



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Derry and Strabane 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 Derry and Strabane District Council area is split into eight local community planning areas: four are District Electoral Areas (DEAs) in Derry City, three are more rural DEAs and the last is Strabane Town. Each of these areas have an established Local Community Growth Partnership and these partnerships developed a 'Community Resilience Plan' in response to the pandemic for each of the DEAs. As part of the plan each of the Local Community Growth Partnerships assigned a 'lead' for the food response. In the five urban areas these leads came from the existing infrastructure in place namely, in Derry City, the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, which focus on the particularly deprived areas of Derry City, providing emergency food aid amongst a suite of other support. In Strabane Town the equivalent was Strabane Community Project which, similarly, provides a suite of support, including the provision of food. These organisations delivered the response with high levels of support from other local organisations (sports clubs, other community organisations, local businesses) and a wealth of volunteers. In the three rural DEAs, there was less existing infrastructure in place, and food responses were provided by local organisations who, ordinarily, are not involved in any community food work, such as community associations and sports clubs.

The food support provided across the DEAs typically took one of three forms: food parcels, hot meal deliveries or shopping support (for people who were unable to visit the shops). Households accessed this support through the local helplines, usually established by the organisation leading the food response in the area or via identification and referral by other support services. The organisations leading the food response in each of the DEAs also co-ordinated and/or undertook the 'last mile' delivery of the food boxes provided through the Department for Communities scheme, which were available to people who were shielding and unable to access food through other means and to people who were experiencing any other barriers to food access, including financial. Food was delivered by the suppliers to a central hub in each area for collection and subsequent delivery to the households who were referred through the national Advice NI helpline. In some cases, the local organisations supplemented the boxes with additional produce.

Derry and Strabane District Council supported the community resilience plans through the distribution of £27,000 of funding for each DEA which was to support community led responses to assist the most vulnerable during the pandemic. In the urban areas a lead organisation (not necessarily the one leading on the food response) was appointed by each Local Community Partnership to receive this funding. In the rural areas one organisation, RAPID, administered the funding, allocating grants to community organisations and groups across the three rural DEAs. Alongside this community resilience activity existing food aid providers, namely two food banks in the Trussell Trust network and two social supermarkets, adapted their model to allow them to continue their usual food provision and support in ways that were compliant with lockdown restrictions.

Key themes that emerged from the data included the integral role of the voluntary and community sector in providing the response, which participants reflected brought benefits of local knowledge, local trust, and the ability to respond very quickly. Differences in the existing infrastructure between the urban and rural areas was highlighted. Participants had mixed feeling as to the success and efficacy of the national food box deliveries provided

through the Department for Communities. Despite hopes for a positive legacy of better collaborations between the statutory and the community and voluntary sector, highlighted as a key positive to emerge from the pandemic, organisations spoke of a real sense of fear for the future regarding increasing need and the capacity which they have to respond to this.

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Summary of mapping: Key actors and activities responding to food insecurity in Derry City and Strabane

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in Derry City and Strabane 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

Some of the actors working to address food insecurity before the COVID-19 pandemic did so through their wider suite of work, including area regeneration, community development and poverty alleviation. These actors, namely community growth partnerships and neighbourhood renewal partnerships, described below, subsequently took a lead role in supporting food access during the first lockdown.

The Derry and Strabane District Council area is split into eight local community planning areas: four are District Electoral Areas (DEAs) in Derry City, three are more rural DEAs and the last is Strabane Town. Each of these areas have an established Local Community Growth Partnership. These partnerships brought together statutory organisations (e.g. the Housing Executive, Department for Communities, Education Authority, Western Health and Social Care Trust and other), business, community and voluntary organisations, elected members for the DEA and interested citizens.¹ These Local Community Growth Partnerships, which usually met on a monthly basis, played a key role in delivering on the Local Community Growth Plans that are in place for each of the areas.² These plans focus on three pillars of wellbeing; social, economic and environmental.

At a more local level there are also five Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRA) within the Derry City & Strabane District Council area. Four are located in Derry City (Outer North, Outer West, Triax Cityside, Waterside) and one in Strabane. The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is funded by the Department for Communities and led by the Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department of Western Health and Social Care Trust in partnership with local community organisations.³ The purpose of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is to reduce the social and economic inequalities; to work in partnership with communities to identify and prioritise needs and co-ordinate interventions designed to address the underlying causes of poverty.⁴

Unlike the Local Community Growth Partnerships, which operated across each DEA, the Neighbourhood Renewals Partnerships each focused on a smaller geographic area which experienced high levels of deprivation. Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP) operates in the Outer North of Derry City, Ballymagroarty and Hazelbank Community Partnership in the Outer West, Triax Neighbourhood Management Team in Triax Cityside

¹ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Plans](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Plans)

² [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards), <https://growderrystrabane.com/how-were-making-it-happen/local-growth-plans/>

³ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

⁴ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/Neighbourhood-Renewal-Programme>

and Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership (WNP) in the Waterside.⁵ One NRA is located in Strabane, which is served by both the Strabane Health Improvement Project and Strabane Community Project.⁶ Some of these partnerships provided emergency food aid prior to the pandemic. For example, the family support hub at GSAP distributed 576 seven-day food parcels in 2018/19.⁷ Prior to COVID-19, WNP supported on average 15-20 families/individuals with the provision of food. Strabane Community project ran a social supermarket and a food bank amongst a suite of other support.

As well as being members of the Local Community Growth partnerships and the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, Derry City and Strabane District Council provided funding to advice services and were therefore supporting welfare, debt and employment advice.

Two food banks in the Trussell Trust network were located in area, the Foyle Foodbank located in Derry City and the Strabane Foodbank, part of Strabane Community Project. The Churches Trust Pantry project were also an emergency food parcel distributor. However, they did not provide parcels directly to households, instead providing them to other organisations for further distribution to households. Two social supermarkets are located in the area, both part of the Northern Ireland Executive Department for Communities pilot scheme of five social supermarkets, launched in 2017. One social supermarket is based in Strabane Town, by Strabane Community Project and the other in Derry City by Apex housing.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust provided a Meals on Wheels service covering an area which includes Derry and Strabane. In addition, the Food and Nutrition Team, in partnership with Derry and Strabane District Council, created a booklet which contains both nutrition and food safety information to assist local food banks and organisations who may be making up and/ or preparing food parcels for their local community.⁸

A number of community lunches and community meals operated before the pandemic, more commonly in the urban areas.

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

The key role which the Council played in the response was the provision of funding for community resilience planning in the seven DEAs and Strabane Town. At a council meeting on the 26th of March councillors agreed to provide £280,000 to support community led responses to assist the most vulnerable during the pandemic. This was intended to support the work being undertaken by Local Community Planning, Neighbourhood Renewal Groups, rural networks and the community-based volunteer initiatives that emerged in the early weeks of the crisis.⁹ The funding could be used for a range of responses of which food provision may have been one component. The Local Growth Partnership in each of the areas appointed a lead organisation to receive the funding.

⁵ <https://www.shantallow.net/>, <https://www.facebook.com/ballymagroartyhazelbankcommunitypartnership/>, <https://www.triaxneighbourhoodmanagementteam.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/watersidenp/>

⁶ <http://strabanecommunityproject.org.uk/services/index.html>, <https://www.facebook.com/StrabaneHealthImprovementProject/>

⁷ <https://www.shantallow.net/about-us>

⁸ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/eat-well/>

⁹ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

The Council also acted as a conduit between the organisations doing the last mile delivery of the food boxes provided through the national scheme (see later section), and the suppliers ordering centrally the number of boxes required and distributing these to the DEAs as well as divvying up the referrals received through the national helpline to the organisations doing the last mile delivery. In addition, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, funding was provided to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in the evenings and weekends.¹⁰

Each of the Community Growth Partnerships developed a 'Community Resilience Plan' in response to the pandemic for each of the DEAs, designed to protect those most in need and focus on supporting isolated and vulnerable people. The Community Resilience Plan included actions such as providing access to food, medicine and cleansing materials; developing activities to deal with mental health and wellbeing; and connecting isolated people, family members and friends with the wider community.¹¹ Although a number of organisations were involved in delivering the Community Resilience Plan, the Local Community Growth Partnerships nominated a lead organisation to draw down the funding provided by the Council and to coordinate the response in the area to make best use of resources. As part of this response the partnership also designated an organisation to take the lead on the food response.

The way in which the community resilience plan was delivered differed across the 4 Derry City DEAs, the three rural DEAs and Strabane Town. In Derry City at least three of the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships were the designated food lead for their areas, GSAP, WNP and Triax Neighbourhood Management Team. The activities of these partnerships included establishment of a local support helpline, wide advertisement of the support available (community billboards, leaflets drops, poster campaigns, newsletters and dedicated community response social media sites) and direct food provision, most commonly, in the form food parcels and the delivery of hot meals. They delivered these services with the support of a wide range of other local community organisation and groups and a number of volunteers. People requiring support with food could call the helpline or were often identified by community and voluntary groups and statutory services such as social workers, chemists, GPs and Housing Associations. Food supplies were sourced through FareShare, Churches Trust, donated by local businesses and purchased using money from fundraising activities. Local retail businesses also supported the response by ordering and storing food.

Strabane Community Project led the food response in Strabane Town and similar to the food lead organisation in the Derry City DEAs they established a local helpline and co-ordinated other local groups to aid the response, including the provision of food parcels. They also expanded their existing Meals on Wheels service. In the three rural DEAs the Council funding was channelled through the 'Rural Area Partnership in Derry', to which a range of community organisations and groups could apply for grants.¹² Each of these three rural DEAs received £27,000 in total, split across 25 organisations which received grants of between £1,000 and £5,000. As with the urban DEAs the main forms of support with food

¹⁰ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

¹¹ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/communitysupport>

¹² <http://www.rapidni.com/>

were food parcels and hot meal delivery although support with shopping, for people who were unable to go to the shops was also an important feature of the response in the rural areas.

In addition to the responses delivered to fulfil the Community Resilience Plans, the relevant actors involved in delivering the food response in each of the DEAs led on the 'last mile' delivery of the weekly grocery food boxes provided by the national initiative of 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.¹³ The 'last mile' delivery approach meant the local actors took the role of delivering the boxes to the individual households from a central hub.

The two social supermarkets continued to operate during the lockdown, making adaptations including providing groceries for either collection or delivery, increased membership and providing wraparound care via online workshops. The food banks in the Trussell Trust network also continued to operate with adaptations, and the Churches Trust continued to provide food parcels to organisations providing food aid and reported a large increase in need.

¹³ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

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:

- Five 1:1 interviews were conducted with representatives of different organisations: 1 with a representative of Derry City and Strabane District Council, 3 with representatives of local community projects/partnerships, 1 with a rural community association.
- One workshop conducted with 6 participants of whom:
 - 2 worked for third sector food aid organisations (one social supermarket and one food pantry project)
 - 2 worked for Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, leading on a food related COVID-19 response (1 already interviewed)
 - 1 worked for a third sector organisation supporting community participation
 - 1 volunteered for a rural community association (also interviewed due to connection problems during workshop).

In addition, a further 5 participants were invited to participate in the research (1 council staff and 4 representatives of third sector organisations) but did not do so.

All participants were invited to share other reports/documents that were relevant to the project. Key pieces of data shared include a report written by one of the research participants titled 'Research Paper and Proposal for an Access to Food Pilot', this included a mapping of the organisations in Derry City providing responses to food during the pandemic and an 'Overview and Summary of the Community Resilience Fund' distributed in the three rural areas of the district. In addition, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic with a particular focus on the information available of the Derry City and Strabane District Council website. Lastly, during the workshop, 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 Derry and Strabane

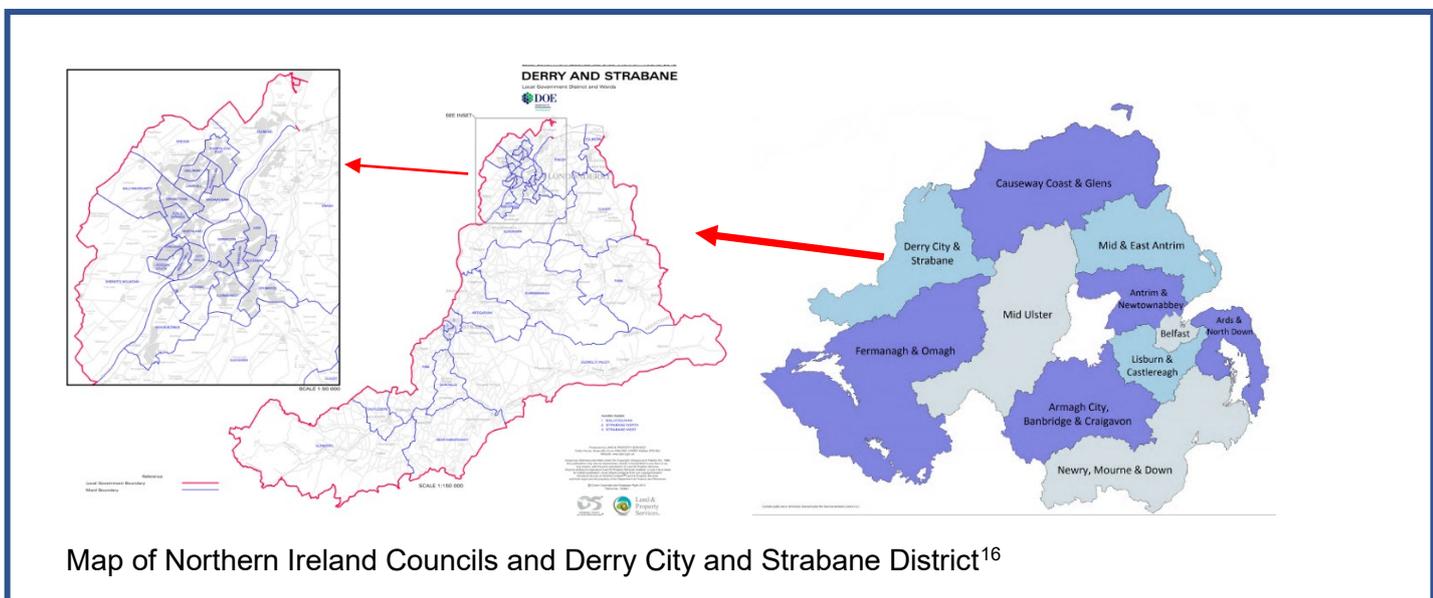
As detailed in the methodological appendix available on the project website, case study selection criteria were chosen to allow comparisons across the case study areas. The selection criteria were the presence/absence of a food poverty alliance registered with the Food Power network, areas that were 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. Derry and Strabane was selected due to the absence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly urban. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 68%.

Derry City and Strabane, located in the northwest of Northern Ireland, has a population of around 150,000 people. 22% of the population are aged 0-15, 63% are 16-64, 14% are 65-84 and 2% are 85+. ¹⁴

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). Derry City and Strabane District has 75 SOAs. In 2017, Derry City and Strabane had 20 of the 100 most deprived SOAs, accounting for 27% of its 75 SOAs, and five of the 10 most deprived SOAs. ¹⁵

Before the pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Derry City and Strabane was 4.4% in January 2020, but this rose to 7.4% in July 2020.



The district is split into 8 local community planning areas. Seven of these are termed 'District Electoral Areas' (DEAs) and the remaining area is Strabane Town. Four DEAs are located in Derry City: Ballyarnett, Foyleside, The Moor and Waterside. These and Strabane Town are predominantly urban areas. The remaining three DEAs, Derg, Faughan and Sperrin, are more rural. One participant estimated about two thirds of the geography of the area is rural, accounting for approximately a third of the population.

Participants provided some insights which are relevant to a broad understanding of the area. Firstly, the existence of a strong community development infrastructure and, relevant to rural areas, challenges around connectivity.

¹⁴ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2019-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>

¹⁵ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/NIMDM17-%20with%20ns.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/local-government-maps>

“Our council were very lucky, that we’ve got a very strong community development infrastructure” (Council staff respondent)

“I suppose the major block is for us now as rural broadband in Northern Ireland, particularly in the west. It’s still difficult for some people to work from home because of the broadband connection.” (Third sector respondent)

Data reported by the Trussell Trust showed an 87% increase in the number of food parcels distributed during 1st April 2020 - 30th September 2020 compared to the same time period last year.¹⁷

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

This following list of actors include organisations that, prior to the pandemic were not necessarily involved in the direct provision of food but rather they worked on actions such as area regeneration, community development and poverty alleviation. As well as these wider actions that may help to tackle food insecurity, the actors subsequently took a lead role in supporting food access during the first lockdown.

Derry City and Strabane District Council

Prior to the pandemic the Council was not heavily involved in direct food provision however they did provide substantial funding to advice services and were, therefore, supporting welfare, debt and employment advice. The advice organisations to which they provided funding include Advice North West, Dove House Advice Services and Resource Centre Derry.¹⁸

They also played a key role in the Local Community Growth partnerships and the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships described below, with the elected members for each of the DEAs being members of the partnership. The Council also provided funding to a range of local organisations and initiatives working in and with local communities.

Local Community Growth Partnerships

Each of the 8 areas noted above (7 DEAs and Strabane Town) have a Local Community Growth Partnership. These partnerships aim to bring together statutory organisations (e.g. the Housing Executive, Department for Communities, Education Authority, Western Health and Social Care Trust and other), business, community and voluntary organisations, elected members for the DEA and interested citizens.¹⁹

“As part of our community planning process, we have set local growth partnerships in each of the DEAs, district electoral areas. So, we had those community planning

¹⁷ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/>

¹⁸ <https://advicenorthwest.com/>, <https://dovehousecommunitytrust.org/projects/adVICEServices.html>, <https://www.resourcecentrederry.com/>

¹⁹ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Plans](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Plans)

partnerships in place representing the community, elected members, and statutory representatives” (Council staff respondent)

These Local Community Growth Partnerships, which usually meet on a monthly basis, play a key role in delivering on the Local Community Growth Plans that are in place for each of the areas.²⁰ These plans focus on three pillars; social wellbeing, economic wellbeing and environmental wellbeing. In the urban areas the establishment of the Local Community Growth Partnerships built and expanded on the existing Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (see below). In rural areas, where there was no existing Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships the Local Community Growth Partnerships were built up from scratch.

As the Local Community Growth Partnerships are not constituted they cannot receive funding directly, however, depending on the focus of each particular programme they will appoint a lead organisation within the partnership who can receive funding from, for example, the Council.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships

At a more local level there are also five Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) within the Derry City & Strabane District Council area. Four are located in Derry City (Outer North, Outer West, Triax Cityside, Waterside) and one in Strabane. The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is funded by the Department for Communities and led by the Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department of Western Health and Social Care Trust in partnership with local community organisations.²¹ The purpose of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is to reduce the social and economic inequalities which characterise the most deprived areas; and to work in partnership with communities to identify and prioritise needs and co-ordinate interventions designed to address the underlying causes of poverty.²²

Unlike the Local Community Growth Partnerships, which operate across each DEA, the Neighbourhood Renewals Partnerships are each focused on a smaller geographic area which experiences high levels of deprivation. The Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships are each structured and governed differently: some operate as a limited company whilst others are not constituted but have an appointed lead organisation within the partnership who hold the contract and receive the funding for the neighbourhood renewal delivery.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships and lead delivery organisations most notable for this project in the four Derry City NRAs are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Organisations/ Partnerships operating in the four Derry City NRAs.

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Key Organisation/ Partnership	Details
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²⁰ [https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-\(1\)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards](https://www.derrystrabane.com/Subsites/Community-Development-(1)/test2/Local-Community-Growth-Partnership-Boards), <https://growderrystrabane.com/how-were-making-it-happen/local-growth-plans/>

²¹ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

²² <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/Neighbourhood-Renewal-Programme>

Outer North	Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP) ²³	A core community support agency working with local residents, community/voluntary sector groups and statutory/private organisations to help improve the social, community, economic and physical regeneration of the area.
Outer West	Ballymagroarty and Hazelbank Community Partnership ²⁴	The aim of the Ballymagroarty Hazelbank Community Partnership is to lessen the effects of deprivation in the area by contributing positively to the social economic and environmental regeneration of the area.
	Rosemount and District Welfare Rights ²⁵	Provision of a community hub. The hub provides a range of services including welfare rights project, legal access project, employability and skills training, programme of activities for children and families, and other services.
Triax Cityside	Triax Neighbourhood Management Team ²⁶	Overall ethos is to recognise and address the challenges faced across the communities they support.
Waterside	Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership (WNP) ²⁷	The aim of the organisation is to transform the area into a safe place, which people will choose to live in, invest in and visit. The partnership is heavily involved in liaising with statutory, private sector and government. Local organisations are responsible for delivery 'on the ground'. ²⁸

As can be seen these organisations have wide regeneration aims, of which food may play a part without necessarily being a specific focus. We learned that at least two of these partnerships provided emergency food aid. The family support hub at GSAP have been providing emergency parcels since 2010. In 2018/19 they distributed 576 seven-day food parcels and in 2017/18 the equivalent figure was 276 parcels.²⁹ Prior to COVID-19 WNP supported 15-20 families/individuals on a weekly basis in relation to the provision of food. This would have been a mix of food parcels from the Churches Trust (see section below) and the issuing of food parcel vouchers for the Apex food bank.³⁰

One NRA is located in Strabane, which is served by both the Strabane Health Improvement Project and Strabane Community Project.³¹ The latter plays a key role in supporting people

²³ <https://www.shantallow.net/>

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ballymagroartyhazelbankcommunitypartnership/>

²⁵ <https://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/charity-details/?regid=102878&subid=0>

²⁶ <https://www.triaxneighbourhoodmanagementteam.com/>

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/watersidenp/>

²⁸ https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/ccni_ar_attachments/0000101469_20190331_CA.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.shantallow.net/about-us>

³⁰ 'Research Paper and Proposal for an Access to Food Pilot' – available on request

³¹ <http://strabanecommunityproject.org.uk/services/index.html>,
<https://www.facebook.com/StrabaneHealthImprovementProject/>

experiencing food insecurity, providing a wide range of services across Strabane Town and into the nearby rural areas. Services listed on their website are Strabane Food Bank, fuel stamp scheme, lunching club, Meals on Wheels, Western Health and Social Care Trust's sitting service, home maintenance (Handy Man Service), befriending, Good Morning Telephone Alert Service, Rummage charity chop, Strabane unemployed resource centre and volunteering. They also operate a social supermarket (see section below for more details). As can be seen from this, Strabane Community Project undertake direct food provision through the food bank, lunch clubs, Meals on Wheels and the social supermarket, as well as providing a holistic suite of support services for people experiencing poverty and food insecurity.

As the rural areas are less deprived, they are not categorised as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. However the 'Rural Area Partnership in Derry' (RAPID) consists of representatives from community organisations, statutory authorities, the private sector and special interest groups with the primary objective of halting the social and economic decline of the rural communities and facilitating sustainable social, economic and cultural development.³² Funders for the partnership include Derry City & Strabane District Council, Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs, Department for the Economy and the Health & Social Care Board.³³

One participant also told us a more local growth partnership in one of the rural areas, which was in its infancy prior to the pandemic.

“A few months prior to it [the pandemic] kicking off, we had formed a local rural community growth partnership group and just got together and we were starting to look for plans and things that we could bring into the area on a more formal basis, and we used that then as the core for a response.” (Third sector respondent)

Emergency food distributors

Two food banks in the Trussell Trust network are located in the area, the Foyle Foodbank located in Derry City and the Strabane Foodbank, part of Strabane Community Project (described above) in Strabane town.

The Churches Trust Pantry project were also an emergency food parcel distributor. However, they did not provide parcels directly to households, instead providing them to other organisations for further distribution to households. The Churches Trust collect donations by appealing to churches and schools which are stored in a food depot until it is needed. The Trust worked with community hubs to distribute the food. One interviewee described this arrangement,

“Prior to that, the Churches Trust, the four churches, they just discretely... There was no funding involved. They would have discretely took collections through the churches, and that's what we liked about them 10 years ago, and they discretely would have delivered to us food parcels for families. Families came here to get them, or we delivered them, and we have been doing that for years.” (Third sector respondent)

³² <http://www.rapidni.com/>

³³ <http://www.rapidni.com/AboutUs/Funders.aspx>

The Churches Trust provided food parcels to at least two of the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships listed in Table 1, GSAP and WNP.

There were no formal food banks in the rural areas which meant this form of support was not readily available or accessed.

“There was no tradition of accessing food banks or anything like that in the rural areas.” (Third sector respondent)

However, some local churches may have provided emergency food on a very informal basis.

Social supermarkets

Two social supermarkets are located in the area, both part of the Northern Ireland Executive Department for Communities’ pilot scheme of five social supermarkets, launched in 2017. The rationale for the pilot was the hope “that rather than an emergency short term response, a Social Supermarket model can provide people with a pathway out of poverty by recognising that access to affordable food is only one factor and that access to and uptake of a wraparound service to address advice needs, training, skills, healthy eating etc. may provide a more holistic approach to a transition out of poverty.”³⁴ There are core elements to the Social Supermarket model: an access criteria (e.g. households in receipt of welfare benefits); that support is provided for a time limited period only; there is a financial cost to the member to access the social supermarket; and access to the food is dependent on the client availing of the wraparound service.

One social supermarket is based in Strabane Town, by Strabane Community Project and the other in Derry City by Apex housing.

School meal provision

42% of school aged children in Derry and Strabane were entitled to a free school meal.³⁵

News reports provided some insight into activities that provide food for school children during the school holidays. Two holiday schemes targeted at low-income households were piloted in 2019. Firstly, 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 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.³⁶ Secondly the Fuel for Fun programme by the Education Authority provides healthy lunches to children aged 4-11 participating in summer programmes being delivered by the Education Authority managed youth centres. The programme aimed to deliver over 23,000 lunches to 1,400 young people throughout July and August 2019.³⁷ Local community organisations also offered summer schemes and a

³⁴ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/social-supermarkets-pilot-programme-screening.pdf>

³⁵ <https://eanifunding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Derry-and-Strabane-Local-Assessment-of-Need-2020-2023.pdf>

³⁶ <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>

³⁷ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/08/20/news/free-meals-for-thousands-of-children-to-fight-holiday-hunger--1688701/>

range of holiday clubs run during school holidays, many of which provide food alongside enrichment, physical and educational activities.³⁸

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Derry and Strabane is covered by the Western Health and Social Care Trust who provide health and social care services across the area. The Food and Nutrition Team, in partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council, created a booklet which contains both nutrition and food safety information to assist local food banks and organisations who may be making up and/ or preparing food parcels for their local community. The Community Food and Nutrition Team also provide 'Making the most of your Food Parcel' recipe books.³⁹

The Health Improvement, Equality and Involvement Department co-ordinates and supports projects in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, described above.⁴⁰ The Trust also provides a Meals on Wheels service (described below).

Meals on Wheels

The Western Health and Social Care Trust provide a Meals on Wheels service covering an area which includes Derry and Strabane. As of March 2017 the Trust was providing 913 households with the service. The Trust has an arrangement with a range of providers to provide the service, providing fresh meals on a daily basis. Service users are charged a maximum of £1.50 per meal.⁴¹ Strabane Community Project also provided a Meals on Wheels service. One participant reflected that the Meals on Wheels service was not as well developed in the rural areas compared to urban areas.

Meal providers

A number of community lunches and community meals operated before the pandemic. In Derry City these are hosted by a range of organisations.

“For community meals and community lunches, there’s a plethora of community organisations in all the neighbourhoods across the district that would do lunch clubs and stuff like that as well across the city.” (Third sector respondent)

Strabane Community Project hosts a lunch club in Strabane town with transport provided to collect people from both urban and nearby rural areas. Clients are provided with a four-course meal and social activities (such as Bingo). Meals cost £3 a day and £1 for transport. Participants were also aware of some other community lunches provided for older people in the further outlying rural areas.

³⁸ http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/DatabaseDocs/nav_8023213_northern_ireland_holiday_club_survey_2018_working_paper.pdf

³⁹ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/eat-well/>

⁴⁰ <https://westerntrust.hscni.net/healthy-living/neighbourhood-renewal/>

⁴¹ <https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/meals-on-wheels>

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

Participants cited a number of early signs of food access issues in the area.

Closeness to the border with Ireland, which went into lockdown earlier than Northern Ireland, triggered some community organisations to start preparing for the impact of a lockdown earlier than other areas in Northern Ireland may have done.

“I think for us, because we’re so close to the border, we had looked at what the Irish Government was doing and they had gone into lockdown before Northern Ireland. So we really started to pay attention. We [the organisation] went into lockdown about two weeks before the UK announced it. We started to change our services and I think that also meant that we were listening about shortages obviously in the British news and then we’re also getting it as well on the Irish news were a bit ahead of time. I think we maybe left, in Derry anyway, we left a bit quicker than maybe even in Belfast because of our closeness to the border.” (Third sector respondent)

“Even by the end of February, start of March, we organised at a community level, our staff getting into bubbles etc. closing, locking the doors, getting PPE. So we were really, end of February, already working and planning towards it.” (Third sector respondent)

Fear in the early stages was another key indicator of food access issues, both fear around going out and fear about food shortages.

“Then I suppose the unknown, and the media had a lot to answer for too because people were scared, people weren’t coming out of their homes, fear kept people in. Along with shortages in the supermarkets. Here, some of the local supermarkets were sold out and people were panic buying but what that did was then everybody else in the community was scared they were going to run out of food. So it was fear kept people in the house and then the shielding letters and the rumour mill.” (Third sector respondent)

Referring to the calls to a local helpline set up to provide support in the community, one participant discussed two groups of people who were calling at the very start of lockdown, public sector staff looking for alternate ways to support their clients and people who were self-employed.

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

So that was a big thing for us and I think particularly in the first week or two, and self-employed individuals who were starting to get really scared, who live on a weekly basis expecting a salary to come in, have kids and were panicking, going, “How the hell, I have no money coming in at the end of the week and I need food.” So in the

first week or two that was our initial influx of phone calls from public workers and self-employed.” (Third sector respondent)

In the more rural areas it was physical access to food due to shielding and self-isolating that drove the request for support in the early stages of lockdown.

“We put a helpline number out, which I manned, and then we took calls from people looking for help with shopping or whatever. It wasn’t so much that there was food poverty, at least not identified initially, it was more a case of access rather than actual poverty. So, it was a case of getting ‘messages’ done, prescriptions delivered, that type of thing, more than people actually really needing food because it didn’t seem to be that impact. Fair enough, there were the shortages in the shops of some items, but it was mainly toilet roll and pasta that seemed to get hammered.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Derry City and Strabane District Council

The key role which the Council played in the response was the provision of funding for community resilience planning in the seven DEAs and Strabane Town. At a council meeting on the 26 March councillors agreed to provide £280,000 to support community-led responses to assist the most vulnerable during the pandemic. Initially £15,000 was allocated to each of the DEAs with a further £80,000 to be released on a rolling basis subject to need and the availability of other regional funds. The investment was designed to support the work being undertaken by Local Community Planning, neighbourhood renewal groups, rural networks and the community-based volunteer initiatives that emerged in the early weeks of the pandemic.⁴² The funding could be used for a range of responses of which food provision may have been one component.

The Local Growth Partnership in each of the areas appointed a lead organisation to receive the funding. This funding could be used for a range of responses. Providing funding at this more local level allowed the people and organisations with the local knowledge and expertise to ascertain what support was needed in their local communities.

“Our funding has been delivered through local partnerships. They identify the priorities in their area. The resilience plans were developed by each partnership with a resource of £27k each from Council. This funding was utilised by partnerships to deliver on needs including food, connectivity and communicating the COVID-19 message locally.” (Council staff respondent)

The Council also acted as a conduit between the organisations doing the last mile delivery of the food boxes provided through the national scheme (see later section) and the suppliers, ordering centrally the number of boxes required and distributing these to the DEAs as well

⁴² <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

as divvying up the referrals received through the national helpline to the organisations doing the last mile delivery.

In addition, through a joint package with the Department for Communities, funding was provided to enable the existing advice services to increase their capacity, including the provision of support for households in evenings and weekends.⁴³ Subsequent to these initial funding packages the Council have provided funding for a range of other initiatives including a community recovery programme, an access to food programme (described later), and a digital connectivity programme.⁴⁴

Local Community Growth Partnerships

A Community Resilience Plan for each of the DEAs was developed and signed off by members of each of the 8 Local Community Growth Partnerships and other local organisations. The plans were designed to protect those most in need, focusing on supporting isolated and vulnerable people; providing access to food, medicine and cleansing materials; developing activities to deal with mental health and wellbeing; and connecting isolated people, family members and friends with the wider community.⁴⁵ Although a number of organisations were involved in delivering the Community Resilience Plan, the Local Community Growth Partnerships nominated a lead organisation to draw down the funding provided by the Council and to coordinate the response in the area to make best use of resources. Organisations and groups who were providing support in their own local area during the pandemic were advised to contact the relevant lead organisation for support and overall co-ordination.⁴⁶ This wide range of organisations involved in delivering the response included sporting organisations, youth groups, religious groups, residents' associations, community associations, family centres, community playgroups and others. The way in which the Community Resilience Plan was delivered differed across the four Derry City DEAs, the three rural DEAs and Strabane Town. These are described below.

Community Resilience Plan – Four Derry City DEAs (Ballyarnett, Foyle, The Moor and Waterside)

In each DEA a Community Response Team was assembled. The Local Community Growth Partnership appointed one member of the team to lead on the food response. We learned that at least three of the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (listed in table 1) were the designated food lead for their areas, GSAP, WNP and Triax Neighbourhood Management Team. As food leads these organisations provided food directly and also co-ordinated the other local community organisations providing food support. These organisations also took the lead on hosting a local helpline for residents to call for any reason, including for support with food.

⁴³ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-announces-major-funding-for-community-COVI>

⁴⁴ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Council-approves-Community-Recovery-Plans-in-respo>, <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Council/News/Schools-delighted-to-receive-IT-equipment-to-assis>

⁴⁵ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/communitysupport>

⁴⁶ <https://www.derrystrabane.com/Community/COVID-19-Community-Support/Support-for-Community-Organisations/Area-Lead-Organisations>

“Yes, the strategy manager delegated that all up and we all would have taken the lead in different elements. I suppose the element that we took the lead on was delivering of the food parcels and supporting the helpline.” (Third sector respondent)

Across these four DEAs the most common type of food support available was the provision of food parcels and the delivery of hot meals. Two of the organisations leading the food response also provided vouchers for food or fuel.

If, following triage, it was established that a caller to the local helpline required a food parcel this would be prepared, matching the caller’s requirements and delivered the same day, wherever possible.

“So that was taking the phone call, assessing them, ringing them back, preparing the bespoke food parcel - we did bespoke food parcels that met the needs of the whole family, supplementing that with your fresh meat, your dairy products, fruit and veg etc.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition, households requiring support were identified by community and voluntary groups and statutory services such as social workers, chemists, GPs and Housing Associations and, if appropriate, households were signposted to the organisation leading the food response. The helpline, and the types of support available were widely advertised through community billboards, leaflet drops, poster campaigns, newsletters and dedicated community response social media sites.

Households requiring support with food were also triaged to ascertain the full suite of support they required.

“We ran a triage system ourselves here, so everybody that rang through, we had key questions we had to ask, the make-up of the family and the reason behind it and if they needed [support with] other issues, prescriptions, drugs, self-employed, death. And we ran a wraparound service.” (Third sector respondent)

Participants talked of the range of resources including volunteers, redeployed staff, food donations, and financial donations that were utilised, allowing the organisations to ‘get on with it’.

“We had to put a call for volunteers. We’ve been lucky enough here that we had a volunteer investment project. So we initially started with that organisation and put a call out for volunteers. I suppose at the peak we probably had 80 or 90 volunteers because we were delivering up to 800 parcels a week and we also did the whole billboard information leaflets the same as Ballyarnett distributing through theirs. So we did that as well.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Food supplies were sourced through FareShare, Churches Trust, donated by local businesses and purchased using money from fundraising activities. Local retail businesses also supported the response by ordering and storing food.

“I have to say local businesses were amazing. Being able to order in stock for us, store the stock. So that was a real asset that we had down here and then, likewise, small grants, housing executive and all were great at the start. We were able to order through our local Super Value, for instance. They done our orders for us. They stored our deliveries. Then they delivered the food from their warehouse as and when we needed it on a daily basis. This was a daily operation, every morning from 8:30 to maybe 6:30 throughout that whole period from mid-March right through to end of July.” (Third sector respondent)

Some of the food supplies were facilitated through partnerships with FareShare and Apex Housing who began collecting food from FareShare and delivering it to the organisations providing the food response.

“I think it’s critical to mention, particularly for ourselves here in the city, Apex Housing Association, they obviously in the past across all the different premises, across the district would have been taking FareShare deliveries. Obviously a lot of the premises closed and weren’t taking them. So they redeployed the driver and van to support the community sector. So they done twice weekly deliveries from Belfast of FareShare which is a lot of fresh produce. That supported the community organisations on the ground.” (Third sector respondent)

Although the response was provided at a DEA level the lead organisations for each of the DEAs met on a regular basis to discuss responses, share experiences, and ensure consistency across the city.

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

Community Resilience Plan – Strabane Town

The Local Community Growth Partnership appointed Strabane Community Project as the lead organisation delivering the community resilience plan in Strabane Town. They were also the lead of the food response.

Similar to the food lead organisation in the Derry City DEAs, Strabane Community Project established a local helpline and co-ordinated other local groups to aid the response, made the ‘last mile’ deliveries of the national food boxes, averaging 350 boxes every week (see below for further discussion of this). They also expanded the existing Meals on Wheels service. The service was primarily aimed at elderly people and people who were shielding. Anyone who usually attended one of the projects community lunches was contacted and transferred to the Meals on Wheels service if appropriate. Geographical coverage was also extended to cover 4 miles into the rural areas. Three-course meals were provided for a charge of £3. On average, they distributed 1,000 meals a week.

Community Resilience Plan – three rural DEAs (Derg, Faughan and Sperrin)

The response in the three rural DEAs differed in set up from the urban areas. RAPID (described above) received the community resilience funding from the Council for all three DEAs and local organisations applied to RAPID to receive a share of this funding. The

process of applying and distributing the funding was extremely quick: applications opened on Thursday 26 March 2020 and closed on Monday 30th March 2020. Groups received payments on 16 April 2020. Twenty-five organisations received funding together forming local ‘community hubs’ in each of the three DEAs. Each of the three DEAs received £27,000 in total, split across the 25 organisations which received grants of between £1,000 and £5,000. Table 2 lists the funded organisations.

Table 2: Organisations receiving community resilience funding in Derg, Faughan and Sperrin

Faughan DEA	Sperrin DEA	Derg DEA
Claudy Rural Development Ltd Eglinton Community Ltd Lettershandoney & District Development Group Upper Cumber Presbyterian Church The Villages Together, Bready Newbuildings Community Association Strathfoyle Community Association Strathfoyle Womens Activity Group Eglinton Building Bridges Gortilea Social Farm CIC	Dennett Interchange DonemanaOwen Roe GAC Leckpatrick Glenelly Development Trust Brighter Ballymagorry Development Group Clann na Gael GAC/Aughabrack DDA Learmount Community Development	Clady Cross Community Development Association Churchtown Community Association Derg Valley Care Aghyaran St Davogs GAC Victoria Bridge Cross Community Forum Sion Mills Community Forum Castledearg St Eugene’s GAC Dergview Football Club Newtownstewart Community Forum

The groups identified individuals and families who needed support by a variety of means: those in the community who received a letter advising them to self-isolate; clients in good morning programmes (a service which provides reassurance to people within the community through free confidential daily telephone calls and support) and members of Social Prescribing projects; referrals from social workers and other members of the health care trust multi-disciplinary team; referrals from carers who work in the area; an existing database of Meals on Wheels referrals; existing portfolio of individuals that were part of the ‘Community Companion programmes’; requests from family members that no longer live in the area and have a relative that is vulnerable and in need of support; referral system by members of the community and existing database of people that use services at the centres such as luncheon club, woman’s group, family support programmes; referrals from social media and leaflet campaigns.

One participant suggested the local groups identified need within their own smaller group of users rather than the wider community.

“There were a lot of community groups providing food boxes but not on a referral basis. They decided themselves who were going to get them, so it was usually people that were associated with their football club or their... We have here the Orange Lodge, the lodges, and those types of things, for the various associations that they would have had. They would have really targeted their own elderly more than anybody else.” (Third sector respondent)

The breakdown of expenditure by each DEA showed different proportions of the £27,000 funding being spent on food related support.

	Faughan DEA	Sperrin DEA	Derg DEA
Emergency aid/care packs & activity packs	27% (£7,150)	36% (£9,600)	57% (£15,350)
Hot meal delivery	33% (£8,800)	19% (£5,130)	18% (£4,850)
Fuel vouchers	4% (£1,000)	4% (£1,000)	1% (£350)

Funding was also used to cover the cost of volunteer travel expenses, purchase of PPE, befriending services, advertising costs and other overheads.

As with the urban DEAs the main forms of support with food were food parcels and hot meal delivery although support with shopping, for people who were unable to go to the shops was also an important feature of the response in the rural areas. For smaller local shops in the rural areas this worked with people phoning the shop, placing an order and paying over the phone. Someone from the response team would then collect the shopping and deliver it to people's houses.

For many of the organisations involvement in food provision was new. When asked how many of the organisations would have been working with food prior to the pandemic one respondent said:

"I'd say very few of them. There was maybe two or three that had a Meals on Wheels service for older people, but it wouldn't have been that extensive. A couple of larger community centres I suppose to get funds from Western Health and Social Care Trust to provide that. So those groups were doing it, but I think there are only three, I think, off the top of my head, the bigger community centres. Wee voluntary groups and sports club wouldn't have been doing that. For instance, in one of the towns, the local GAA [Gaelic Football] club and the local football club have teamed up with a restaurant in the town. Then the restaurant was doing the hot meals and they were delivering them to volunteers. They wouldn't have had that provision, that wouldn't be something that they would do on a regular basis." (Third sector respondent)

Last Mile Delivery of Northern Ireland Executive grocery boxes

In addition to the responses delivered to fulfil the community resilience plans the relevant actors involved in delivering the food response in each of the DEAs (the food lead in the 4 Derry City DEAs, Strabane Community Project in Strabane Town and the 'community hubs' in the 3 rural DEAs) lead on the 'last mile' delivery of the weekly grocery food boxes, provided by 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.⁴⁷ The operation of the scheme differed across the local authority areas throughout Northern Ireland. The 'last mile' delivery

⁴⁷ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/food-parcel-service-be-extended-those-medically-shielding>

approach meant the local actors took the role of delivering the boxes to the individual households from a central hub.

Food was provided from suppliers, through a contract with the Department for Communities. The Council ordered the number of boxes required and these were delivered to a central storage point in each of the local areas for further distribution by the Community Resilience Teams.

“The Council ordered whatever boxes we needed centrally. The boxes were delivered to central points, like leisure centres. The boxes were delivered to central locations, and then those local partnerships undertook to do the delivery to the door. So, they did the last mile.” (Council staff respondent)

People accessed this support by calling the national Advice NI helpline who then sent the referral on to the Council who passed it onto the relevant organisation in the local area.

“So in terms of rural areas, the Council would have come to us and said, ‘Can we channel these food boxes to these 25 local community support hubs?’ So anyone that came through the referral phone line for food that was rural was sent to us and we allocated them to the most appropriate local community hub. That’s how we got those referrals through from the food scheme anyway to start.” (Third sector respondent)

Some of the actors doing the last mile delivery chose to supplement the boxes with additional produce from their own food supplies before delivering them to the households.

As the national food parcel scheme was ending at the end of June for people accessing them due to financial barriers and the end of July for people who were shielding, the local organisations contacted recipients and further support was discussed. For the people who were shielding and predominantly facing physical barriers to food access, options such as supermarket deliveries were now more readily available and people facing financial barriers would be subsumed back into the other support services.

“We were looking at the stats at the time and I was liaising with the department, and it was about 96% were elderly, self-isolating in their home. But we advised them all the time. By the end of July they were well aware this was the end. They were fine. They were grand and happy. We still helped and supported maybe 30 or 40 through our own, and then it just went back to normal to be honest within a few weeks. We were worried at the time, but it did. We just let it naturally happen. Essentially then, so from August/September time we might have got the odd one. We listened to them and we supported them or whatever. They were subsumed back in under our family support, and if there was any individual that didn’t meet the criteria for family support, you know I am talking one-offs, one or two a week or something, we would liaise and support them like anybody would do, based on their circumstances. That was the situation.” (Third sector respondent)

Social supermarkets

The Apex social supermarket in Derry City had to adapt their model so they could continue to provide both food and wraparound support to their members.

“We had to decide how we could be a social supermarket without being social. So we had to change our systems around.” (Third sector respondent)

Although the supermarket itself was closed food was still provided to members either by collection or delivery. This meant there was still some face-to-face contact with members.

“So every single member was contacted by phone. So we would check out how they were. We would see what their needs were, what their shopping needs were and then we would see them either face to face or on delivery as well. So we saw everyone twice a week because the social aspect of our framework was so important and that is how we support people and move them on.” (Third sector respondent)

The social supermarket also increased their membership from the start of lockdown as they were experiencing more demand for their service which they attributed to redundancies and furlough. Their membership increased from 50 households at the start of lockdown to 73. Although they did so without additional funding, meaning they had to “*eke out the food*” that they had. Doing so meant they were still able to supply seven day’s worth of food each week to member families. As well as the new members the supermarket had a waiting list. Apex would call these households once a week to “see how things are and if we could direct you to other services” (Third sector respondent) and households would be referred to the Foyle Foodbank if appropriate.

The social supermarket hosted by Strabane Community Project remained open through the national lockdown for its existing members. Online workshops were also introduced to provide some of the wraparound support usually provided by the social supermarket.

Emergency food distributors

The 2019-2020 financial statements of the Foyle Foodbank provide some insight into the impact of the pandemic on the food bank.⁴⁸ The statements report that food stocks were maintained as a result of the ‘continued generosity of the people of the North West’ as well as the ability to access some bulk supplies of food from a local Tesco store, which was made possible through the Trussell Trust network. The food bank also experienced an increase in financial donations through individual donations or fundraising activities. It is also reported that the food bank “wasn’t overwhelmed in the early stages of the pandemic by a massive increase in demand for food” and this was attributed to the “many local food bank initiatives have sprung up”.

The Foyle Foodbank also assisted the organisations leading on the food provision in the four Derry City DEAs by using their van to collect food that was available through FareShare and bringing it to the relevant storage point in each of the DEAs.

“They did support us through FareShare. We were able to utilise their van and they went off on behalf of the neighbourhoods. They picked up the food and brought it to us, which was amazing, every Tuesday and Thursday. That was a great resource to have.” (Third sector respondent)

⁴⁸ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ujokymKtrujfd5mGgQBZD04sBOaE3ULT/view>

One participant commented that they felt the Foyle Foodbank had “disappeared” at the start of the lockdown and then when some of the other responses were being scaled back they “all of a sudden they started advertising again in the city.” (Third sector respondent)

The food bank in Strabane Town, Strabane Foodbank, continued to run, with households or referrers phoning the food bank to organise a food parcel.

The Churches Trust, which provides food parcels for the community organisations to distribute continued to do so, providing food parcels to GSAP and WNP (Table 1) and Action for Children. They experienced a big increase in the need for food parcels. Referring to this increase one participant said:

“Well, it did for March and April and over the first lockdown. It increased, probably doubled in demand but since that, we supplied about 2,000 a year, so we’re way up to 8,000 at the minute. It just seems to be increasing and increasing and increasing.” (Third sector respondent)

The majority of the usual volunteers were shielding so, in the early weeks of lockdown, members of staff got more involved in food parcel preparation than they ordinarily would. Over time they were able to recruit more volunteers which helped them manage the increased need for their services.

“So at the minute I have over 20 volunteers and whereas before, say, March time, we were just- it was once a week, we were making up parcels. But now we’re supplying food parcels to approximately 150 families. So we would have volunteers in everyday and maybe Saturday and Sunday as well.” (Third sector respondent)

School meal provision

Free School Meal replacements in Northern Ireland were provided in the form of direct cash payments into families’ bank accounts which were funded and facilitated at a national level. This provision continued throughout the school holidays.

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Derry and Strabane

Reflections on the national food box delivery scheme

Having played a key role in the operation of the national food box delivery scheme, participants commented on both the process and the contents of the box.

In principal, and remaining mindful that this was an emergency response, participants considered the set-up of the scheme a good approach.

“The food box scheme was developed as an emergency response, and councils in partnership with the communities worked together in this emergency situation. This worked very well, in terms of getting the referrals delivered. These referrals came through the national helpline, through our health trust or through the councils. The Council worked closely with the local community organisations in order to deliver on the ground.” (Council staff respondent)

Referring specifically to the rural areas another participant said,

“The food supplier just came and delivered packs of food to a central location and then we got the Easylink rural community transport, they would have come and lifted the boxes and then delivered them to the different community centres. And then the community workers in each centre would have delivered them individually into houses. It actually worked well. We’re able to give Easylink the delivery, say, Monday morning, they deliver the boxes - we told what community centres to leave them at. So they did that. Then they can divide them up and their volunteers would deliver them in cars and that all worked fine.” (Third sector respondent)

Participants considered the scheme to have additional benefits rather than simply the provision of a box of food.

“What we found, particularly in rural areas, was getting the box of food delivered was important. But maybe a lot of the other things that happened out of getting that delivered were more important. So, people who were isolated were seeing somebody. People who were isolated were getting other services. People were collecting prescriptions, then, for people, through that contact, they were maybe put on to other services because of that contact. So, it was all the auxiliary services that happened. Same in the urban area” (Council staff respondent)

However, there were challenges in providing the service. We learned that there were sometimes not enough food boxes provided through the national scheme to meet the number of referrals.

“We were allocated a total of 60 boxes per week. The list of clients was at about 130.” (Third sector respondent)

Organisations took different approaches to managing this shortfall. Two delivered the boxes provided through the national scheme every fortnight, rather than weekly, with one providing their own box in the gap weeks. The produce for the interim week boxes was sourced both through FareShare and, when necessary, purchased from local retailers using funds from COVID-19 related donations and fundraising.

“FareShare basically provided the fresh produce. Although, we did spend a fortune at the local butchers on sausages at the very start. Anything within the box we wanted to make sure could be made into a meal” (Third sector respondent)

Another organisation took the approach of trying to assess who was in more need, but this was problematic.

“So what we were doing was giving maybe a group 50 food boxes and they maybe had a 100 referrals. We said, ‘Do what you can here, see who you think is in most need.’ Again, that was unfair because you’re putting a local volunteer to make that call deciding who they should help.” (Third sector respondent)

Another research participant noted some early teething problems with the referrals that they received via the national Advice NI helpline for households requiring a box through the national scheme. In some cases the details required to deliver the food box were not included in the referral.

“Then, obviously, there were loads of teething problems with Advice NI where you were given... The referrals were from Advice NI down to council, and then council divvied it out according to postcode. I do recall the first few weeks the referrals were awful. We had no contacts...Where we were getting referrals from Advice NI, no phone numbers, no contact numbers, half of the people, when we looked at addresses, we had already dealt with them by the time the referral from Advice NI came down to us.” (Third sector respondent)

Some respondents felt the messaging about the food box scheme, in the initial stages of lockdown, suggested everyone who was advised to shield would receive a box, leading to requests for boxes from households who may have been able to access food through other means, such as online delivery. The impact of this messaging was exacerbated by a subsequent perceived lack of triage to determine levels of need.

“I’d say that the demand was higher than there was food boxes because again, the criteria, I suppose, in that scheme was originally targeted at those shielding, but then it got extended to anyone they felt needed food. So there wasn’t much triaging of people coming in through the phone line. Basically I could have lifted the phone, phoned up and said look, “I’m struggling here, I need food,” So then I was referred to the local group.” (Third sector respondent)

“The food box came out and there was no proper triage as such as to who should really be entitled or who should be getting it. People weren’t being asked if they needed help with food. It was mainly targeting people who were told to shield. To be honest, their income hadn’t varied at all, and there was a wee bit of disquiet amongst ourselves that there were people that we obviously knew with local knowledge that did not need food support but were being given food support and were looking for food support without needing it. There was a lot of that. There was a lot of waste that went on.” (Third sector respondent)

As a result some of the organisations operated their own process in which households would not automatically receive an ongoing weekly delivery, rather they were encouraged to stay in contact with the organisation and keep them up to date with their situation.

“We told anybody that needed food parcels that rang, we didn’t guarantee them any food boxes, anybody that [was] isolating. We can provide them as and when. People didn’t want food boxes every week. They didn’t need them, even if they were self-isolating. It was only those that needed food, so they were able to ring if they still required it due to a change of circumstances. They rang us then. They got what they needed.” (Third sector respondent)

Later they said,

“We had our triage. We can stand by every single food parcel that went out, why and how and when they rang.” (Third sector respondent)

Others spoke of encouraging voluntary withdrawals from the scheme with one participant suggesting that being a local third sector organisations may have made these conversations about the level of need for the boxes easier to have.

“I suppose the community sector gets away with a wee bit more, they can say to people, do you really need this box? I suppose if someone in government said that

they would be dragged through the coals. So we were able to come in at a local level and talk to people, and talk to the community leaders to check they were checking that people getting the boxes were in need. And that worked, were able to reduce it [no. of boxes] after talking to people.” (Third sector respondent)

Respondents also voiced concerns about the contents of the box, including short-dated items, and the lack of tailoring to specific households. This was the key reason that organisations supplemented the boxes with additional produce.

“You know yourself, elderly people as well, do they want the same food coming to them? With the food boxes, they had no meat in them. You were given a jar of Dolmio. Where is the meat? It was just... if there were three people in the house, giving them three food boxes a week with the same food in them. Even the food boxes, like the stuff we tallied up, we were given the food boxes on a Tuesday, and come Wednesday the bread was blue moulded. We just dealt with it. It was COVID. Nothing is perfect, and we just got on with it, you know, on with what we had to do.” (Third sector respondent)

“There was no thought put into whether it was a household or whether it was an elderly person. The same standard box was going to everybody. So you could have an 80-year-old getting a massive box full of pasta and pasta sauces and shower gels every week that were never going to be used, and then a family of four or five were getting exactly the same and they’d have gone through the box in a couple of days. So there was no thought put into it, and as much as we gave feedback to that effect, it didn’t make any difference. We were just told, ‘Just get on with it.’” (Third sector respondent)

“They [boxes] were very restricted and I suppose here in neighbourhoods and the areas across the city and across the North we spent the last 15, 20 years trying to educate people about healthy eating. Then these hampers were coming out and they were all full of processed foods. So what we were trying to do was provide fresh vegetables and meat and things like that and for the hampers to allow people to continue that journey.” (Third sector respondent)

Speed of response

Participants consistently noted the speed at which the community sector were organised with their response. This was particularly the case as many organisations were anticipating the lockdown, and preparing accordingly, due to their closeness with the border of Ireland, who locked down at an earlier stage.

“So, basically, those communities really came together very quick, and were organised very quick.” (Council staff respondent)

“Essentially, all of us in our neighbourhood level were operating five or six weeks prior to even any government intervention, to be honest.” (Third sector respondent)

The existence of the growth partnerships and the existing networks between these partnerships and the local community in each of the DEAs were considered a key factor behind this quick response.

“At a neighbourhood level we can galvanize hundreds of people at a very short notice through goodwill and relationship building to deliver in a community.” (Third sector respondent)

One participant reflected how they had initiated their response not knowing what resources were available to them, but knowing that households in their community needed support.

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

Two of the quotes provided earlier in the report also highlight the speed of the response at the community level. Respondents noted that sometimes, by the time they had received a referral through the national advice helpline, the household had already received support from the community organisation. Secondly, participants noted that calls to the local helpline in the early stages of lockdown were coming from statutory organisations looking for support for their clients, highlighting the community level support was in place prior to the support from statutory bodies such as social work and health professionals.

One respondent reflected that a benefit of this early response from the community sector was it gave a shape to the response which made the best use of the growth partnerships and the community sector.

“Like, I think it was a good thing that the neighbourhoods got up and running and had those few weeks to do what they do best, and show what they are good at. Everything else that happened was a bonus. The Council then were able to bring down different small grants to us directly a month or two in. Everything in hindsight looked... It wasn't planned, let's just say, but it worked out really well, because the neighbourhoods just got on with it. Then everything that everybody wanted to bring they grabbed hold of it.” (Third sector respondent)

Known locally and local knowledge

Participants highlighted the fundamental role that the voluntary and community sector played in providing the response

“I think all the statutory agencies now appreciate that and they say without the voluntary organisations on the ground, grassroots, we could not have done this.” (Third sector respondent)

They also reflected on the benefits of this local level of support in comparison to central or national providing support systems.

“To be honest, it's that whole local level, local accents, local people knowing each other and supporting each other and there's more empathy and more quality time spent with individuals where they can open up and where you can provide a wraparound service.” (Third sector respondent)

Having responses at a local level, firstly, made it easier for people to seek this support as they were familiar with the organisation and, secondly, organisations were able to identify which households may require support based on their existing relationships with them.

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

The existing embeddedness in the local community also meant that the organisations could tap into the necessary resources through their existing relationships, rather than having to get support via the statutory organisations.

“What we did have across the city was the goodwill of staff, they were renewal staff, volunteers, local businesses, and if we didn’t have that at a neighbourhood level, if we had to sit and wait, no disrespect to the government or council, oh my God, it would have been firefighting morning, noon and night.” (Third sector respondent)

The response in urban and rural areas

A key theme to emerge was the different experiences in providing a response across the whole area of Derry and Strabane, particularly with the mix of urban and rural areas. Part of these differences arises from the infrastructure that was in place prior to the pandemic, with more resources typically available in the urban areas.

“I suppose because we have quite a large urban area, we have five neighbourhood renewal partnerships. So, those neighbourhood renewal partnerships are resourced through the Department for Communities. We do have quite an expansive rural area as well, but there would not be the same resource there in terms of human resources employed within the community sector.” (Council staff respondent)

“Something that’s been highlighted for us is that the Meals on Wheels services in rural areas are not as well developed as urban areas. The Meals on Wheels are delivered by the health trust, it’s the Western Health and Social Care Trust in that area. Again, the majority of referrals for Meals on Wheels from social workers and GPs are in urban areas for some reason. Part of the reason is there is, as I was saying before, we’re in a council area it’s two thirds rural but only a third of the population live in that area. So the transport cost in delivering a meal to some of the rural areas are much, much higher than it is in an urban area. So that’s part of the consideration but I’m saying that it shouldn’t be then that someone in rural area doesn’t receive a hot meal because of that issue.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as not having the same infrastructure in place prior to the pandemic, the organisations that were in the rural areas had a different staffing profile, largely relying on volunteers.

“The Department for Communities would fund their neighbourhood renewal areas in the urban areas. There’s quite a lot of paid staff, paid workers whereas the vast majority of the [rural] groups we’re working with are all voluntary, with no paid staff. So we found they’re putting a lot of pressure on volunteers which are not paid to deliver boxes.” (Third sector respondent)

One participant spoke of a sense of resentment that the rural communities, without the same experience, staffing and infrastructure were expected to provide support in the same way as was provided in the urban areas.

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

The same participant said:

“As I say, there's always been this wee bit of tension between the rural and the urban and that we seem to be forgotten about. No matter what's happening, everything is focused on Derry.” (Third sector respondent)

Physical or financial access barriers

Participants varied on the extent to which they felt the need for their services was driven by physical or financial access barriers. One participant suggested that from the outset and throughout the first national lockdown the need for their services was primarily driven by physical access barriers to food. Talking about the drivers of demand one participant said:

“I was shocked. It was more [people] couldn't get out, they had to self-isolate, rather than anything else. Very early on you would have thought, especially with the phone calls coming through, it was because people were panicking, money, particularly the self-employed and stuff, but the majority of it all, I think in the month of June, like you are talking it was 96% was due to having to self-isolate.... , maybe it was 70/30 type of thing at the height of it, but predominately it was because they had to self-isolate, and where they were elderly and the fear of leaving the home or whatever, rather than financial.” (Third sector respondent)

Another participant felt that over time, but perhaps quicker than the participant above, the need was increasingly driven by financial access barriers. Referring to people who were receiving the national grocery box deliveries,

“I think at the beginning, it was mostly people who were shielding, because they were given priority at the beginning. But it then became more people who were financially vulnerable.” (Council staff respondent)

One participant suggested that the local community organisations operating in the rural areas tended to focus on the populations experiencing physical access, rather than financial, barriers to food.

They would have really targeted their own elderly more than anybody else. They didn't target young families that were probably suffering more than the elderly.” (Third sector respondent)

Fear for the future

Participants spoke of their significant concerns looking ahead. Some of these concerns regarding the availability of funding after the pandemic and how much of this would be allocated to the community sector.

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

“I think that a whole lot of residents, a whole lot of people have seen the work that community groups do and community organisations do. I just hope yet again that when - pardon the phrase - the shit hits the fan, that the government don’t forget that we do the work and we were on the ground and hit the ground running. That we’re not the first to cut budgets on.” (Third sector respondent)

This sentiment was echoed by another participant who felt that the strong relations that had developed between the community sector and statutory organisations, when they were playing a key role in the response, may subside in the longer term.

“I think there was a panic by the government of, “Oh my God. What are we going to do here? We have to get money out somehow, somewhere, whoever it is that have still got their doors open on the ground. They deliver to people, because we can’t.” I think that we did wake up and we thought, they are finally going to acknowledge how, by us all working collaboratively and collectively together. But I think the novelty has worn off again now, to be honest.” (Third sector respondent)

The social supermarket, which had received some additional funding through the Access to Food pilot (see below) discussed how this temporarily enabled them to increase their membership base, but this would have to be reduced again once the funding came to an end in March 2021. Although membership of the social supermarket model usually lasts about six months on the basis that the wraparound support has allowed clients situations to improve, this has often been extended during the pandemic as people needed the support for a longer period of time.

“People can’t come off after six months, because these are people who are willing to progress and are working hard and changing their situations and things like that. But because of being furloughed or losing their jobs or on a zero-hour contract and things like that. They don’t have access to that.

A lot of our members have been on since March, so they are almost coming up under a year and over a year. We have looked at everybody from January and said- sorry, from the end of January, we’ve said, “You can stay on for another three months because we really don’t know what we’re doing either.” Then those 103 families that we have, we’ve had discussions with people who are ready to move or who have had help with Universal Credit or PIP [Personal Independence Payment] or whatever it is. It’s really difficult looking at those people and even ringing them and saying to them. But we do hope to end up with about 70 families again, after March, because there is

no other funding. So we just have to go back to our original model then after that.”
(Third sector respondent)

These concerns regarding funding were considerably exacerbated by participants expectations of people’s financial situations deteriorating during the pandemic, with a long time required for this to recover.

“The stories we were getting was about the people who now with the lockdown again, with the lockdown gone on so far had spent all their savings, couldn’t see light at the end of the tunnel. I know this is replicated across the whole city and district. It’s just scary times” (Third sector respondent)

“We can see a whole new level of poverty coming, we’re going to have lack of job opportunities, we need to try and get to people before they fall into an even deeper level of poverty.” (Third sector respondent)

They continued,

“It’s just we’re now in the third week in February [2021] and the government hasn’t come to talk to us about it and it’s scary, there are lots of people on the ground, how are we going to support these people and continue on or help fix this problem? Just because we’re coming out of lockdown or because things are easing off. It’s going to take years for people to get back to normal.

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

Longer term outcomes

At the time of the data collection a pilot of an Access to Food project was happening across the Derry and Strabane District. The pilot was funded by the Department for Communities, who provided £83,000 for a period up to March 2021. The pilot was delivered through partnerships between the Council, the Local Community Growth Partnerships, the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships and other third sector organisations. Part of the rationale of the pilot was greater awareness of food poverty in the area, as it had been brought to the fore during the pandemic, and also concern about the longer-term consequences of the pandemic increasing household food insecurity. The pilot was, therefore, focused on addressing ongoing financial barriers to food access and changes in circumstances as a result of COVID-19 that have reduced household income, rather than addressing physical access barriers.

The pilot was initiated partly through the research undertaken by one of the participants (noted above) and a desire at both a community and council level for a more strategic, long term and sustainable approach to addressing food poverty in the area. Having been involved in responding to food insecurity there was an increased appetite for a more sustainable, joined up and consistent response to food poverty as part of the recovery from the pandemic.

“At least if we were collaborating together and moving forward we needed to be all up to speed exactly, because everybody was coming from different angles, different experiences. Let’s all get to grasp exactly what we have all been involved in these past few months, and what happened pre, what happened during, and at least it is a baseline for us to develop moving forward as we move out of and into the recovery period of COVID.” (Third sector respondent)

All the relevant groups met to agree the process for the Access to Food Programme. The funding included costs for four facilitator roles who would coordinate referrals and the wrap around service and liaise with clients. The local phonelines that operated during the national lockdown became a route for people to self-refer to the programme and referrals from other organisations are also accepted. Consistent triage and eligibility criteria were agreed. Referrals are reviewed and people are linked in with the relevant support agencies.

“Through contact with the Helplines, individuals will be triaged to financial support or advice services, or they can have short-term support through the food bank, or long-term support through the social supermarket.” (Council staff respondent)

Food support is provided by the designated organisation for the area with the Foyle Foodbank proving food for three of the urban DEAs, the Churches Trust providing food for the remaining urban DEA and Strabane Community project providing for Strabane and two of the rural DEAs. Participants hoped this joined up approach would capitalise on the existing strengths and assets in the area.

“We are working as one, and with the same protocol, eligibility criteria, our own local neighbourhood helplines and making the direct referrals and collating the information for the departments. We are together across the district just utilising and reflecting on what happened and what results did we have, and trying to capitalise on everybody’s strengths really.” (Third sector respondent)

As well as this consistent and joined up process other elements of the pilots include additional funding by the Council for advice services.

“And we also have – which I think is an important element of it – is that we have also got a bit more finance to expand our advice services. And so, our advice services are now going to be working evenings and weekends.” (Council staff respondent)

In the rural areas the pilot includes feasibility work on Meals on Wheels.

“Through the access to food programme we have allocated a small pot of the funding towards scoping study and to Meals on Wheels provision in the more rural area to see is that feasible? Who should be doing that? Comparing it with other areas. So it’s pre-empting, but probably the results will show that there is much less provision from the health trust in the more rural areas. Whether that’s because of the cost per head of delivering a meal is much, much higher and there is a not budget there for it. So that is probably going to be the conclusion to that and then it’s probably going to be then an issue of whether the resources and the finances are there in the future from the health trust. It would be more from that strategic longer term decision, it should not really be the local communities doing this, it should be a statutory authority.” (Third sector respondent)

We also learned of a local community association in one of the rural DEAs participating in the programme by providing a helpline that people can contact and, if appropriate they will be provided with £25 shopping vouchers and a referral to Strabane Community Project for further support.

“The initial response now is if somebody is in need we advertise my mobile number now to advertise regularly that this is available and anybody that’s furloughed or hours cut or out of work, or even just getting tight, basically. Contact me or there are four... We’re called animators. There are four other animators working in the area, contact myself or one of them. We take their details and do a money assessment without asking too many questions...We issue a £25 food voucher and with their permission refer them through to Strabane Community Project.” (Third sector respondent)

Once referred to Strabane Community Project people will receive food and assessment for additional support requirements.

“People will apply for that food support and then maybe two or three times, maybe four, depending on their circumstances, they will then receive free food parcels. Through that free food period we will do a full assessment, very informal assessment as we always do and to find out exactly how we can further support them.” (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 2020

Resources

Participants reflected on the availability of funding for organisations providing the response, allowing existing food aid organisations to scale up their services and new organisations to start providing food aid, as part of the response delivered through the Community Resilience Plans. As well as this availability of funding, participants appreciated the quick turnaround of applications by funders. The generosity of the public, through donations, through online donation platforms and through fundraising events was acknowledged and appreciated.

Organisations also appreciated the availability of food supplies. At the start of lockdown organisations experienced an influx of food donations from businesses which had closed. Organisations also started, or increased, their food supplied through FareShare which had a

benefit of an increased variety of foods available for distribution. They also received support from local businesses in the form of loans of vehicles and drivers.

Although, in general, many people offered to volunteer and help with responses one organisation spoke of difficulties in recruiting the number of volunteers they needed, although this situation has resolved over time.

“Yes, and just people to do it, the volunteers. We found it difficult, say, over the summer and that, because people were scared to go out and we never had any problems getting volunteers before but thankfully that has picked up again and people now want to help. I think they’re just fed up being stuck in the house and if they can help at all. So we have no problem getting volunteers at the minute, so it’s great.” (Third sector respondent)

Collaboration across government and the community and voluntary sector

When asked about aspects of the responses that should be continued into the future participants highlighted what they felt was increased support from government around tackling food poverty, noting that food poverty needs to be high on the government agenda at all times. They hoped this would develop into a collaborative approach to tackling food poverty, that was locally led in partnership, and supported by, the Council and the Department for Communities.

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

As well as this increased collaboration between the sector and the statutory bodies participants also reflected positively on the increased collaboration across the district. Previously these relationships were in place within each DEA but responding to the pandemic has brought organisations together across Derry and Strabane.

“I think all of that rich element of the positive that’s come out of such a huge negative still needs to be unpacked somewhat. Even in the city alone and the collaboration and the networking that we have all done collectively. As a district we would have worked maybe at neighbour renewal level or at a DEA level across the Derry and Strabane District Council area. We have worked- this initiative has brought us all together across the district, probably one of the first that brought us across together through this as well. I think it’s a great opportunity to continue working across the district now and better.” (Third sector respondent)

Reducing barriers to accessing support

Participants suggested that the pandemic had increased general awareness of food poverty, and poverty in the area.

“COVID has smashed a lot of barriers, it broke down a lot of barriers. Cause so many people that have never had to make that phone call had to make the phone call. It gave them a big insight into what food poverty, and what poverty is really like. A lot of people understand that now.” (Third sector respondent)

Accordingly, participants reflected that the response had reduced barriers to accessing support with food poverty by increasing awareness and knowledge of the existing local community responses to food poverty in two key ways. Firstly, there is now increased awareness of the organisations that can provide households with support and, secondly, people who have accessed the support may be more likely to access the support again in the future as they had a positive experience of doing so during the pandemic.

“That whole localism, knowing your community, the localism, plus it brings sustainability because these people have made connections for the first time in their neighbourhoods to the communities, they now know what else is available out there and can connect.” (Third sector respondent)

“I think we have reduced a lot of barriers with regards to food poverty and people being able to seek out and gain that support because they were treated with respect. Everybody was on the one boat, so it’s not to say because I’m poor or whatever, I need to go and beg for food or whatever.” (Third sector respondent)

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer 2020

Lack of Triage/ Lack of coordination

Some participants raised concerns that there was sometimes a lack of assessment of need for the food support that was being provided by the organisations newly involved in food provision. This may have resulted in firstly, people accessing the food who did not really need it and, secondly, people receiving support from a number of organisations, leading to duplication.

“They were turning out something like, at one stage it was over 200 hot meals a day, but, again, those were going to people who really... At least 70% of them wouldn't really have needed them, they just thought it's a nice idea to get a hot meal made for you and not have to pay for it. Sorry, I'm sounding very cynical but it's actually what's happened on the ground and too many folk were frightened to say anything..... Eventually, they tried to get a bit of control on that, but there was no real organisation in terms of who was entitled to or who needed food support. The football clubs, soccer clubs, the various other organisations were putting up their own food parcels and the same person could have been getting a food parcel from three or four different outfits, which was ridiculous. At the end of the day, they probably didn't even need it. So, that would be my main criticism.” (Third sector respondent)

“The pop-ups did a lot of damage, they done a lot of damage, unintentional damage and created a bigger dependency and people were going around everywhere where they could get free food. Not everybody, a percentage of them, it was not everybody by any intentions.” (Third sector respondent)

Participants noted that the lack of coordination and assessment of need was rooted in people’s desire to help and the speed at which a response was required.

“I know it all came on us very quick and everybody thought it was all done with the best intentions, you thought you were doing the right thing, but it became pretty

obvious pretty quickly that it wasn't targeted and it wasn't hitting the right people at all." (Third sector respondent)

"That was the biggest criticism, my first reaction. There was no proper effort made to identify people who actually needed it. I can understand the timescales and things. It would have been difficult to do that." (Third sector respondent)

Individual and organisational burnout

Some participants highlighted the fatigue that individuals and organisations were experiencing, having been intensely involved in providing a response from early March to the end of June and throughout Summer 2020.

"Now we get into winter [2020/2021], there's a wee bit of burnout for those voluntary groups." (Third sector respondent)

Referring to one of the local restaurants in one of the rural towns who has been providing hot meals one participant said,

"He ran out of funds and he just got exhausted because he was basically cooking on his own and with his daughter helping him, it was just far too much." (Third sector respondent)

Another participant talked of fear of another lockdown and had sent a clear message to the statutory bodies that they would not be willing or able to provide the same response due to exhaustion and burnout.

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

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

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



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