum."

"Really honestly, it was getting them food. We helped with that really early on, but that brought a whole load of trust because we're just buying them food for them to dish out. They're suddenly seeing that we're here to help. We were able to bring them together under the Community Food Forum umbrella which, nominally, was in place before but this gave it a real incentive to do so." (Council staff respondent)

School food provision

Initially free school meal replacements were provided in the form of a hot meal delivered to eligible households. Meals were prepared by the existing catering teams in schools, using existing supplies and delivered by teachers and education staff.

"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)

Reported benefits of this approach include families seeing a familiar face on the daily deliveries, providing an opportunity to get technology to families if needed and an opportunity for the school to do welfare checks on vulnerable families.

Once it became clear that the schools were going to be closed for a longer period of time it was agreed that this response was not sustainable so after the Easter holidays eligible families were transitioned onto the food parcel delivery scheme (described above). As lockdown eased the decision was taken to adopt a cash-based response and from the start of the summer holidays families were provided with a cash payment.

"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)

Community food organisations and food banks

The existing community food organisations in the areas made a number of adaptations to allow them to continue to provide their services, described below. Some experienced an increase in the need for their services at the start of the lockdown whilst others anticipated this but it did not materialise.

Bute Oasis (Isle of Bute)²¹

Bute Oasis Food bank continued to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The food bank switched to mostly delivering food parcels to people's homes, both people who had restricted access to food for financial or physical access reasons. Where delivery was not needed collections from the food bank operated by providing details at the door and then waiting outside. Once prepared the food parcel would be left outside the door. Bute Oasis had to find new sources of funding as the accompanying second-hand shop, the profits of which usually fund the food bank, had to close. The alternative funding largely came from donations from the local community. The food bank also secured two grants. The food bank usually buys the food for the food parcels from Lidl, Aldi, Asda, Farmfoods, Tesco and Home Bargains. Due to restrictions imposed on bulk purchases by these supermarkets, some of which did not make exceptions for food banks, Bute Oasis started buying food from national suppliers, Brakes and Failte, although this was a more expensive option for them.

The food bank saw increased need for services at the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, even prior to the national lockdown. This increase, prior to lockdown, was attributed to panic that there would not be enough food supplied to the island, which relies on the local Co-op. To cope with the increased need during the COVID-19 pandemic the food bank stopped collecting details or filling in paperwork: the priority was to give people in need of food.

Helensburgh and Lomond Food Bank²²

Helensburgh and Lomond Food Bank happened to have their AGM the night that the national lockdown was announced and decided at that point that they would continue to provide a service, although they knew a number of their volunteers would be shielding or self-isolating.

They redesigned their service in a number of ways. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the food bank operated a cafe like environment where people came in and had a cup of tea and a chat as well as collecting a food parcel. This was immediately stopped, due to the restrictions, and a 'grab and go' service was provided. The layout of the food bank was changed to facilitate a "walkthrough process"

"So we decided that we would focus purely on a give and go service. So the difference was people were not going to be able to get a cup of tea, sitting down, addressing social isolation and maybe some of the mental health issues that just by being in company and listening to people you can get a wee bit of support. That side of it had to go by the wayside, unfortunately, so that we could just focus on a food

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/buteoasis2/>

²² <https://helensburghlomondfoodbank.org/>

bank delivering food to those that came. And it was walk in the front door and straight out the back door.” (Third sector respondent)

The walkthrough model also meant there was no flexibility in the contents of the food parcel. Ordinarily people would be able to leave or swap foods that they did not like, but this was no longer possible.

“People are taking stuff and maybe giving it away to somebody else, “Oh, I don't like tuna, I don't like cornflakes.” That sort of thing we used to deal with on a one-to-one basis and of course we can't do that, so that would be something we would want to put back in when we're able.” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank also decided to focus purely on providing food as opposed to some of the wider wraparound care such as signposting to other support organisations and having other support organisations drop into the food bank to provide advice if required. Although many current volunteers were shielding, the food bank were supported by new volunteers who were on furlough. Due to the food bank trying to minimise contact the service which topped up people's electricity and gas payment cards was also suspended.

“We still can't do that. Under the COVID rules, we find that's impossible to do. We haven't got enough people, and that would mean queuing in a shop, somebody going for a long period. We've still actually got some money in a pot that was donated specifically for that and we've not been able to use it, which is pretty sad really.” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank secured a grant of £3,500 which covered the cost of some of the necessary adaptations. The Council community development manager advised the food bank to apply to the fund which was part of the Scottish Government Supporting Communities Fund which was held by the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park and made available for redistribution to smaller local charities.²³

“We didn't know that we would need that money at that time, because you hadn't quite got your mindset round it all, but very quickly we realised that we had to buy hand sanitisers, we had to buy face masks, and a whole lot of other things. There were a lot of unknown and unexpected costs that we had to have for redesigning the service. Having disinfectant sprays and paper rolls to be able to sanitise tables between every use, and gloves for every... all those things. So having that fund available was great.” (Third sector respondent)

The need for the service increased in March and April. 222 food bags were provided in March, which represents a 32.5% increase year on year, and in April there was a 62% increase year on year. The volumes then “settled back down for us in May” (Third sector respondent). The increase in need was driven by both people who had accessed the food bank previously and also new clients who had been made redundant and were applying, for the first time, for Universal Credit.

“I would say that we did see new people, but a lot of our old people who knew about us came back because their need increased.” (Third sector respondent)

²³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/helping-communities-affected-by-covid-19/>

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic the food bank was concerned about changes in their existing food supply. They experienced a drop in food donations from the local community, largely attributed to existing drop off points at local Churches not being accessible and fewer people visiting the shops to deposit food in collection baskets. However, the decline in food sourced in this way was compensated for by other supply sources. Firstly, using some of the grant money detailed above the food bank ordered a bulk purchase through Morrisons and got a delivery of pallets of food to boost stocks. Secondly, the food bank received food through the national commitment which Morrisons made to give food to food banks.²⁴ Thirdly, the food bank sourced some items that were difficult to obtain (such as UHT milk) by contacting the Council and purchasing it through their bulk purchase order. Finally, the food bank experienced a significant increase in financial support.

“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)

These additional financial donations allowed the food bank to extend the range of food provided in the food parcels. Having previously not provided fresh food, due to the not having fresh food storage facilities, the food bank now pays local suppliers to provide eggs, cheese, bread, fresh fruit and vegetables.

Hub Grub café and Dunoon Food Bank (Dunoon)

A number of changes to the ‘back office’ of the cafe and food bank were required. 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). 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.

They also increased the amount of food provided, from 1 bag of food per client to 2 and provided recipients with some money (in cash) to cover gas and electricity costs. These cash payments were funded by a grant that the organisation applied for specifically to provide this service. Everyone who accessed support from the food bank during the summer months was provided with the money.

“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)

The cafe that was usually open once a week was no longer able to operate so, as an alternative the organisation provided takeaway meals. These meals were provided at the

²⁴ <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2020/03/morrisons-to-donate-10m-worth-of-groceries-to-uk-food-banks/>

same times the food bank was open. A hot meal was provided on the Thursday evening session and a cold meal on the Friday morning session.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the food bank provided parcels to approximately 20 clients a week. In the early phases of the lockdown this increased to in excess of 60 clients a week. The food bank also received some referrals through the Council's Caring for People helpline and, in these cases, the food bank delivered the food parcels to people's homes. This service was provided when people needed food urgently and there may have been a few days before the Council food parcel would be delivered.

Moving on Mid Argyll

Moving on Mid Argyll (Moma) experienced a small increase in people who were contacting them directly for support with food. Self-referral in this way was very uncommon before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in total, the need for their food support service did not increase, although they had expected that it would.

“Basically, given you were a charity that's about helping people at a time of stress, I have to say it was quite a surprise to us. What I was saying is, at that time, given that obviously COVID was such a stress on the community, we expected to see an uplift in demand” (Third sector respondent)

The organisation largely attributed this to the Council's food parcel deliveries and the national shielding grocery box scheme. Like Dunoon food bank, they did find themselves acting as, what they called a 'bridging' provider, where they provided a food parcel to people in need in the short period in which they were waiting to receive their first food parcel delivery from the Council.

Islay Food bank²⁵

Islay Food bank increased their accessibility by having the phone line available Monday to Friday (as opposed to Monday and Friday). However, they did not experience a big increase in need for their service.

“I would say that actually we anticipated far bigger demand at the start of COVID and we didn't actually experience it. It was just to say, these early signs, really, we expected them to have an impact and we didn't get that impact.” (Third sector respondent).

The food bank attributed this to there being a range of new support options available to people living on the island, such as the Council grocery parcels, food support from local businesses, support from a local resilience group and family and friends supporting each other. The “small and supportive community” (Third sector respondent) on the island ensured these support mechanisms were in place.

Less detailed data was available on the adaptations made to the other existing community food organisation who did not participate in the research. Available secondary data is detailed in the table below but this may not cover all the activities and adaptations of these

²⁵ <https://www.islaybaptistchurch.org.uk/community-store-cupboard>

organisations. No information could be found on operations and adaptations of the Solar Food Project, Maxie Richards and the Tarbert Pantry.

Hope Kitchen	Food bank remained open daily, with slightly extended opening hours. Community cafe closed and group activities suspended.
Mull and Iona Community Trust	Submitted a joint funding application with 4 other local organisations to Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the organisation which was administering the Scottish Governments Support Communities Fund for the area. £50,000 was awarded to support people on the islands of Mull, Iona and Ulva experiencing food and fuel poverty (amongst other aims). Community groups could then apply to access this funding.
Kintrye Food bank	Food bank remained open operating from a new venue (local town hall) to accommodate social distancing.
Jean's Bothy	Continued to distribute food parcels to members. Community cafe closed.

Bute Advice Centre

The Bute Advice Centre continued to provide advice services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting people to maximise their income. This support was being provided to both existing clients and people who were applying for benefits for the first time. The levels of support that people required differed.

“We were able to say, “This is what’s on offer, this is what you can tap into,” many people just needed a bit of information and then they went off and ran with it themselves. We’d phone them up maybe a fortnight down the line and say, “Did you get everything you were anticipating when we did the benefits check? Are you now getting that amount?” and “How did it go?”. But for others, I guess their mental health was in such a poor state with the pressure of it all. But for others, even people who were IT literate, the welfare state benefits system was just a step too far and they needed a hand to make the application. It was just good to know that they were getting everything that they were entitled to. It gave them peace of mind. It’s not the kind of income that perhaps they would be used to, but at least it was a stable income that they could rely upon.” (Third sector respondent)

The team were able to manage the significant increase in need, with the number of clients going “through the roof” (Third sector respondent) due to the new ways of working that were required due to lockdown and social distancing. Firstly, one member of staff who was working on a different project started to work on the advice services. Secondly, by having to switch to a telephone service, as opposed to face to face meetings, staff were able to speak with more clients in a day as there was more flexibility with timing when staff did not have to allocate time slots for people to attend.

“So when we changed over to a telephone service, if a client didn’t engage at their expected time, we just went onto the next client. We’d say to them, “I’m phoning you a wee bit early, is that alright?” and the vast majority of people were at home on furlough or unemployed, it didn’t make any difference whether it was 10 o’clock or 11

o'clock their advisor phoned. And if it didn't suit we would just phone at the designated time. What we discovered was that we could fit in far, far more clients in a working week than we ever could have in people come to the centre. I guess some of our clients, they have very chaotic lives, and they have issues with addiction, domestic abuse, all sorts of things that impact on their ability to get to the advice centre for a specific time. And so phoning them on their mobile, I don't know how many times I've phoned a client and you know you've caught them on-the-hop because they've forgotten about their appointment, or they thought it was tomorrow, or they thought it was this afternoon but it was this morning. If you can say to them, "Is it okay to talk just now?" 99 times out of 100 they'll say, 'Oh, yes, it's fine.'" (Third sector respondent)

This different way of working is something that the Advice Centre plans to continue in the future whilst recognising that for some people and in some situations a face-to-face appointment is still a priority.

Community Food Forum

The Food Forum had regular meetings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to share experiences and support each other. In addition, a key output of the Forum during the COVID-19 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>).

Part of the impetus for developing the leaflet, from the food banks perspective, was concern that demand would increase considerably when the food parcel deliveries from the national and local scheme were rolled back.

"But once we stopped and drew a breath, as I say, we spoke to the Council. We were a wee bit concerned that when the lockdown ended and the doorstep deliveries stopped that we might be overwhelmed. So we spoke to the Council to say to them. And we organised the production of a leaflet for people who didn't have money to buy food. A leaflet that would direct them to agencies which could help them to apply for the Scottish Welfare Grant....and the leaflet is intended to say, 'If you are worried about money for food, here are the things you can do', and tell them how to apply for the Scottish Welfare Grant. And what we did is, because we can't hand out leaflets with the COVID thing, we could put them in every food bag. So everybody in their food bag got a 'Worrying About Money' leaflet." (Third sector respondent)

Interviewees from the food banks hoped that the leaflet would provide the information needed for people to access this support. Participants felt this was particularly important as these types of conversations were not taking place at the food bank, due to social distancing rules and offices of the other support services, such as Citizens Advice and the housing association, were closed with staff working from home. This was potentially making it more difficult for people to know where to go to get support.

Other Community Groups

Interviewees gave examples of other organisations that started to provide food parcels during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may have been organisations already supporting

clients, examples given being an existing elderly befriending organisation and a mental health support charity. Another example was Dunoon Burgh Hall which had to close its doors and cancel all planned events at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the organisation started a 'community kitchen' which delivered meals to elderly and vulnerable people. This was funded through a £30,000 grant from Scottish Government's Covid 19 Supporting Communities Fund which was administered in Argyll and Bute by the organisation Highlands and Islands Enterprise.²⁶ Very localised groups, such as community councils or informal neighbourhood groups, also started providing services to support food access. When discussing this support from other local community groups one participant added to the chat box:

"At least four community trusts/community council 'won' grant aid from various bodies and passed on to those suffering hardship in their communities. Ardfern Community Trust provided food boxes (from local shop). Now finished." (Workshop chat submission)

One participant described the different sources of support of the Isle of Islay:

"We also had a system from one of the estates, which set up a trust which provided what they call 'welfare boxes'. They were available to anybody who needed them. We were- one of our members, rather, was involved in helping to deliver those boxes, so they were going out to the island. Also, one of the distilleries was very generous. There was a resilience group set up in Islay, which was very well funded. That provided meals, free lunches twice a week to anybody over 70 who wanted it." (Third sector respondent).

These data highlight the range of localised support available. In planning their response the Council team were aware of this type of local activity and wanted to ensure that their own response supported this work too.

"We needed to make sure that it augmented the good support that was already being provided by our communities, because we had seen that pop up really quickly. So, the little Facebook groups that were supporting additional shopping, we didn't want to encroach into the territory that was already organically growing." (Council staff respondent)

Where possible, the existing food banks encouraged people to signpost people to existing services, rather than set up a new operation.

"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).

Other Local Businesses

A range of local businesses also provided low cost or free food support. Examples include a local cafe in Lochgilphead which prepared and delivered five hot meals a week for £10 for

²⁶ <https://www.hie.co.uk/>

anyone who was elderly and vulnerable. Another community cafe on the Isle of Islay provided delivery of a Sunday dinner for any elderly people who would like one. The meals were free, with the chef at the café covering the costs. Another was as a local toy shop which became a point of contact for people that found themselves without food. When discussing this support from local businesses during the workshop one participant added to the chat box:

“Lots of good examples of this - lots of local businesses responded in very generous ways.” (Workshop chat submission)

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Argyll and Bute

Supporting local businesses

A key focus of the local authority's food parcel delivery scheme, as well as the provision of food to people in need, was to support local businesses as much as possible therefore creating wider benefits than the direct provision of food. This was achieved through the 'From Argyll for Argyll' approach where local producers were approached to provide contents for the fresh, and in smaller amounts the ambient, food parcels.

“We were able to sustain the supply chain because we kept them going where all the hotels and restaurants closed. So, by purchasing our bread and rolls all locally from Black's of Dunoon, they were able to get someone back off furlough and into work and by working with our fruit and veg supplier, they were able to keep some of their workforce in employment by providing for the fresh food deliveries.

So, it was very much a holistic, trying to have a holistic view, how to protect a fragile supply chain, a fragile retail chain, meet the needs of our vulnerable people and get them the right food at the right time that was going to sustain them during a pandemic. Pretty multi-faceted, and it was more than just delivering a box to a door, which is what it looks like on the other side. We had another part of the project, we were dead keen to try and engage with other providers in Argyll and Bute that we were perhaps not aware of, so we worked with Highlands and Islands enterprise, and with another volunteer who used to be a managing director of Sodexo and we tasked them with looking to see what other suppliers there were that we could use their produce in our supply chain to sustain businesses.” (Council staff respondent)

Some of the businesses providing the local supplies told the Council how their usual customers were not buying stock as their business was not operating. For example, a local biscuit producer usually supplied British Airways but this has stopped due to the reduction in flights. Becoming suppliers for the Council scheme meant these businesses continued to make some income and were able to keep staff working, as opposed to putting them on furlough. Interviewees reported that an additional benefit of this approach was that the contents of the parcels varied and sometimes included more luxury products which helped to make the recipients feel valued.

“We worked with Purdies and put local soap and local shower gel into our parcels as well, so although we're talking mostly about food, it was food and other things. So, it

was just some little things like that that made the people receiving it feel valued and they could see it was local produce.” (Council staff respondent)

Third Sector as an early response

Some of the third sector organisations reported increases in need at the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, which later reduced again when other responses, primarily the Council’s food parcel delivery scheme was put in place. Reflecting on this one interviewee said:

“Yes. I think because they were already established in the communities, because they weren’t as a result of COVID, they were there already. People just automatically were thinking, “Oh, my goodness, what can we do? I’m not allowed to go out, or I’m frightened. What will I do?” and we would just lift the phone and speak to their local food bank. I have to say, it was a very short period of time because the Council set things in motion really pretty quickly, when you consider how it was rolled out, and the logistics of getting procurement and all the rest of it, they did a fantastic job. But, yes, in that interim period, it was definitely the food banks whose numbers rocketed and they were thinking, “Oh, my goodness, how are we going to cope with this?” (Third sector respondent)

Alternatively, as noted above some organisations did not see the increase in demand that they anticipated and this was attributed to other support being available in the local area.

One participant spoke of their concerns in the early stages of lockdown that there were inaccurate expectations as to the role of food banks in the response.

“Another thing that we were a wee bit concerned about is just as the lockdown was hitting we had one or two phone calls or emails from...for example, the social work department phoned and the worker said, ‘Oh, I have got a lady with a family of four who is self-isolating, and I wonder if you could give us a parcel for them.’ And I said, ‘Well, we can do that, but I have to say that I am very surprised that the social work department in this lockdown would think that a third-sector voluntary charity is where they should be coming for food.

There was another organisation called {name removed} which phoned to say, “Oh, we have got three people that are in the house. They are self-isolating or they are at home and they don’t want to go out to shop. Could you just give us bags of food for them?” So we did do that, but I say “Absolutely. We can give food if you send one of your volunteers along to pick them up. All we need is their name and the size of the household.” However, we are not the response for Argyll and Bute. We are a food bank. We are really here to catch people who have fallen through every other net. There should be a response (net) from the Council catching these people.” (Third sector respondent)

Urban/Rural Mix

Whilst the rurality of the local authority area was a big driver in determining the response from the Council some interviewees highlighted that, whilst many people do live in rural areas there are also some larger towns that may not have had the same physical access

restrictions. Therefore, they felt other cash-based responses may have been more appropriate.

“But overall I think we would need to recognise that Argyll and Bute [Council] were in the position where the shortage of food to rural areas and the lack of food on shelves was thought to be quite a big concern, and they were very keen to quickly mobilise some sort of sending out of parcels to vulnerable people. We did ask had they not thought about vouchers rather than food parcels or money to let people buy their own food, because food was becoming available easily in supermarkets....

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

This data highlights that different experiences of different localities and the challenges of responding across a local authority area with a mix of larger and smaller settlements.

Interviewees from the Council also recognised the benefits of a cash first response and would prioritise this response when households are able to physically access food however potential food shortages in the rural communities remained a concern.

“We have been trying to keep in line with the Scottish Government advice to provide the cash first approach, retaining dignity and choice, and that really is going to be our main focus when people can get out to access food. We do worry that we could be facing the same situations in some of our island communities if we go into a lockdown, or if there is panic... you know, there is a bit of a worry about panic buying three or four weeks ago, and that was a real concern for us around how our islands would cope again.” (Council staff respondent)

Interviewees also noted the additional costs associated with food for people living in the more rural areas such as the higher price of food and the cost of public transport, both reducing the affordability of food for some households.

Reflections on national shielding grocery box scheme

Participants raised several points about the national shielding grocery box scheme, raising concerns about the quality, the lack of variation each week and uncertainty about when they would be delivered. These were some reasons attributed to people opting out the national scheme and opting into the Council's scheme instead.

“And I'm not saying... I'm trying not to be critical around that, there were good reasons why that 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)

Reflecting on these points the interviewee suggested local authorities could have been the lead in their area, instead of the national scheme.

“In hindsight, should the shielding not be delivered through local authorities? Probably. Because we could have then been more consistent and prevented some of these issues that arose.” (Council staff respondent)

Third sector organisation also spoke of some consequences of the national scheme, some experiencing an increase in people seeking their support when the scheme stopped.

“Yes, I think the thing for us was because the shielding boxes stopped with only a week's notice, a lot of families had made no provision for suddenly losing this input of boxes of food every week. They'd got no financial provision because they didn't save money. The boxes stopped and all of a sudden they'd got no food, so then there was a mad rush to the food bank because they couldn't cope without having these boxes every week. They only had a week's notice that they were going to stop. Especially the younger families with children, not so much the elderly, vulnerable who had the shielding boxes... The families that had the fresh boxes and the fruit and the vegetables, all of a sudden, with very little notice, had nothing. I think they went into panic mode. We were deluged for a few weeks until people sorted themselves out.” (Third sector respondent)

However, this increase in demand at the cessation of national or local food deliveries was not experienced consistently. Referring to the Council's weekly food deliveries coming to an end, although organisations were worried about a jump in demand this did not materialise.

“We did absolutely expect to have an uplift afterwards, so much so that I was thinking, well, when the Council food aid stopped, then there would be a kickback demand on our own service...although in effect, as I say, as we looked at what happened in the aftermath, as it were, people just fell back into what had existed before.” (Third sector respondent)

Food banks also talked about receiving donations of food being given to the food bank which had been received through the national scheme were not wanted or needed.

“The other thing was that an awful lot of these parcels that were given to people who were shielding weren't wanted by them. They didn't want them. And a lot of the food found its way back to the food bank in donations. And I know a lot of my other food bank colleagues across Scotland where the same thing happened.” (Third sector respondent)

In some cases, people who were shielding, who didn't need the food, were giving it to families who they thought would make better use of it.

Looking ahead

Participants raised concerns regarding the immediate future and the prospect of future local lockdowns. In preparation the Council has kept a store of 400 food parcels in case a town or village is locked down. Others raised concerns around the longer-term financial consequences households are likely to be facing and at the time of data collection, some of the community food organisations and food banks were starting to see an increase in need for their services as the winter approaches.

“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)

One of the Community Trusts on one of the islands that provided welfare boxes during the COVID-19 pandemic has undertaken to continue supplying these for the next 5 years highlighting how some of the initially short-term responses are to continue.

Longer term impact of the response

Although not a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and as noted above participants considered the development of the Food Forum, which was in its infancy at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to be a very positive development. As well as being able to support each other in the direct response the Forum reflected on wider responses to food insecurity and plans were underway to provide consistent support through Argyll and Bute that prioritised maximising income and taking a holistic approach.

“At the moment, at the last forum meeting, what became really apparent was that advice services seem to be sporadic in nature. It's kind of a postcode lottery really, depending where you live in Argyll and Bute. So what the food banks want is basically to have their own welfare rights officer that they can refer their clients to. So at this moment in time we are trying to locate funding so that we can actually provide a full-time member of staff, so no matter where you are, if you live in Tarbert or Helensburgh or Oban or wherever, you will be able to refer your client and make sure that they get a good service and get access to, well, income-maximisation really, and perhaps budgeting advice as well if that's what's required. So we're in the throes of trying to do that because it is so different depending on where you live, particularly the very rural areas, it can be really challenging to get access to advice services. So we just want to make sure that there's parity across the whole region so that these people that are the most vulnerable in our communities are getting the services that they need. So it's a telephone service, essentially, that we want to offer, but we will phone them so there shouldn't be any expense associated for the client, we'll absorb all of the cost. So we're trying to get that sorted.” (Third sector respondent)

Subsequent to this the Council has funded a designated welfare rights/money advice advisor working with Bute Advice Centre specially for people accessing support from one of the food banks in the area. This is in partnership with the 'Argyll, Lomond and the Islands Energy Agency' who also have a full-time member of staff working on the project providing energy advice.

Stakeholder reflections on responses to insecure access to food over spring and summer 2020

Over the course of our interviews and workshop, various reflections were offered on responses to concerns about rising food insecurity over this time. In addition to freely offered responses, we also used Padlets to gather responses to targeted questions asking respondents to reflect on the responses put in place over the spring and summer (as outlined in the Methods section).

Participants' answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

Funding for responses

Participants reflected that there was sufficient funding available during the national lockdown and this was a key facilitator to delivering responses. The Scottish Government Food Fund, which provided funding to local authorities to support people with access to food²⁷ was used by the Council to cover the costs of the food parcel delivery response. Also, third sector organisations utilised the supporting communities funding for grants to cover a range of costs.²⁸

One interview discussed how accessing funding may have been more challenging for the smaller, less established organisations providing food support.

“That’s been some of the challenges because some of the food banks, it’s individuals who have a really good heart that want to deliver it, but what they then struggle with is because they don’t have charitable status, they then struggle to do fundraising to get funding. So that was a bit of an issue for some of them, but the Third Sector Interface has very kindly offered support to the food banks across the region if there are any of them that want to go for the charity status, they will help.” (Third sector respondent)

Many of the third sector organisations reported increases in public monetary donations, with local people reportedly being extremely generous. This influx of funding has allowed many of the organisations to continue to meet all the costs of providing the service during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to build up reserves of both money and food stocks for the winter period when need was expected to increase.

“Funding not an issue. Public were absolutely brilliant. Not only in terms of [food] donations but also financial donations.” (Workshop, Padlet submission).

Partnership working and building relations

Participants reflected that partnership between the Council and the third sector food aid organisations, through the Community Food Forum, was an extremely positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the Food Forum still in its infancy at the start of the national

²⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

²⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/news/helping-communities-affected-by-covid-19/>

lockdown, this conduit for information sharing has now been established and this should continue in the future.

“So I think that has been a positive thing that has come out. Rather than just being just a wee independent food bank working in isolation, through this Argyll food forum we are able to speak to the Council and ask them and challenge them. And they get to know what we are trying to do as well.” (Third sector respondent)

“Our other legacy is that our Community Food Forum is stronger and has a much, much, better relationship with the authority and that is continuing.” (Council staff respondent)

“These are the kind of initiatives that we have engaged in as a forum because we do feel that collectively we are stronger than any one individual part, which has been quite exciting.” (Third sector respondent)

Outside of the forum better connections had been forged with a range of other organisations who already existed and were providing support to people. These networks had not existed previously, coming about as everyone responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The other thing, from our point of view, we did get quite a few referrals from... Not referrals but requests from other local organisations. I think it helped us to realise who else was out there. Some of the joining up only came about as a result of the crisis, rather than there being a kind of network.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as these networks between organisations one interviewee reflected that relations between the local authority and people in the community had also been strengthened.

We always had a good relationship with our communities, we’ve got a really strong relationship with our communities now. I think one of the things we did was we changed, an awful lot, people’s perception of the authority. I’ve got some lovely, lovely... We got so much feedback. I remember a lovely person calling in to say that they used to think of the Council as a faceless entity, they’ll never, ever, think of us that way... because of the sort of care and compassion and kindness that we’ve shown.” (Council staff respondent)

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Early confusion

Interviewees recognised that a range of actors were involved in providing food support across Argyll and Bute and in some cases this may have been a cause of confusion for some people seeking support.

“That was a bit of confusion, to be honest, I have to say, because people in Islay, 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)

More co-ordination needed from the outset

Although participants reflected positively on the networks and partnerships that have developed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic some felt that there could have been more co-ordination of responses at the start of the national lockdown when lots of organisations and individual people were looking for ways to provide support.

“I don’t criticise their desire to help, but it would have been good if there was more coordination of everybody who wanted to help and it was a more coordinated thing. It is back to that same point, I think. It was evident there was a lack of that.” (Third sector respondent)

Some third sector participants would also have welcomed the opportunity to be involved in early discussions as to the local authority wide response.

“There wasn’t a lot of discussion – or any discussion, I think it would be fair to say – with the food banks about what they were planning to do. Basically, I think they appointed a strategic team. Within the Council buildings they decided how it would be. And that is fine. I fully recognise it is a crisis. They had to get organised and make their response.” (Third sector respondent)

They also would have liked an opportunity to feedback on this response.

“They were interested in what we were doing, but they weren’t necessarily looking to feed that into what they were doing, if you like. I think that is maybe fair to say. They wanted to know what we were doing and how our numbers were going and were we alright for food. So they were being a supportive arm, but they weren’t looking for feedback on what we thought.” (Third sector respondent)

One response to the padlet reflected that communication at the start of lockdown could have been improved.

“We could have been clearer in communicating with existing groups in the early stages.” (Workshop, Padlet submission)

An option for face-to-face support

Although driven by the lockdown restrictions one participant reflected on the lack of face-to-face support available, suggesting that an option for this, in some circumstances, may have been beneficial, particularly when some people were finding it hard know where to access support.

“So I think one of the things that we need to learn is where can people get face-to-face support in a lockdown situation? Everywhere was closed....

And I know we are trying to minimise travelling and we are trying to keep people safe, and I agree with that, but there probably needs to be some thought as to, “Is there a hub? Is there somewhere where people can access a face-to-face, a person who can help them to navigate the system or help them to get onto that phone line?” A free phone. They can go in and use a computer, and they can use a phone, and there is a person there that can help them to do that.” (Third sector respondent)

Direct food provision

The Council's decision to provide deliveries of food parcels was, as documented, driven by concerns regarding physical access to food. However, this increase in direct provision of food is something that participants hoped, in general, was not replicated in the future. Commenting on features of the response that should not be continued into the future one participant wrote:

“Less direct 'food aid' except where really needed of course.” (Workshop, Padlet submission)

Another respondent, discussing the Council food parcel delivery scheme said:

“And it is only after it you can reflect and say, “Well, it is good that that can be done, but could it be done better or differently?” And I think the better and differently would be about knowing people's views on what they wanted and maybe giving them vouchers or money or content more suitable to their needs. In a crisis situation you don't always have that luxury, but if it is a reflection of what we can learn then I suppose that would be what we can learn.” (Third sector respondent)



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