



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Belfast 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

The response to restricted food access in Belfast during the COVID-19 pandemic operated on a multi-layered basis. The Council coordinated and provided city wide deliveries of food parcels for people who were either shielding or experiencing financial barriers to accessing food. They also provided £1.6 million funding to nine strategic partners across the city. These partners were existing third sector organisations that provided a range of local support services, including food provision in many forms (e.g., emergency food parcels, community meals, meals on wheels and holiday clubs). As well as using this funding to provide their own services the strategic partners redistributed funds to smaller organisations and community groups who were also providing support with food access. Some of these organisations and groups already worked in communities with food whilst others were newly undertaking food work. Eighteen food banks operated in the city prior to the pandemic. Available data suggested need for these services increased at the start of the pandemic, abated to some extent when the lockdown restrictions eased but increased again in September when the economic consequences and impact on household's incomes came to the fore. Belfast Food Network, a collaborative forum established in March 2014 to work towards developing Belfast as a recognised Sustainable Food City, consciously avoided involvement in direct emergency food provision instead focusing on initiatives that supported local sustainable food businesses and supported households with cooking and growing. To a large extent the response was informed by, and built upon, what stakeholders reflected to be a vibrant community sector that already existed in the city. This localised, community driven model was perceived by stakeholders to have capitalised on the capacity and reach of the community sector. These local community organisations were able to use their existing knowledge to identify households who may require support, were able to respond quickly, providing support from the very start of the national lockdown and were able to provide responses that were tailored to their local community. However, some respondents were concerned that the localised and ad hoc nature of the response also led to an uncoordinated, disjointed response across the city and duplication of services in some circumstances. Some felt this resulted in a complicated and messy landscape of food provision across the city.

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

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in Belfast 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

Prior to the pandemic Belfast City Council responded to food insecurity through the provision of funding for the five advice consortia in the city.

Participants reported 18 food banks operated in the city prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of these were food banks in the Trussell Trust network. The Council website lists some of the other organisations providing emergency food aid in the city including the Storehouse, East Belfast Mission, Belfast Central Mission, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. In addition, a wide range of third sector organisations provided community lunches, Meals on Wheels, community cafes and pay as you feel services across the city. A Meals on Wheels service was also provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with meals provided at a cost for recipients. A range of holiday clubs ran across the city during school holidays, many of which provided food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.¹

The Belfast Food Network (BFN) is a collaborative forum established in March 2014 to work towards developing the city as a recognised Sustainable Food City.² BFN also registered as a member of the Food Power network in 2017 and received financial support to develop its network, produce a food poverty report and increase Healthy Start uptake. Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the bulk of BFNs work centred on five funded strands: the 'Peas Please' initiative, a sustainable ready meals project (in partnership with organisations supporting people with additional needs), the 'Healthy Start' programme, a sustainable fish initiative, and the 'Nourishing Communities Programme' (a cooking and food education programme).³ On top of these funded programmes BFN undertook work to inform policy work on building a sustainable food network in Northern Ireland.

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

The Council set up Belfast's Community Response Hub at the start of April, including a helpline which received 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st of July 2020. Of the calls requesting support in some form, 88% related to support with food.⁴ The food support provided depended on the needs of the household.

¹http://www.cini.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

² <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>

³ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/peasplease/>

⁴ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

In Northern Ireland weekly grocery box deliveries were available through an intervention from the Department for Communities. This scheme provided weekly food boxes to people who were shielding and unable to access food through other means and people who were not shielding but were in critical need of food.⁵ Belfast Council played a central role in operating this provision across the city. People who received a letter advising them to shield were advised to contact the national helpline, ran by Advice NI, if they required support with food. Callers would be triaged and passed onto the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust who undertook an assessment of the callers' support requirements. If required, callers' details would be passed on to Belfast Council in order for a food box to be provided. In addition, any Belfast resident who self-identified as vulnerable and isolated, with little or no family or friend networks, and no other means of accessing food could then call the Council helpline and request a weekly food parcel. The Belfast Community Response Hub sorted the food parcels received through the national initiative and delivered them to eligible households. Most of this work was undertaken by re-deployed council staff and Red Cross volunteers. Between the 8th of April and the 31st of June, a total of 50,533 food box deliveries were provided in Belfast via the community response hub with an average of 5,000 boxes a week. The delivery of food boxes for people who faced financial barriers to accessing food stopped on the 26th of June. However, the scheme continued until the 31st of July for people who were shielding with deliveries in July being made by the Red Cross.

As well as this direct food provision, the Council provided a total of £1,601,000 grant funding to community and voluntary organisations to support residents across Belfast between March and July 2020. Of the £1,601,000, £1,115,300 was contributed from the Council and £485,700 from the Department for Communities. 90% of the funding was provided to nine strategic partners to provide food and other support at a local community level. The nine strategic partners funded by the Council were: Upper Andersonstown Community Forum (in the west of the city), East Belfast Community Development Agency (in the east of the city), North Belfast Advice Partnership, Crusaders Football Club, Intercomm and Greater Shankill Partnership (in the north of the city) and Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group, Southcity Community Development Resource Centre and Forward South (in the south of the city).

The types of responses that the strategic partners were providing included food parcels, help with shopping, provision of shopping vouchers, electricity and gas payment top ups, prescription collections, benefits advice, friendly phone calls and wellbeing packs. This support was provided through the network of local organisations and community groups that received a disbursement of funding from the strategic partners. Reporting on the use of the funding disbursed via the strategic partners, the Council noted that 134 local groups were funded to contribute to the response and 56,874 food parcels or meals were provided.⁶

Perhaps as part of this network of organisations coordinated by the strategic partners, or independent of this, a number of organisations newly started providing food aid including local football clubs, youth diversionary projects, community restorative justice and local non-food businesses. In addition, new initiatives were formed purely for the purpose of providing food aid during the pandemic, for example, a 'pop up' soup kitchen that ran for 14 weeks

⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

⁶ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

providing 1,600 meals a week to people who were struggling to access food for whatever reason. Organisations that ordinarily provided social opportunities around food, such as community lunches, switched to providing emergency food aid. Other initiatives arose to fill specific needs of different communities, such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic households, which it was perceived were not being met by the Council food parcel scheme.

The existing food banks in the city made a number of adaptations to their emergency food aid provision. For example, one independent food bank reported changing venue due to the large increase of food that required storage prior to distribution, purchasing some of their food from a cash and carry rather than the supermarkets due to food shortages and pairing up with a local soup kitchen to provide hot meals to people living in temporary accommodation. They also provided lunch bags, during the summer school holidays, to households who were not eligible for the nationally provided free school meals replacement cash transfers but were still experiencing financial barriers to food access. This food bank reported an immediate increase in demand at the start of the lockdown which reduced once online shopping capacity had increased. However, by the end of August demand was increasing again and the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were impacting households' ability to access food. The food banks in the Trussell Trust network also adapted their services, including the pausing of face-to-face services, starting home deliveries, and food parcels being provided at the door of the food bank premises.

As well as the more formal food support provided through existing food banks and the network of organisations led by the 9 strategic partners a lot of informal, very localised food support was available such as neighbourhoods coming together to provide support to the more vulnerable people in the areas. This support was described as being on a street-by-street basis.

Belfast Food Network continued with a focus on sustainable solutions. They distributed £50,000 of funding which they had received from Necessity, to provide grants to 27 local food businesses.⁷ Grants were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock. They also produced a series of online videos on cooking and growing and published a comprehensive newsletter every fortnight throughout the Summer which detailed some of the responses across the city, some of the work the Councils were doing and different funding opportunities.

Local businesses also started providing food support such as pubs and restaurants delivering hot meals to elderly people. In addition, two websites were created to provide information on local food businesses continuing to operate throughout lockdown. 'InYourArea', is a website which allows people to search for businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.⁸ 'Who is delivering? Northern Ireland' is a Facebook

⁷ <https://necessity.info/about>

⁸ https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

page that shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.⁹

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

Data overview

This case study primarily draws on data collected through interviews and a participative workshop held between September 2020 – January 2021. This case study area had a 'local research facilitator' working as a partner on the project who identified and facilitated access to the research participants. 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:

- Four interviews were conducted with representatives of different organisations: Belfast City Council (3 participants), Belfast Food Network (1 participant), a charity that supports community participation (2 participants) and an independent food bank (1 participant).
- One workshop conducted with 7 participants of whom:
 - 3 worked for Belfast Council (3 already interviewed)
 - 3 worked or volunteered with third sector organisations (1 already interviewed)
 - 1 was a local councillor

A further 14 people were invited to participate in the research, 13 from the third sector and 1 from Belfast Council. As the workshop was held in January 2021, when a further national lockdown was in place, the research facilitator attributed the lack of responses being due to 'providers being busy providing for those in need.'

In addition to primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two key sources of this secondary data were the Council's 'COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020 and 'digests' that were written by Belfast Food Network and sent to members providing updates on various responses across the city and beyond.¹⁰ These digests were updated weekly during May and June, fortnightly throughout July and every 3 or 4 weeks thereafter. Lastly, during the workshops, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements assessed using Mentimeter. Other data included comments submitted via the 'chat' function and emails which were sent with additional comments following the workshop. These sources of data are also reported on.

About Belfast

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

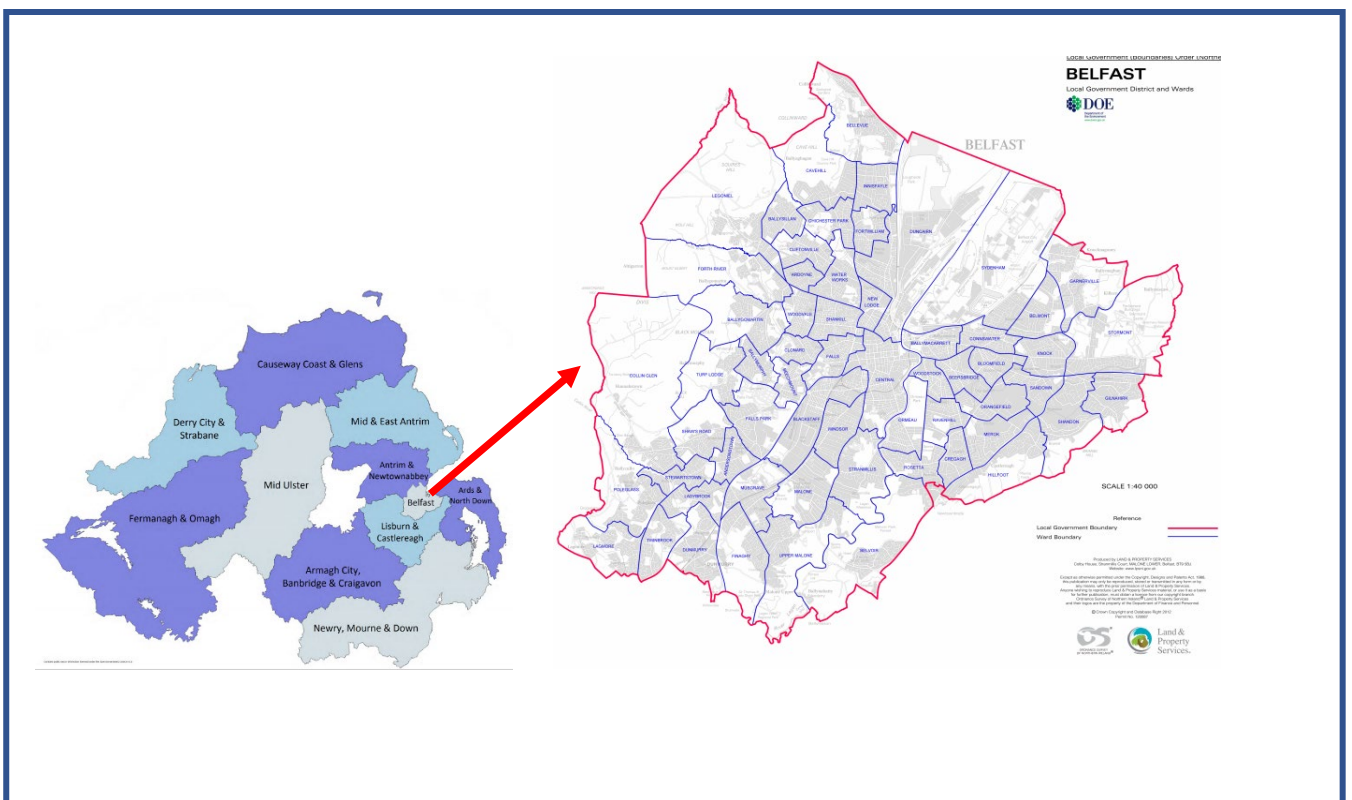
¹⁰<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

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. Belfast was selected due to the presence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 113%.

Belfast City Council serves a population of 330,000. There are 59 electoral wards which make up 10 district electoral areas.¹¹ 20% of the population in the Belfast Local Government District are aged 0-15, 65% are aged 16-64 and 15% are aged 65+. The median age in mid-2019 was 35.9 years. Compared to other Governmental Districts across Northern Ireland Belfast has the highest proportion of the working age population, particularly at the younger working ages (people aged 16 to 39 years) (35.7 per cent).¹² Before the pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Belfast was 3.1% in January 2020, but this rose to 6.6% in July 2020.

Levels of deprivation across the country are reported in the ‘Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures’ which splits the country into 890 Super Output Areas (SOAs). Belfast has 174 SOAs. In 2017, Belfast had 50 of the 100 most deprived SOAs, accounting for 29% of its 174 SOAs, and five of the 10 most deprived SOAs.¹³

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed a 47% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.¹⁴



¹¹ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/your-council>

¹² <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2019-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>

¹³ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/NIMDM17-%20with%20ns.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

Two key themes emerged from the data regarding the socio-political backdrop of Belfast. Firstly, the city has a very active voluntary sector, one participant describing it as an “incredibly, unbelievably active voluntary sector.” (Third sector respondent)

“I mean Northern Ireland has, I don’t know if it still does but it certainly did have a higher proportion of voluntary organisations per head of populous because of The Troubles” (Third sector respondent)

The second theme related to the divides across the city, which impact on the service provision of the third sector.

“The city has a whole pile of natural topographical divides, and then community and identity divides alongside of that. And all of the delivery is divided accordingly.” (Third sector respondent)

“And I suppose in Belfast, that’s one of the big things for sure, we have this whole green and orange thing that’s never going to go away so it adds a completely new dimension, or it puts a very sectarian dimension on everything, nearly.” (Third sector respondent).

The consequence of this socio-political backdrop is many organisations providing services in well-defined communities. Referring to one area of the city a participant said:

“It was in a small area that had a population of 5,000 people. In that area alone there was something like 12 churches, literally 12 different churches, 2 or 3 different women’s groups, 2 or 3 different youth groups, 2 or 3 little community development groups, all of this stuff.” (Third sector respondent)

However, in some cases there is reported to be limited co-ordination and communication between the organisations. One participant described this lack of coordination between the community sector and the faith sector:

“I know there are a number of - in fact, we are looking at the community sector here, once you get into the faith sector... which is huge and diverse and doesn’t always interact terribly well with the secular sectors. And it’s quite strange because it just adds even greater diversity. There isn’t an even pattern of communication and contact, and there is certainly no co-ordination between them all. But there is an awful lot of stuff that the faith sector would do. Not just for their own congregations, but geographically based as well, but primarily for their own congregations, some people might say. That’s another complication to the picture.” (Third sector respondent)

This socio-political backdrop is important context for exploring the responses in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/local-government-maps>

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

Belfast City Council

Prior to the pandemic the main response to food poverty by Belfast City Council was the provision of funding for the five advice consortia in the city. These advice consortia comprise organisations that give out general advice and information around income maximisation and support with welfare. The consortia model is based on geographical providers. The Council also undertake a wider programme of work to tackle poverty and social exclusion in the city.¹⁶

Belfast Food Network

The Belfast Food Network (BFN) is a collaborative forum established in March 2014 to work towards developing the city as a recognised Sustainable Food City, with Belfast being one of the original 6 pilot Sustainable Food Cities.¹⁷ The pilot had six objectives: tackling food poverty, diet-related ill-health and access to affordable healthy food; promoting healthy and sustainable food to the public; building community food knowledge, skills, resources and projects; promoting a vibrant and diverse sustainable food economy; transforming catering and food procurement; reducing waste and the ecological footprint of the food system. BFN also registered with the Food Power network in 2017 and has received financial support to develop its network, produce its food poverty report and increase Healthy Start uptake.

An early key output was the Food Poverty Scoping Report 'Enough is Enough'.¹⁸ This scoping study laid the foundation for developing an action plan to tackle food poverty in Belfast in collaboration with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. The report made a number of recommendations: adopt a rights-based approach to food poverty; promote the living wage; build advocacy capacity; widen the debate (involving a range of stakeholders); promote the availability of fresh, healthy food; and data collection.

A final report on the Enough is Enough work was published in August 2019.¹⁹ The listed key achievements were:

- A holiday hunger survey was sent to all schools in Belfast to gauge the level of holiday hunger in the city, map 'hotspots' and target resources.
- The Food Poverty Working Group, led by Dr Liz Mitchell, has been able to deliver seven projects from the collaborative response to food poverty, with reasonable attendance at meetings.
- Three Community Gardens have adopted their 'Sow, Grow, Munch' manual.

¹⁶ <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s13777/Appendix%201%20-Revised%20draft%20of%20the%20Belfast%20City%20Council%20framework%20to%20tackle%20poverty%20and%20reduce%20inequal.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/Portals/4/Documents/Belfast%20Enough-is-Enough-Report.pdf>

¹⁹ https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Belfast_AllianceDev_12monthSnapshot.pdf

- Delivered a 'Right to Food' joint project between three civil society organisations – Nourish Scotland, Belfast Food Network and Food Sense Wales to strengthen existing networks, build knowledge and share learning on the right to food.

Immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the bulk of the food network's work centred on five funded strands: the 'Peas Please' initiative, a sustainable ready meals project (in partnership with organisations supporting people with additional needs), the 'Healthy Start' programme, a sustainable fish initiative, and the 'Nourishing Communities Programme' (a cooking and food education programme).²⁰ On top of these funded programmes BFN does policy work and building a sustainable network in Northern Ireland.

Emergency food providers

The Council website lists some of the organisations providing emergency food aid in the city including the Storehouse, East Belfast Mission, Belfast Central Mission, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army.²¹ Participants reported there were 18 food banks operating in the city prior to the pandemic. Five of these were part of the Trussell Trust food bank network (West Belfast, South Belfast, North Belfast, South-west Belfast and Dundonald).

Eighteen food banks represent an increase of one food bank in existence since 2015 when the 'Enough is Enough' report identified 14 food banks operating in the city and a further 3 in development. Three of these food banks were in the Trussell Trust network (South Belfast, North Belfast and Dundonald), North Belfast Advice Partnership, Foodstore @ Cooke, Sustain, The Larder, Storehouse and Willowfield Parish Church. The three in development were Falls Community Fellowship, Greater Shankhill Methodist Circuit and Greencastle Methodist Church. The report also identified a further 36 organisations which were involved in more ad hoc provision of food parcels or were charities working in collaboration with food banks. In addition, it was reported that many advice centres reported working with their local Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul to provide food and fuel support to clients in pandemic.²²

Referring to the independent food banks in the city one participant said:

“We have a few independent good ones. I mean, because we all know each other because we all rely on each other at different times of the year to support the people who come through our doors, and then we would have our Trussell Trust network, so in that sense there was a very good existing network of food banks.” (Third sector respondent)

School meal provision

A pilot of a 'Healthy Summer' programme ran in the Summer of 2019 targeted at children who are eligible for free school meals. The programme was run in partnership between the

²⁰ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/peasplease/>

²¹ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/poverty>, <https://www.storehousebelfast.com/provision/food>, <https://www.ebm.org.uk/>, <https://www.belfastcentralmission.org/>, <https://www.svp.ie/northern-ireland-homepage.aspx/>, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/>

²² <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/Portals/4/Documents/Belfast%20Enough-is-Enough-Report.pdf>

Northern Ireland Executive's Urban Villages Initiative, Business in the Community NI and local businesses to provide 30,000 meals through a diverse range of community-based initiatives in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.²³ In addition to this specific programme aimed at low-income families a range of holiday clubs also run across the city during school holidays, many of which provide food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.²⁴

Meals on Wheels

A meals on wheels service is provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with meals provided at a cost for recipients. 406 people in Belfast used this service in 2019/20.²⁵

At least one community organisation, East Belfast Mission, also provide meals on wheels service to over 250 people in the local area. Meals cost £4 for 1 course and £5.30 for two courses.²⁶

Community food providers

A wide range of organisations provide community lunches, community cafes and pay as you feel services across the city. When asked about these types of socially focussed initiatives prior to the COVID-19 pandemic one participant responded with "there were loads".

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

Respondents cited early indicators of food access issues for both financial and physical reasons. One of the participants that worked in partnership with advice services noted a large increase in Universal Credit applications in the first two weeks of the national lockdown. They also felt the pandemic exacerbated existing issues with Universal Credit.

"But obviously Universal Credit's playing a major role in pushing more families towards food banks, and we've seen that before the pandemic hit, but what has happened with COVID, is it's just actually exacerbated it." (Third sector respondent)

Restricted physical access was attributed to fear, both fear of food shortages and fear about going out. Participants provided examples of a shortage of supplies in the shops, which led to people buying more than they needed, which then exacerbated the supply shortages.

The lack of food supplies was one of the main concerns. So, a few people were probably aware of the shortages, but others were not aware, panicked and they started buying food." (Third sector respondent)

²³ <https://www.bitcni.org.uk/post-news/businesses-helping-provide-a-healthy-summer-for-local-children/>, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/urban-villages-initiative>

²⁴ http://www.cini.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/cc-adults-ni-19-20.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.ebm.org.uk/meals-on-wheels/>

One respondent noted that that the panic buying resulted in people visiting a food bank for support.

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

One respondent reflected that clearer messaging might have reduced this immediate impact on food access.

“I was going, “This is just horrendous,” but panic buying really, really did frighten people. Don’t get me wrong, you could see the trauma that people were going through watching their TV. I do think the message could have been conveyed a bit better, do you know what I mean, that we were never going to run out of food.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as this fear about food shortages there was also fear about going out.

“I think for us, it was fear, fear and panic, but Arlene Foster in a Stormont meeting highlighted how nearly... I can’t remember the figures, I’m sorry. But it was basically, there appeared to be about two-thirds more people shielding than actually needed to be shielding, because the level of fear was so high and that was very difficult for people. So, people were actually physically afraid to leave their houses and it affected, I think it was close to 300,000 people, whereas actually, it was only 80,000 people that were meant to be, sort of, shielding officially. So, that created an instant problem.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Several existing and new actors responded to food access issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Belfast Council

The Council set up Belfast’s Community Response Hub the first week of April. The Hub ran a community helpline which went live on the 8th of April. The helpline handled 9,770 calls between the 8th of April and 31st of July 2020. 7,838 of these calls were requests for support. 6,908 (88%) of these calls related to support with food, including calls related to the grocery box delivery scheme (see below) such as requests for a food parcel, calling to find out date of delivery, clarification on missed deliveries, and customers cancelling deliveries. Of the non-food related calls 43% resulted in a referral for charity or community support, 20% for emergency service support, 11% for collection and/or delivery of prescriptions and 10% for emergency/crisis support. People seeking support also emailed the Hub and, at the peak of

the pandemic, around 300-600 emails were processed each day.²⁷

Promoting advice services

The Council also increased their promotion of the advice services to ensure people were aware of their existence and the services offered.

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

Grocery boxes delivery scheme

In Northern Ireland weekly grocery box deliveries were available for people who were shielding and/or in financially vulnerable households. The Department for Communities funded suppliers to provide food supplies to local councils. In Belfast this response was co-ordinated through the community response hub who sorted the food parcels and delivered them to eligible households. Most of this work was undertaken by re-deployed council staff and Red Cross volunteers. Standardised food parcels were provided by the Department for Communities containing tinned food, dried food, cleaning essentials, toiletries, fresh fruit and bread. Each week households could receive multiple boxes if required, such as households with more than one person shielding or large families. The information leaflet included in the food boxes is shown in Appendix 1.

The Department for Communities set the criteria for eligibility for the food boxes. The priority group was those who had received a shielding letter from the GP, who were advised to call the national advice helpline, ran by Advice NI, who would triage callers and pass onto the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust who undertook an assessment of the callers support requirements. If required, callers details would be passed to the Council in order for a food box to be provided. In addition any Belfast resident who self-identified as vulnerable and isolated, with little or no family or friend networks, and no other means of accessing food could then call the Council helpline and request a weekly food parcel.

Between the 8th of April and 31st of June a total of 50,533 food box deliveries were provided in Belfast via the community response hub, with an average of 5,000 boxes a week.

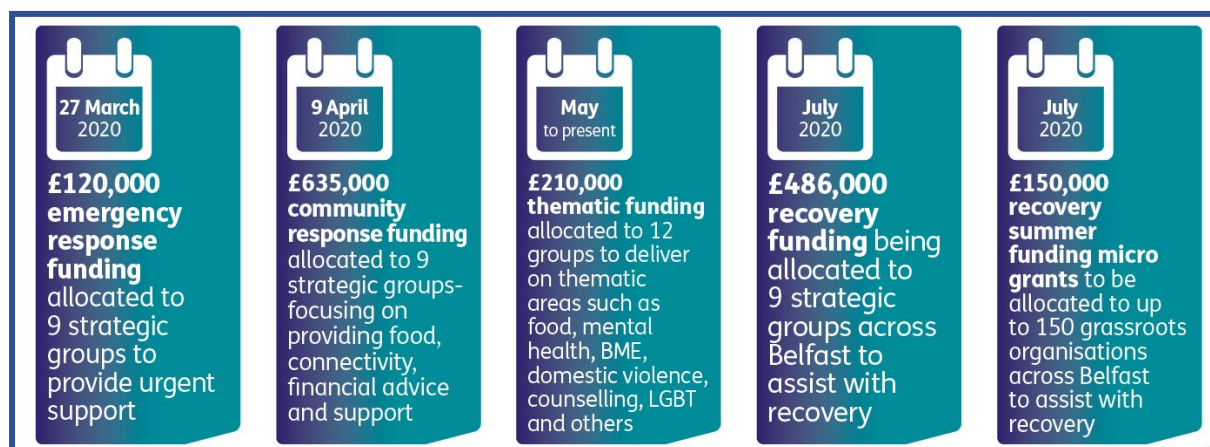
The delivery of food boxes for people who faced financial barriers to accessing food stopped on the 26th of June. However the scheme continued for people who were shielding. In partnership with the Council the Red Cross continued delivering boxes to around 900 people who were shielding, each week, until the 31st of July, when the guidance to shield was paused. Prior to the closure of both delivery schemes the response hub phoned all residents receiving food boxes to prepare them for the closure of the scheme and signpost people to

²⁷<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

local community support.

Funding and support for community organisations

The Council provided a total of £1,601,000 grant funding to community and voluntary organisations to support residents across Belfast. Of the £1,601,000, £1,115,300 was contributed from the Council and £485,700 from the Department for Communities. The timing and target of the funding is depicted below.



Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020²⁸

As is shown, £1,451,000 (90%) of the funding was provided to nine strategic partners to provide food and other support at a local community level. As well as utilising the funding to provide services the strategic partners also further distributed this funding to local groups.

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

The rationale for the use of the strategic partners was to ensure that local needs were being met by organisations who were known and familiar to the communities and that support was available across the city.

“The idea would have been that all of the neighbourhoods would have had some kind of support available to them.” (Council staff respondent)

Strategic and thematic partners

The nine strategic partners funded by the Council were: Upper Andersonstown Community Forum (in the west of the city), East Belfast Community Development Agency (in the east of the city), North Belfast Advice Partnership, Crusaders Football Club, Intercomm and Greater Shankill Partnership (in the north of the city) and Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group, Southcity Community Development Resource Centre and Forward South (in the south of the

²⁸<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

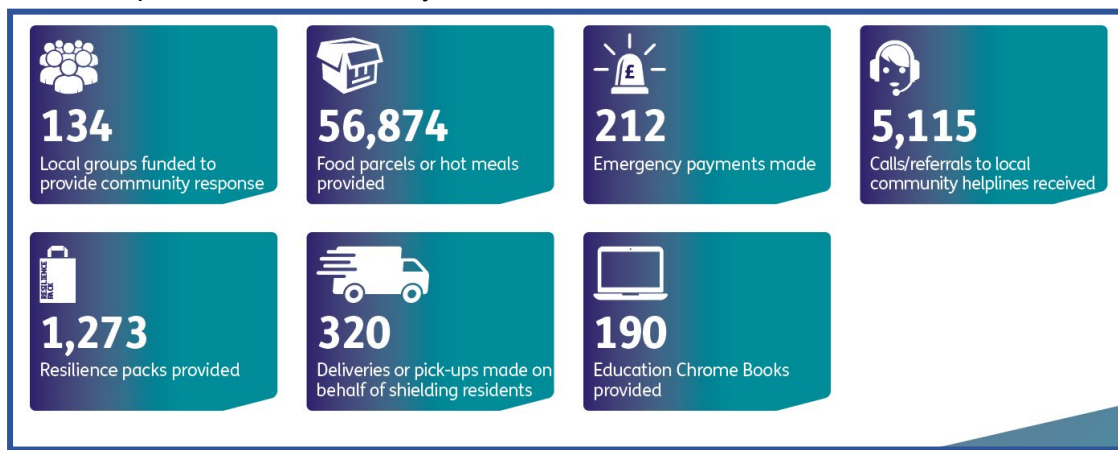
city). The response offered by the partners and the more local organisations was tailored to meet the need.

“I was engaging with a couple of the strategic partners. The sense I got from them was that we as a council gave them money, and then they used that in the way that was most appropriate for their particular area. Certainly, there was a sense that, whilst you had the strategic partners, they were engaging with their partners in the local area.” (Council staff respondent)

The types of responses that the strategic partners were providing included food parcels, help with shopping, provision of shopping vouchers, electricity and gas payment top ups, prescription collections, benefits advice, friendly phone calls and wellbeing packs. This support was provided through the network of local organisations and community groups that received a disbursement of funding from the strategic partners. For example, East Belfast Community Development Agency reported that 867 food parcels were delivered to local residents through a network of 28 community groups. These groups seemed to be a combination of organisations that already provided support with food increasing the capacity of their services or new organisations providing support with food for the duration of the lockdown.

“There were definitely a lot of churches and things set up ad-hoc ones, although just for a few months. Then obviously the big ones ramping up their production or their level of food distribution, definitely.” (Council staff respondent)

Each strategic partner reported to the Council on what the funding had been used for. The Council reported some of the key achievements, shown below:



Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020²⁹

Community groups and organisations

Given this model of very local level responses mapping all the organisations involved was not possible. BFN noted:

²⁹<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

“We were overwhelmed at the beginning with the response, and actually quite consciously decided not to track it on the basis that it was nearly impossible, because nearly every community organisation in Belfast was trying to do something, because that’s what the community in Belfast does.” (Third sector respondent)

From desk-based research prior to the workshop an initial list of organisations was presented during the workshop, including existing organisations that continued with food provision, existing organisations that newly started food provision and new initiatives established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent commented that it would be the “beginning of a very long list, to be honest.” (Third sector respondent)

A wide range of existing organisations newly started food provision, such as local football clubs, youth diversionary projects and community restorative justice.

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

“They completely reprofiled a project basically, to be able to meet the needs of their community, which is basically people with learning disabilities and their families. So, they walked straight into the middle of very regular parcels and actually hot meals and things as well, and then there were quite a number of brand new soup kitchens that popped up.” (Third sector respondent)

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

“Today is the last day of our soup project. Over the past 10 weeks, with the help of a team of restaurants, cafes, arts organisations, home cooks, drivers, harassed pals and well-wishers we have produced nearly 14,000 portions of soup to help feed our city’s most vulnerable. We have also supported 10 other charitable ventures throughout Belfast and provided the start-up seed money and mentorship for other soup kitchens throughout our city. We feel incredibly privileged that we have been trusted to do this.” (Framework website)³⁰

In addition some projects were newly established projects in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant spoke of a ‘pop up’ soup kitchen that ran for 14 weeks providing 1,600 meals a week to people who were struggling to access food for whatever reason.

³⁰ <https://www.frameworkbelfast.com/post/619622687522832384/today-is-the-last-day-of-our-soup-project>

This local level of community support developed quite naturally as people realised there was a need.

“It was a local football team in the Shankill. And the guy who drives the van for one of the local pharmacies, for delivering prescriptions, he suddenly realised he was going to people who couldn’t get out of their house, couldn’t even get tea bags, let alone a pint of milk to put with their tea. So, they then got together and they sort of pioneered this, working it out themselves, until it all started to shape up.” (Third sector respondent)

Others arose to fill specific needs of different communities, which were not being met by the Council food parcel scheme. Local groups started providing alternate support that was more tailored to different population groups.

“Groups emerged to work with their own minority ethnic communities. There was a bit of outcry at the beginning, saying that food wasn’t authentic and some of the groups tried to combat that.” (Third sector respondent)

“Through the crisis, in the actual lockdown, we were involved in delivering food to the Indian community. With the shops being closed... A lot of Indians don’t have the actual logistics, and that is where we came in handy by delivering food to their homes.” (Third sector respondent)

The local support was often quite small scale. One participant talked of a community group making posters with their contact details and sellotaping it to the windows of houses in their area.

“It was just local people wanting to help their local community.” (Third sector respondent)

The funding for these very local level responses was reported to be a combination of that redistributed through the strategic partners and also some quite informal, local level fundraising.

“It was a mixture. The Council stepped up and the Council was working with a lot of the established groups across the city, but there was that, sort of, very localised almost street level response. There were multiple things in terms of just people putting GoFundMe requests on the likes of social media, on Facebook, on Twitter, Instagram, and people buying into that and supporting it.” (City Councillor respondent)

Belfast Food Network

Belfast Food Network opted not to provide emergency food directly, describing the provision of food aid as being “saturated”.

They received about £50,000 funding from the organisation Necessity to provide grants to local food businesses.³¹ The grants aimed to help alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and support businesses to adapt their business models. 27 microgrants were

³¹ <https://necessity.info/about>

awarded to small sustainable food businesses and were generally used for one of three purposes: website development to allow for online orders, covering costs of offering deliveries such as drivers and packers wages, and, much less commonly, to increase the volume of stock.

Belfast Food Network also continued to support people with cooking and growing and adapted their services to allow for this. To replace the existing Nourish face-to-face food citizenship programme, a series of online low-cost cookery videos were produced.

“We had low-cost cooking videos based on fresh local and seasonal produce so to give people something to cook in the house, build their cooking skills, reconnect with food, use that as a way of boosting their mental health, that kind of thing.” (Third sector respondent)

They also produced a series of online videos focused on cooking and growing your own in partnership with the emergency response from Keeping Northern Ireland Beautiful which sent out 550 growing packs to individuals, families and community groups.³²

“So, they provided growing kits to families to try and use that as a way of tackling mental health issues, and creating positive family time and activities, and we supplemented it with cooking videos in relation to the ingredients that were provided.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as these responses Belfast Food Network sent out a comprehensive newsletter every fortnight throughout the Summer which detailed some of the responses across the city, some of the work the Councils were doing and different funding opportunities. To some extent they also became a contact point for people who wanted to help.

“I had an interesting phone call at one point where a guy rang me, he was basically saying, ‘I want to make curry for people that need it. Who needs it?’ I said, ‘Mate, I’m really sorry to have to break this to you but you’re never going to get a list of vulnerable people. That’s not how it works... I linked him with St Patrick’s Soup Kitchen and said, ‘Those guys are doing this every night. Why don’t you go in and do it with them, take over two nights so you’re relieving their pressure and you’re bringing yours in but you’re still accessing their clients.’ That’s exactly what happened in the end.” (Third sector respondent)

Emergency food providers

The participant from the independent food bank, which is part of an organisation that provides both advice services and crisis food support, talked about the fluctuation in the need for their services during the lockdown. An immediate increase in need at the start of lockdown was partly driven by physical access restrictions however, supermarkets introducing COVID-19 safety measures and offering increased online shopping capacity eased this pressure. As the economic consequences of the pandemic started to impact, such as job losses, new population groups started accessing the food bank.

³² <https://www.nigoodfood.com/calling-all-would-be-grow-your-owners/>

“I’m going to say up until roundabout the start of May was seriously mental. It was nuts. At one stage we did 800 food parcels in a week. Now some of them were actually maybe - I call them pensioner packs because they were like basic supplies to pensioners who probably had maybe food but just needed like bread, the wee basics that they may be picked up from the shop every other day. Come the start of May, things started to settle because people had to get into a new normal and we had to actually start to say to people, ‘Look, we’re not Tesco’s. The food bank is here for people in food poverty. Yes, we understand there are some issues around access.’ Supermarkets were very safe at that stage.” (Third sector respondent)

“At the end of August things changed and we started to see job losses. We started to see a new group of people accessing the food bank who never accessed it before. Before who actually – and as I always say - the first thing they say to you is, they say, “I’m awful sorry for contacting you,” that’s the way they start the conversation, “But I really need help.” They apologise for asking for help. So it’s a really different group of people that we would see accessing our service now. People who are really struggling.” (Third sector respondent)

This food bank made a number of adaptations to their operations. Due to the large increase in volume of food that they were providing they moved to a bigger venue. As a result of the food shortages in the shops they also had to start purchasing some of their food from a cash and carry, which was a more expensive option for them.

“We basically have moved to a venue because it is literally now the biggest project we have in terms of, you know, fitting into the space and stuff like that.” (Third sector respondent)

“Accessing food was a massive issue for us because we then had to go to the cash and carries and that’s quite expensive for us.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as these practical adaptations the food bank provided a wider range of other forms of food support. They paired up with a local soup kitchen to provide hot meals to people living in temporary accommodation.

“So basically, we’ve paired up because that was the best way to reach people the best, and to be able to provide both. So, we provide a food bank with hot meals. So today we’ve had, for temporary accommodation, we had 5 requests for food parcels but we also did 20 hot meals then for that accommodation because we knew if they’re needing hot meals, they’re needing food parcels.” (Third sector respondent)

They also provided lunch bags to school children during the summer school holidays providing 500 bags of five days worth of lunches. Many of the families who accessed this support were those who were ineligible for the cash transfers that were provided to households eligible for free school meals through the national scheme. Referring to this national scheme the interviewee said:

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

Between the food bank and the advice services the organisation also produced “fun and friendly” financial capability packs.

Desk-based research highlighted some of the adaptations being made by three of the food banks in the Trussell Trust network, shown in the table below.

<p>South Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust)³³</p>	<p>All face-to-face services paused.</p> <p>Started delivering food parcels to homes 5 days a week and also distributing food boxes through key agencies.</p>
<p>West Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust)³⁴</p>	<p>Operating a delivery service only.</p> <p>Referral agencies provide food bank with recipients details and an E-voucher is issued. Parcel will be delivered as soon as possible. UP to three attempts at delivery will be made (food parcels cannot be left unattended).</p>
<p>South-West Belfast Foodbank (Trussell Trust)³⁵</p>	<p>Food bank remained open (Tuesdays 1:00pm to 2:30pm and Thursdays 10:45am to 12:15 pm). The building was closed, parcels provided at the door. Home deliveries also available.</p>

One participant noted some of the work by the food banks in the Trussell Trust network in the city.

“The Trussell Trust were working very closely with Advice NI. So, they’ve got a helpline number out and launched a campaign, which was brilliant and very helpful. They were pushing a cash-first campaign, basically saying that people should be given money to choose what they want to eat and to buy their own food, rather than to be given surplus food essentially. So, that was the big major, sort of, regional one that happened.” (Third sector respondent)

Informal street level support

As well as the more organised responses respondents cited examples of informal support networks providing support with food:

“So, you had that, kind of, quite high-level community response. You then had that more neighbourhood, and then within neighbourhoods, there was that street-by-street thing, and I think also, there was that natural human response to want to help

³³ <https://southbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

³⁴ <https://westbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

³⁵ <https://southwestbelfast.foodbank.org.uk/>

your fellow man. So, people were coming together in informal ways to meet the needs that they could see happening around them.” (Council staff respondent)

“Of course, the community was helping out each other also. The individuals were helping out with their friends or within the same street by giving out excess food to the other families who didn’t have food.” (Third sector respondent)

Community food providers

Due to the restrictions of lockdown the wide range of organisation that provided social activities around food stopped that form of activity, some switching to emergency food provision.

“I mean, we’ve got a very, very, very big and diverse food scene in Belfast. It really is. There’s an awful lot of really interesting projects and stuff, but they all ceased operating essentially. You know, anything that was to do with... well, ceased operating in a communal sense and went more with the emergency food response really. Some of them went into online lessons as well, but no, I mean it just stopped everything.” (Third sector respondent)

Food retailers and hospitality

Respondents also cited examples of local businesses providing food support or staff contributing to the community efforts.

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

“A chef with a highly regarded restaurant, instead of kicking his heels, he spends two days a week with a community group, organising meals for the week.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as the delivery slots provided by the major supermarkets another larger retail group provided deliveries. This support was listed on the Council website:

Food provision

Spar, Eurospar and Vivo home delivery

- Phone your local Spar, Eurospar or Vivo and ask for their delivery service.
- The store staff will do your shop with you over the phone.
- Many let you pay by card over the phone for your shopping and for the cost of a taxi to deliver it to your home. Some may do this free of charge.
- Your items will be delivered to you by taxi as soon as possible.

Source: Belfast Council Website, Accessed Nov 11 2020.³⁶

³⁶ <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/community/health-and-wellbeing/covid-19-belfast-community-support>

In addition two websites were created to provide information on local food businesses continuing to operate throughout lockdown. 'InYourArea', is a website which allows people to search from businesses that were open for takeaway and delivery by postcode.³⁷ 'Who is delivering? Northern Ireland' is a Facebook page shares information on businesses across the country that are delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals, including an interactive searchable map.³⁸

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Belfast

Local community responses

Reflecting on a community response participants widely agreed on the key role of local community organisations in the response.

"You know, they really did step up to the plate, there's no doubt about it." (Council staff respondent)

Participants reflected on the advantages and benefits of a local community response, particularly in a city with a well-established and vibrant community sector. Two key themes emerged: the ability to respond immediately and having established local knowledge.

"Yet the response in the {name removed} Estate, I thought was first-class because they have a long-standing community network. They had people in place that knew the community, and they were able to respond." (City Councillor respondent)

One food bank pre-empted the problems with access to food in the early stages and distributed food parcels to the households who they knew would be impacted. This was only possible due to their existing knowledge and understanding of these households.

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

Respondents also reflected on the more challenging aspects of the role of local communities in responding, primarily centred on a rapid increase in organisations providing food aid, resulting in duplication.

"They basically have funded a whole new raft of mini organisations to turn into food banks. They started duplicating existing services. This is a flippant comment, it's not

³⁷ https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/how-inyourarea-is-helping-restaurants-turning-to-takeaway-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?_ga=2.159214457.212464629.1613473163-196384144.1609758220

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI/>,
<https://dynamicmap.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b3e9b5a5b67b47cb8f47c9b05689dae5>

an accurate statement, but we went from 14 official food banks to 300 overnight, something like that. I mean that's not obviously the case but that's what it felt like."
(Third sector respondent)

Respondents also had concerns that the introduction of new actors detracted from the established services even though they may not have had the same knowledge or expertise as the more established actors.

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

"Apparently the {name removed} were literally just dropping random bags of food at people's doors, no understanding of their dietary requirements, whether they actually physically, financially needed it or wanted it or any of that kind of stuff so it's been very tricky here." (Third sector respondent)

A further consequence of the increase in new actors was exacerbation of what one respondent felt was the existing lack of a co-ordinated response to food poverty.

"That splintered unjoined-upness, from what I've seen just as an outsider, has just been replicated with bells on." (Third sector respondent)

Meeting the needs of different groups

Workshop respondents highlighted how different groups may have faced different challenges around food access in the city. One participant highlighted a reduction in public transport which impacted people on temporary work permits who may not have access to a car. This exacerbated access issues that arose due to the reduced opening hours of some of the Asian food retailers.

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

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

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

Respondents also voiced concerns that overseas students, who were unable to go home over the summer period were missed from the responses

“What we did have was a larger number of overseas students that were stuck here.... That group of people were not thought of, you know, and people forget about food poverty in that aspect, because they’re overseas students.” (Third sector respondent)

Limitations of the shielding box programme

There was some discussion of the shielding grocery box scheme with limitations identified around the appropriateness of the food, the speed of the response and confusion around messaging.

Delivery of the food parcels provided through the national scheme, co-ordinated by the Council, started on the 8th of April. Respondents felt this was later than it could have been due to lack of a centralised list of people who were shielding.

“The government department didn’t hold that list and it was all done through GPs which created another level of complexity and slowed things down further.” (Third sector respondent)

Furthermore, given the likely characteristics of the shielding population one respondent felt the provision of a food parcel was not a suitable replacement for the food support they might normally receive.

“I did the COVID helpline for six weeks here, and what we realised was that the food boxes were not suitable for the client group that they were supposed to be for, because the client group that they were for, were isolated, older, vulnerable, disabled sick people who actually in many ways needed a hot meal because they were so used to family coming in and doing that for them, but the family were taking a step back, and therefore it was a complete miss-match of approach” (Third sector respondent)

Finally, respondents felt the messaging, in the early days, lead to confusion as to who was entitled to receive one of the food boxes.

“Now what also probably happened was when the food box scheme come out there were people who had the sense of entitlement. The message around it was for here, we didn’t get the messaging right, what happened was we had, “If you got a letter, you’re entitled to a food parcel,” and actually that wasn’t the case. We had lots of people phoning up and they were just saying, “I want to claim my food parcel.” I was like, “No, that’s not actually how it works.” The food parcel people were for either you’re in food poverty or there are genuine reasons where you can’t get out.” (Third sector respondent)

One respondent reflected on the period in July when the Red Cross did the deliveries of the national box scheme, highlighting that perhaps other existing food providers could have been involved in this phase.

“But yes, I mean, when the Department for Communities, through Belfast City Council, as well, made the money available for the food delivery then, for the second phase, went to the Red Cross, which left a number of community groups, “Well, what

about us? We stepped up to the mark and we did this, and now you're just bypassing us.” (Third sector respondent)

Crisis vs holistic support

Recognising that support was put in place in response to the pandemic respondents hoped that there would be a return to other ways of supporting people with food access, rather than just the direct provision of food.

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

Another respondent observed how earlier conversations regarding the need to eradicate poverty had been gathering momentum prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and they wondered what the impact of the increase in organisations offering direct food provisions would have on these conversations. They felt the increase in direct food support had “muddied the waters”.

“There were a lot of organisations doing food, but it was a bit clearer who was doing what, frankly. So, we had a certain amount of food banks that were doing specific food bank work, as normal I have to say. In fact, most of the food banks were starting to enter into a dialogue to shut the food banks down because everyone’s starting to recognise that surplus food certainly isn’t the answer to this, and we don’t want an American model. Otherwise, we’ll be doing this for eternity.

Yes, that debate was just starting to gather pace here actually, which is really good. The Trussell Trust have got a really good exit plan in place to try and get out of it in the next, sort of, 5 to 10 years. Basically, working towards eradicating poverty, rather than just shoring up the broken system, broken system being broken food system, but also the lack of equality that we have and the level of poverty that we have in Northern Ireland, which is extraordinarily high.

Then post or during the pandemic, literally nearly every other organisation did something around food. Yes, I mean, I suppose in a way, it’s the easiest response, isn’t it?” (Third sector respondent)

Evidence and concerns of economic impact

Respondents reported that since September they were experiencing an increased need for support services as a result of the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We were working with the food banks and the Trussell Trust particularly here, and they were looking at September for the fallout to happen and they were right, it really did, and redundancies were key, definitely.” (Third sector respondent)

Another respondent reported seeing new groups of people accessing the food bank from September. They suggested that households who had been on furlough may have been able to manage with the 20% reduction in income for a certain time but were finding it increasingly hard to do so. They also highlighted financial challenges for people working in the hospitality industry and those who are self-employed.

“I think with schools going back in September, whereas maybe before the 20% wasn’t such a big deal, because everybody was home and no one was travelling. We’re nearly into September and kids are going to school and kids are needing money. That 20% becomes a real big- you can definitely start to see how families really did struggle with that. Then it was up to 70% and then it’s gone to 60%, now obviously we’re back to 80% but for lots of families at the moment.

I mean our hospitality sector here had fell apart and we have households with mum and dad both in hospitality and that’s two incomes lost. Our self-employed people literally, they’re on their knees. There’s nothing for them.

I think it’s been tough. So from September it’s been a new group of people accessing the food bank. People we had never really been able to - and what we do is we give them all food benefit check and we look to see if there’s any debt and can we put in any debt solutions and stuff like that.” (Third sector respondent)

One respondent spoke of increased demand for advice services in September due to both redundancies and social security assessments restarting.

“It was only really come September that the advice services started to see this massive pickup and that’s because more people are losing jobs but also because the PIP, personal independent payment forms were back up and running. So assessments are back up and running and appeals are back up and running. So the advice service has picked up again.” (Third sector respondent)

Political dimensions

Some respondents spoke of their disappointment at what were perceived to be political dimensions in the response. One respondent pointed us towards news coverage of political affiliations of the groups that received funding from the Council (for example see here³⁹). Another commented that they felt “quite disgusted” as they perceived that food poverty had been made political, when it is a non-party political social issue. Another respondent discussed that there may have been a political reason for some of the community groups becoming involved, with some group possibly feeling they should be providing a response because other neighbouring communities were and “politically, it would have been impossible for them not to be doing it.” (Third sector respondent)

Looking ahead

Respondents talked of activity that was happening at the time of the workshop (January 2021) around supporting recovery from the pandemic and also the legacy of the strong

³⁹ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/04/06/news/uda-linked-group-awarded-share-of-120-000-council-coronavirus-funding--1891872/>

involvement of the community sector. The Council have been exploring ways to support the recovery.

“Over the last sort of, four or five months I’ve been in contact with the food providers and advice providers in the city, getting a sense of what pressures they’ve been experiencing, what the difficulties are for the people who are coming to them, to try and get a picture of what the situation is, so the Council can respond most appropriately.” (Council staff respondent)

One strand of this work which will be implemented in the near future is support for organisations providing meals in the community.

“My main emphasis is still a little bit in the future because I’ve been awarded a grant, well through council. The Council are awarding a grant to hopefully 45 community groups who are registered with FareShare to allow them to buy kitchen equipment, like fridges, freezers, ovens. Basically, whatever it is they need, so that they can take an increase in the amount of food that they get from FareShare and turn that into meals for their own local community groups. So, that hasn’t actually started yet. It went through council in December and was passed, and hopefully we’re going to get started on that really, really soon.” (Council staff respondent)

Others talked about a transition in the activities of community organisations which had been involved in food work.

“And I think there actually has been quite a bit of head-scratching, in terms of, “What is it you want us to do now?” And there has been a certain amount of ‘we’ve done the food, but we also realise it’s no good just keeping somebody alive with food if we’re not giving them a quality of life’.

So, people are diverting their energies into social- I mean, there are people who- hard-edged community activists, who became bingo-callers and quizmasters during the summer, and will be Santa. There was a bit of a diversion away from, ‘Okay, we’re looking at food stuff, but we also need to do other things as well.’ That kind of happened and it kind of happened in, I think, a typically Belfast kind of way.” (Third sector respondent)

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

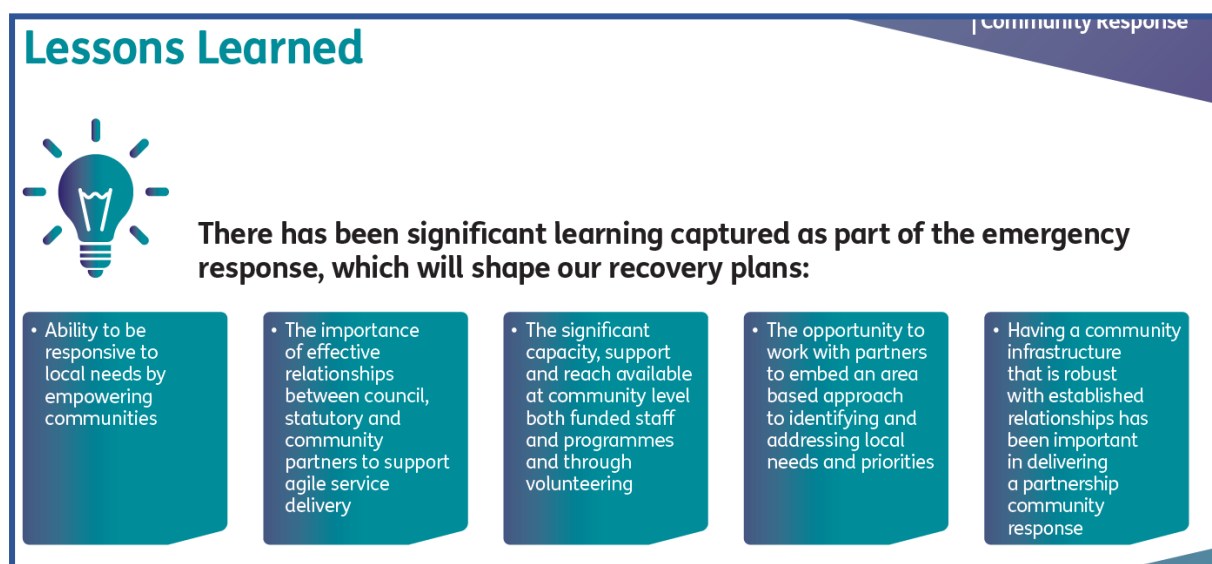
A 'layered' response

Participants reflected positively on the layered nature of the response with responses coming from the Council working alongside responses at a more local, community level. This was a key feature of the response that participants felt should continue into the future. Respondents also felt that the improved collaboration between services organisations, such as advice services, support organisations and food banks should be continued. Responding to what features of the response should continue, padlet entries included:

“Continuing delivery of responses at a layered level with the focus on area & neighbourhood level” (Workshop, Padlet response)

“Existing relationships with other organisations & groups helped to create linkages e.g. food banks & local advice providers” (Workshop, Padlet response)

The City Council's 'Lessons Learned' (documented in the Community Response Closing Report) shown below, also reflected these themes.



The infographic is titled "Lessons Learned" and is part of a "Community Response" report. It features a lightbulb icon on the left. The main text states: "There has been significant learning captured as part of the emergency response, which will shape our recovery plans:". Below this, there are five teal-colored boxes, each containing a bullet point:

- Ability to be responsive to local needs by empowering communities
- The importance of effective relationships between council, statutory and community partners to support agile service delivery
- The significant capacity, support and reach available at community level both funded staff and programmes and through volunteering
- The opportunity to work with partners to embed an area based approach to identifying and addressing local needs and priorities
- Having a community infrastructure that is robust with established relationships has been important in delivering a partnership community response

Source: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Belfast Community Response Closing Report - August 2020⁴⁰

Opportunity for engagement

Respondents also reflected positively on the responses that included deliveries to households as this ensured some social contact for people and provided an opportunity to check up on people's health and wellbeing.

“And this is in an inner-city part of Belfast, where there would be a high proportion of older and very vulnerable people, particularly older men, who you would have seen in some of the wee city centre pubs and clubs, having a drink of an afternoon. And you

⁴⁰<https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/s85913/Appendix%201%20PC%20Belfast%20Community%20Response.pdf>

could keep an eye on them there. But now, because this is happening and they're closed, these guys are going out to these houses and making sure that they're okay and they're settled." (Third sector respondent)

This opportunity to look after others was also beneficial for people who could not visit family as they usually would, creating a sense of working together to support everyone in need.

"And it's become quite inter-generational. Young people realise all of a sudden that, "I can't go and see my granny because she's isolating and nobody is really there. I'll join with everybody else and we'll go around and do the visits or the calls and keep an eye on the older people in our neighbourhood." Yes, so it was quite strange, in a way, to see all of these different interests coalesce together and pick up on it." (Third sector respondent)

Resources

Respondents also reflected that some resources were easy to secure, such as offers of repurposed physical space to store food and host operations. There were lots of volunteers across the city. Some respondents felt that funding was available to a wide range of initiatives that supported a food response.

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Lack of co-ordination

The main concern that respondents voiced related to a lack of co-ordination of the responses. This was particularly problematic due to the many organisations providing support with food, including a number of new actors.

One of the consequences of this was duplication of services, with some people receiving the same support from a range of sources.

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

Such duplication may have been the result of the availability of a range of helplines that people could call.

"There were a number of helplines operating at a regional, council and local level and this created issues in terms of people being referred from several sources." (Workshop, Padlet response)

Another respondent provided an example of arrangements being put in place where donated food was being taken from a town on the outskirts of the city and brought into the city, rather than using the food for the responses within the town.

"But ultimately, what they were doing was they were physically taking the food out of normal local food banks to drive it to Belfast. They were getting food collected in Donaghadee, forgetting about the Donaghadee food bank and driving it to Belfast.

That was being replicated across the whole province, across all of their shops literally. I had spoken to three food banks directly, Donaghadee, Bangor and Lisburn and they were all experiencing this loss of donations because it was being redirected up to Belfast which was actually really completely unnecessary. Now, to be honest with you, that's been my experience of food poverty emergency grants here. It's not good. It's not coordinated." (Workshop attendee, third sector)

Respondents suggested that some of the lack of co-ordination arose from people wanting to help and 'do their bit', without the knowledge of the support already available.

"It was local people wanting to help their local community, and their community maybe being an estate or a street or whatever, but very much in their little silos."
(Third sector respondent)

One respondent summarised a range of concerns, describing the landscape as a "complicated space":

"We heard a lot of stories around duplication, people being on the same list two or three times, people getting food when they didn't need food, the quality of the food they were getting not being appropriate for either their ethnicity or their cultural kind of background or their age, frankly. It just seemed to be a very complicated space."
(Third sector respondent)

Funding

Funding was discussed as both a positive and a negative of the response. The availability of funding was considered a positive, but this did also lead to some of the duplication discussed above.

"Funding supported a plethora of initiatives, but there was little connectivity between them, leading to duplication in some areas." (Workshop, Padlet response)

Other respondents expressed concerns that funding was not available for some groups providing support and, therefore, some populations groups may have been missed.

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

Others felt that funding was all channelled towards emergency responses which meant they could not continue with some of their wider food support work.

"I suppose I'm more interested in nutrition and the training of it, because that's what I do, and our 'culture cuisine with me' course was about the heritage and the background of food, and encouraging people to eat nutritionally, different culture of food from different diverse trainers. Now, our trainers got ready to make little, small videos to do that, but we couldn't get the funding because funding wasn't attached to

that importance. So, in a roundabout way, we have stopped it.” (Third sector respondent)

Tracking funded activity

One respondent reflected how it was sometimes challenging for the strategic partners, funded by the Council, to report on the activities that were being undertaken by the local groups which had received a distribution of the funding.

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

Lack of consideration of local food systems

One respondent expressed disappointment that local suppliers were not utilised in the supply of the nationally provided grocery boxes for the shielding population.

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

Others provided examples of the more locally devised responses giving more consideration to local suppliers and retailers.

“Then I look on the Cregagh Estate where they were working with the local Spar, the butcher and the baker, and if there'd have been a candlestick maker, they'd have probably been working with them as well, but, you know, that real, sort of, holistic community response.” (City Councillor respondent)

Appendix 1: Information leaflet included in grocery box deliveries



Belfast
City Council



Department for
Communities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk

The Department for Communities and your local council are supporting communities during the COVID-19 pandemic by delivering boxes of essential food during this time.

You have received this food box because you (or someone who looks out for you) have told us that you have been asked to shield by your GP and stay at home; and that you currently have no available help or

alternative way to get food. You may also be experiencing financial stress and worry about how you will get food. We know this is an uncertain time for many and we hope this package is helpful to you.

Please check the contents carefully



Everyone has been given the same items, and some may not suit you if you have **allergies, dietary, or religious requirements**. Please check the contents carefully and do not eat anything you are unsure about.

What happens next?



- **The scheme will continue until 26 June 2020.**



- We have a limited supply to help the most vulnerable, **so if you don't need this box again next week** and are happy for us to support someone else with it **please tell us:**



- Call **Belfast City Council direct** at freefone **0800 587 4695** or

- Email: **covid19@belfastcity.gov.uk**

- At some point over the next few weeks you will also receive a call from Belfast City Council who will make sure you are getting the help you need.

Thank you for staying home, staying safe, and helping to protect the NHS.

For Information: Other ways to have access to food

If you are vulnerable because of health conditions:

You can get food shopping support through a local volunteer:



- Call **Belfast City Council direct** at freefone **0800 587 4695** or Email: **covid19@belfastcity.gov.uk** to be connected to other forms of support including volunteer shoppers near you where available

If you have received a letter from the GP telling you to shield i.e. avoid face-to-face contact for 12 weeks:



Supermarket delivery slot:

- If you have a letter from your GP, you can request a delivery slot from Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, or Iceland.
- Go to **www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/priority-online-food-delivery** for advice or to register your interest

OPTIONS OPEN TO ANYONE:



1. Spar/Eurospar/Vivo Home delivery

- Phone your local Spar, Eurospar or Vivo and ask for their delivery service
- The store staff will do your shop with you over the phone
- Many let you pay by card over the phone for your shopping and for the cost of a taxi to deliver it to your home. Some may do this free of charge.
- Your items will be delivered to you by taxi as soon as possible



2. Other independent retailers

- **wholsdeliveringni** is a Facebook group (run by members of the community) which allows users to share information on businesses in Northern Ireland delivering fresh food, groceries and pre-made meals - **www.facebook.com/groups/WholsDeliveringNI**. This is an unofficial community group so content, accuracy and reliability cannot always be guaranteed.



3. Foodbanks and other community support:

- Please visit **www.consumercouncil.org.uk/coronavirus/vulnerable** or **www.communityni.org/help** to search for foodbanks and other food support near you



The research project **Food Vulnerability during COVID-19** is funded by the ESRC through the UKRI COVID-19 research and innovation fund. To contact the project team please email foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk