



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING

COVID-19



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

Herefordshire 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

Herefordshire is a rural county in the West Midlands, where over 50% of the population lives in rural areas. The area comprises of Hereford City, home to just under one third of the population, and market towns.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance had been established and had registered as a member of the Food Power Network, though it was not active in early 2020. There have been no food banks in the Trussell Trust network in the county, but independent food banks have been running in Hereford City and the market towns, most of which required referrals. Whilst not formally networked, the Diocese of Herefordshire has employed a Church and Society Link officer whose work includes linking food banks across the county. The Herefordshire Council was a referral agent for these food banks, though also ran a limited local welfare assistance scheme that provided in-kind assistance (e.g. food vouchers, second-hand white goods). The Council had recently started a programme called Talk Community, which aims to bring Herefordshire together, encouraging residents, businesses, community leaders and the Council to work together to make the community a better place to live and work. At the time of data collection, fourteen hubs operated as part of the scheme, varying from actual venues to WhatsApp groups, across the county.

Hot meal provision served the precariously housed population in Hereford City every day of the week, but various meal programmes also ran across the county, including a private Meals on Wheels provider. Growing Local is an example of a community-interest company that ran meal programmes for the community, as well as education programmes.

Over the course of the pandemic, many new and existing organisations adapted and/or provided new services to help support people to access food. These included new hot meal provision projects targeting people who were self-isolating and unable to go out for food, and new food parcel delivery programmes that targeted families with children on low incomes. Food banks continued to support people in financial need of food.

The Council mainly acted to support the work that organisations were already doing or were newly doing. For example, they helped food banks source food from supermarkets and volunteers, and linked organisations that wanted to provide food parcels to low-income families with families identified through Children's Services at the Council. A helpline was initiated through their Talk Communities programme. Their primary approach was supporting individuals and communities to support themselves.

One specific council initiative was the direct provision of food boxes to people who were shielding in the first weeks of the pandemic. This was quickly put in place to act as a stopgap between the announcement of the need for people to shield and the delay in Government shielding boxes reaching this population.

There appeared to be a lack of coordination between different programmes and some stakeholders expressed concerns about the duplication of provision and lack of communication between actors. On the other hand, this may reflect the rural nature of the county and localised nature of organisations working in different market towns. However, one lesson identified by the Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance out of the pandemic was the need for the alliance to resume activity and have a coordinating role.

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

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

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

Prior to the pandemic Herefordshire Council supported people experiencing food insecurity in two key ways. Firstly, various teams across the Council were food bank referral agents or would signpost people to the food banks across the county. The Council also had a form of local welfare assistance available for “residents in an emergency” to which residents could apply. The support available through this assistance scheme included provision of food or vouchers, referrals to support organisations and providing quality second-hand goods.

In addition, the Adults Directorate was developing the ‘Talk Community’ programme, which aimed to bring Herefordshire together encouraging residents, businesses, community leaders and the Council to work together to make the community a better place to live and work. At the time of data collection, fourteen hubs operated as part of the scheme, varying from actual venues to WhatsApp groups, across county. Prior to the pandemic, food was not a specific focus of the programme.

A range of third sector actors also responded to food poverty in the area. All of the food banks in Herefordshire are independent food banks. Hereford Food Bank is the largest in the city of Hereford, and then there are food banks operating in market towns, including in Ross-on-Wye, Ledbury, Bromyard, Kington, and Leominster. Each food bank operated slightly differently. Hereford Food Bank was described as the most active food bank, serving people from the market towns and from rural areas who had a referral. Ledbury Food Bank provided a weekly food parcel for 6 weeks, which could be collected on a Wednesday or Friday morning. Bromyard Food Bank operated a delivery service only, with food parcels delivered weekly for five weeks. The Ross Community Larder operated similarly to a food bank and required referrals. In addition to these food banks, the Diocese of Herefordshire employed a Church and Society Link Officer who had the specific remit of supporting independent food banks, the role involving enabling the different food banks to work together, share good practice, identify needs and what services are available across the county.

Other sources of support with food access included a range of hot meal providers targeting people who were vulnerably housed, particularly in Hereford City, and community meal programmes offering meals for reduced costs, including one specifically targeted at youth and others for the elderly population. Growing Local is a community interest company that was involved in a number of initiatives, including running a vegetable bag scheme, running land-based activities to teach schools and community organisations about local, seasonal food and hosting pay-what-you can community meals every 6 weeks to two months.¹ A local

¹ <https://growinglocal.org.uk/about-us/>

caterer, Bake and Create, provided a “Meals on Wheels” service, at a cost of £4.25 per person.

Herefordshire also had a Food Poverty Alliance, a member of the Food Power Network, established in January 2018 with members including the Brightspace Foundation,² the Diocese of Hereford, Herefordshire Housing (Connexus),³ Hereford Food Bank,⁴ Herefordshire Voluntary Organisations Support Service (HVOSS),⁵ Herefordshire Council (Welfare and Public Health departments), Herefordshire Green Network,⁶ and Ledbury Food Bank.⁷ In 2019, the Alliance conducted a mapping study to map risk factors for food insecurity across the county. The Alliance met regularly over 2019.

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

Herefordshire County Council

The Talk Community programme was relied on to provide what was described as the Council’s “Tier 1” approach, aimed at prevention and action in the whole population. The approach was described as a “strength-based approach, enabling people to make their own resilience plans, depending on trusted friends, family, neighbours and their local community”.⁸ This was reflected in a letter sent to all residents on the 20th of March, where residents were urged to “Create your own plan”, referring to the need for them to identify what support they can call on from family, friends, neighbours, or people in the community if they needed to self-isolate. But it was also highlighted that people should contact the Council if further support was needed.

The latter referred to the Council’s emergency phone line. It was available seven days a week, run by 45 Council staff who were deployed to this service. Where appropriate callers would have been referred to one of 70 “Community Link Workers”, who were redeployed council staff, who worked at the ward level with parish councils, local community organisations, and volunteer networks. One outcome of these referrals to a community link worker may have been a food delivery.

The Herefordshire Council also established an “Emergency Delivery Hub” on the 28th of March which provided food parcels to people on the NHS shield list until they received their first parcel through the national grocery box delivery scheme. Food parcels contained a range of fresh and ambient produce, varied to suit households needs. Recipients were contacted each week to check whether they still required a food parcel and during this contact, they were able to select the items for their food parcel. The scheme ended up running beyond the start date of the national scheme due to reported delays in people signing up for the national scheme, delays in deliveries and missed deliveries. Once the Council scheme stopped, parcel recipients were supported through the “Shield Buddies”

² <https://www.brightspacefoundation.org.uk/>

³ <https://connexus-group.co.uk/>

⁴ <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>

⁶ <https://hgnetwork.org/>

⁷ <https://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

⁸ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

programme, which comprised 50 redeployed council staff who provided social contact and facilitated access to support where needed, including support with shopping if required.

Many schools worked hard to provide replacements for free school meals and the form of this provision varied across the schools including schools purchasing supermarket vouchers online and sending them to eligible families, packed lunches for collection from school, and food parcels / hampers delivered to households. In addition, the Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers.⁹ Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks and other organisations who were offering support to families.

The Council also provided support for food banks, facilitating access to supermarkets and other food retailers and linking volunteers who responded to their calls made through the Talk Community programme with food banks. They also provided support for organisation and groups newly providing a food service, supporting a coordinated response to avoid duplication, advising on nutritional requirements and identifying families that may be in need of support. Finally, the Council populated the WISH website with directories of available groceries, food and ready meals delivery; supermarket priority shopping hours; and food banks for Hereford City and each of the market towns in Herefordshire.¹⁰

Existing food banks

All of the existing food banks remained open and adapted their services as necessary. For example, Hereford Food Bank switched to a delivery-only model, with food parcels delivered by local taxi firms. Leominster Food Bank started a free “food share” which did not require a referral but the food available was not guaranteed. This was in addition to their usual food bank sessions on Tuesday and Fridays. Ledbury Food Bank introduced a system where people would receive a pre-packed bag of essential items (rather than being able to choose), although recipients could also fill out a ‘shopping list’ of items, which volunteers would then prepare and provide to them.

Other Actors

Most of the hot meal providers serving people who were vulnerably housed in Hereford City were unable to operate as usual as their premises were not of sufficient size to accommodate social distancing. One continued with takeaway meal provision on a Sunday evening. However, the majority of the replacement hot meal provision was coordinated centrally through the Salvation Army. No referrals were needed to receive this provision, and it was open to anyone to attend. In addition, a small number of other organisations started providing hot meal delivery.

Growing Local repurposed funding that they usually use to run family cooking workshops and programmes for families and children to instead provide free food parcels to families.

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<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/coronavirus/coronavirus-local-community-information/>

The Meals on Wheels service by Bake and Create continued to be offered. The Hereford City Rotary Club, upon the request of the Council because a provider of food parcels to families who fell under the 'early help umbrella'. The food parcels were prepared and packed by the Rotary Club with food purchased from wholesalers and local businesses. Local businesses supported them with storage, packing and vehicles for delivery. Over March to August, they provided 3075 food parcels to 652 families.

In addition, many informal local community hubs were established, providing support to people in need in many forms, and there were many neighbourhood based responses, perhaps doing volunteer shopping, providing food parcels or providing hot meals.

The Herefordshire voluntary organisation support service supported the response across the county to coordinate volunteers, setting up a registration page and connecting people who wanted to volunteer with the Talk Community hubs. Because the Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance had not been active in early 2020, they did not engage in work related to responding to COVID-19 in the first months of the pandemic.

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.

In Herefordshire, we had two “Research Champions” who were part of Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance, a member of the Food network. They participated in a joint interview. We also conducted an interview with a staff member of the Hereford Diocese who worked with food banks across the county. Our workshop included all three interview participants as well as the following participants:

- Two council staff members
- One third sector employee and one volunteer
- One community interest company employee

In addition to these participants, a further 14 people were invited to participate in the research by the Research Champions but did not do so. This included a further 5 council staff, 1 representative from a local food bank, 3 representatives of local food projects and 5 other representatives with involvement in farming, agriculture, wildlife and housing.

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

Finally, the first draft of the case study report was sent to participants for review, sometimes with specific further questions and with an invite to provide further comment and insight if desired. Additional data submitted by email, usually by the participants themselves or colleagues who were better able to respond, and occasionally through a follow up phone conversation, was added to the report.

About Herefordshire

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. Herefordshire was selected due to the presence of a Food Power network member and being predominantly rural. The change in claimant rate over January to July 2020 was 144%.

Herefordshire is a county located in the West Midlands. The local authority is Herefordshire Council, a unitary authority. It has a population of 192,800, of whom 34,800 (18%) are 70 years of age or older.¹¹ It is classified as a largely rural area and has very low population density, with 53% of the population living in areas defined as rural.¹² Hereford City is the only city in the county, with a population of 61,400 (just under 1/3 of the county's population). Besides Hereford City, there are market towns (pictured in Figure 1), with the largest being Leominster (12,200), Ross (11,400) and Ledbury (10,100).¹³ Importantly, Herefordshire was described as "food-producing county" (Third sector respondent), with access to an abundance of local food.

Before the pandemic, the claimant rate in Herefordshire was low at 1.8% in January 2020, but this more than doubled to a rate of 4.4% in July 2020.

One respondent described Herefordshire in the following way:

"I think we are lucky in Herefordshire. It might be worth just saying that it is an area where almost everybody knows everybody. Where actually bringing people together is sometimes easier here than in other places. You have often got a link to somebody else." (Council staff respondent)

However, the rural nature of Herefordshire was described as challenge for identifying and responding to poverty, as below:

"The biggest market towns are probably only 15,000 or 18,000, but most of them are smaller than that. So you haven't got a big infrastructure anywhere that can help people. It's so sparsely populated and spread out, that pockets of deprivation, even on the scale that they do on the super low output areas and things, it's really difficult to pick up, because often it can be just spread everywhere. I find it difficult to attract the funding... we can never make a big enough difference because we don't hit enough numbers. And it is difficult to deliver because it is so rural. Combine expensive delivery with lack of numbers, it's really a challenge to get funding." (Third sector respondent)

Compared with other areas of the West Midlands, Herefordshire has higher levels of fuel poverty, lower levels of earnings, and worse housing affordability.¹⁴ Geographical barriers to services has been flagged as a reason for Herefordshire's poorer rankings in England's Index of Multiple Deprivation.¹⁵

¹¹ Source: [nomisweb.co.uk](https://www.nomisweb.co.uk)

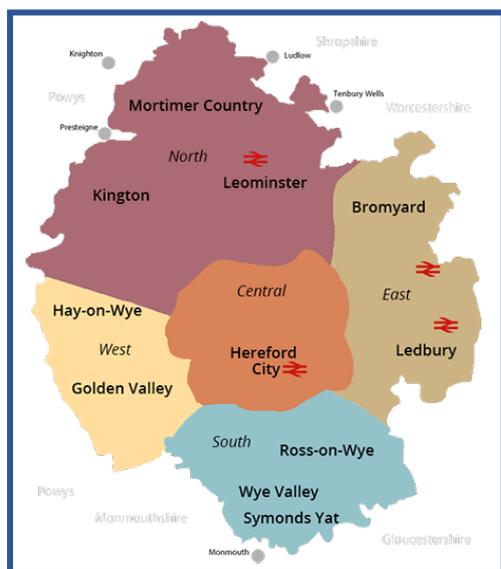
¹² <https://understanding.herefordshire.gov.uk/quick-facts/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://understanding.herefordshire.gov.uk/quick-facts/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Figure 1 Hereford City and market towns in Herefordshire County.



Source: <https://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk/explore/>

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

Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance

The Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance was established in January 2018. It was shared that it was set up in recognition of a need to look at food poverty strategically:

“Because it was clear that there were things going on and no one was really joining these things up or really had a good understanding of what was happening.” (Third sector respondent)

It was established, with Food Power financial support, as a Food Power network member in 2019.¹⁶ Its members have included the Brightspace Foundation, the Diocese of Hereford, Herefordshire Housing (Connexus), Hereford Food Bank, Herefordshire Voluntary Organisations Support Service (HVOSS), Herefordshire Council (Welfare and Public Health departments), Herefordshire Green Network, and Ledbury Food Bank.¹⁷

One of the alliance’s first projects in 2019 was to conduct a mapping study, working with a local organisation called Data Orchard, to map risk factors for food insecurity across the county.¹⁸ Using a variety of potential indicators for food insecurity (e.g. fuel poverty, child obesity data, benefit claimants, no access to a car, and multiple deprivation rank), the project

¹⁶ <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/>

¹⁷ <https://www.brightspacefoundation.org.uk/>, <https://connexus-group.co.uk/>, <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/>, <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>, <https://hgnetwork.org/>, <https://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.dataorchard.org.uk/case-studies/food-poverty-mapping-project>

scores lower-super output areas into rankings of risk out of 5, providing an indication of where prevalence of food insecurity may be higher.¹⁹ The alliance also met regularly over 2019 to help facilitate communication between the Council, food banks, and other organisations working across the county. They were also trying to work on more consistent ways of gathering data across different organisations. Since funding ran out at the end of 2019, the group was less active going into the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Herefordshire Council

As above, representatives from the Council's welfare team and public health team were involved in the Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance. Below, we also outline some of the ways they were involved in responding to food insecurity and poverty before the pandemic.

Work with food banks

Various teams across the Council, including health visitors and social care staff, and the welfare team, would have been referral agents for the food banks operating across the county. Some food banks did not require referrals, however, so the Council would have just signposted to food bank support in this instance.

Talk Community Hubs

Talk Community Hubs were in the early stages of development before the pandemic. There was a goal to have 20 up and running over the 2020-21 financial year. At the time of data collection there was 14 Hubs across the county, varying from actual venues to WhatsApp groups. The programme was described as follows:

“There was a programme called the Talk Community programme, which has been developed within the Adults Directorate. It has got a huge focus on communities and communities supporting themselves... they are voluntary, because they are run by the community...there are certain areas where communities are already doing a lot and the local authority is supporting them to develop those hubs; they could be village halls, for example, to further support their community. So, whether it is by, I don't know, training up the volunteers in some way, or providing them with something they need, small pots of money and support that the local authority will offer them. So, yes, it is about upskilling the community and those people who are really active in the community to be able to support others, I guess.” (Council staff respondent)

As shared later, food became a focus of some of these over the pandemic but wasn't necessarily before.

Local welfare provision scheme

Details on the Herefordshire Council's website suggested that they have had a form of local welfare assistance available for “residents in an emergency”, though what constituted an emergency is not specified.²⁰ We were told that each case is judged on its merit and a common sense approach taken, with ‘emergency’ broadly being would the client could not

¹⁹ <https://data-orchard.github.io/pages/hfds-food-poverty/index.html#10/52.0909/-2.7013>

²⁰ <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/support-emergency-welfare-support>

get help from anywhere else. Residents apply for assistance. The usual eligibility criteria require people to be in receipt of specified benefits, though it is also highlighted that people who can demonstrate that they “do not have the immediate resources to meet the basic needs of themselves or their dependents” may also be eligible. The support that people can receive was outlined as:

- Providing quality, second-hand goods
- Provision of food or vouchers
- Referrals to support organisations

However, it was noted that they would not provide cash or loans and the fund was not available to help with rent or rent in advance. People were also not eligible to receive help if they had already received help through the scheme in the past six months.²¹ Signposting to other agencies and support networks would also be given including a referral to the food bank.

Meals on Wheels

As far as our research participants knew, there was no commissioned local authority Meals on Wheels service operating in Herefordshire. However, as outlined below, a private company was providing this service across the county; the Council signposts people to this company as well as other options.

Wellbeing Information and Signposting for Herefordshire (WISH)

WISH is owned by the Herefordshire Council and has been a source of to support the health and wellbeing of all adults, children, young people and families.²² As outlined below, the website was used to provide information on food access options over the pandemic.

Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS)

We learned of the HVOSS through our desk-based research. They are a support service for charities. The work they outline on their website includes providing information, guidance, and support to volunteers, charities, voluntary and community groups in Herefordshire.²³ As below, they were a key organisation in recruiting volunteers to help with food support over the pandemic, but as they did not participate in our research, we did not learn if they were involved in any work to address food access issues before the pandemic.

Food parcel providers

All of the food banks in Herefordshire are independent food banks. Hereford Food Bank is the largest in the city of Hereford, and then there are food banks operating in market towns, including in Ross-on-Wye, Ledbury, Bromyard, Kington, and Leominster. The food banks were described as operating in different catchment areas, though Hereford Food Bank may have also served people living in rural areas for the reasons described below:

²¹ <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/support-emergency-welfare-support/2?documentId=56&categoryId=200207>

²² <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/>, <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/family-support/wish>

²³ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/>

“Although, because Hereford is a much bigger, more well-stocked and more responsive food bank, they would quite often pick up people from the rural towns as well. Also, because that might save some of that stigma thing.” (Third sector respondent)

Most of the food banks operating required referrals. As already mentioned, different departments across the Council would have referred people. Housing associations were also identified as a key referral partner.

Further detail is provided on some of food banks operating in Herefordshire below, mostly obtained through desk-based research, as no one directly involved in these food banks participated in our interviews or workshop.

Hereford Food Bank

Hereford Food Bank was described as the most active food bank in Herefordshire. It had a referral voucher system in place. As above, it would serve people from the market towns and from rural areas as well. It was also shared that it might have sent surplus food to the market town food banks.

Ledbury Food Bank

Ledbury Food Bank was described as offering more than food, as described below:

“Ledbury Food Bank was actually operating as a much wider welfare net. In fact, that was almost a social services office, but run on a voluntary basis. So, they were doing a lot more and in fact one of the volunteers there was the ex-head of social services from Worcestershire Council, and she just turned all her skills into working on a voluntary basis at the food bank.” (Third sector respondent)

On their website, they outlined the need to have a referral voucher from one of their referral agencies, however, they also offered people the opportunity to come in to speak to a food bank volunteer, who could then also provide a referral voucher upon assessment of their situation.²⁴ An authorised voucher entitled people to receive a weekly food parcel for 6 weeks, which could be collected on Wednesday or Friday mornings in Ledbury. They also operated a sub-branch in Bosbury.

Bromyard Food Bank

Bromyard Food Bank was also described as having a different model, as they did not offer a site from which people could pick up food parcels, instead only offering deliveries:

“One [food bank] in one of the more rural market towns up in Bromyard, they did not even have a place where people came. They only did deliveries. There is a stigma attached to it and with a small town where everybody knows everybody, and you know where the food bank is, you do not want to be seen to be going there and attaching that stigma. So, they realised a delivery service would be preferable.” (Third sector respondent)

²⁴ <http://www.ledburyfoodbank.org/>

Details on their website outlined the ability of people to self-refer themselves by calling, email or visiting their Facebook page.²⁵ This would be followed up with a call by trained team members who would assess needs. Referrals were also received from social services, the HOPE Centre, Citizens Advice, or Christians Against Poverty. Upon the needs assessment, food parcels would be delivered weekly to the recipient for five weeks, after which time, another referral or assessment was required.²⁶

Ross Community Larder

The Ross Community Larder operates similarly to a food bank, requiring referral vouchers from social service agencies and serving people in financial hardship.²⁷ It was considered a food bank by our research participants. The food they provide is sourced from food collections from Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, and a community garden, as well as donations from the public.

Diocese of Herefordshire

Within the Diocese of Herefordshire, a Church and Society Link Officer had the specific remit of supporting independent food banks across the county. It was recognised that though they were linked to churches, they were not coordinated or networked with one another. The role involves enabling the different food banks to work together, share good practice, identify needs and what services are available across the county. There was also some work being done to collate data on levels of use across the different food banks.

Meal providers

It was shared that there was hot meal provision targeting people who were vulnerably housed happening across Herefordshire, but particularly in Hereford City. One participant provided us a list of these providers. They included the Salvation Army, Hereford Baptist Church; Open Door; central Methodist church; Christian Life church; St Martins; and St Peters. These offered various breakfasts and hot meals over the week, all coordinated so that there was something on offer each day of the week, as shared below:

“The hot food provision in the City of Hereford was different providers on different days, and they did coordinate so that if people were in need of food provision they could go to a different place each day and get pretty much a free meal of some description. It might be a breakfast or a lunch.” (Third sector respondent)

Another meal provider in Hereford City specifically targeted youth. It was run by a boxing gym in a deprived area of Hereford. Youth who participated in boxing sessions would also be offered a hot meal. In the same area, Hinton, a community cafe was also offering low-cost meals (for £1). Other community meal programmes offering meals for reduced costs were also mentioned.

Some other meal programmes were mentioned, though these happened less frequently. One was community lunches that were provided free at the The Kindle Centre every six weeks, which targeted older people (over 60s).²⁸

²⁵ <https://bromyardfoodbank.co.uk/where-we-are-and-how-to-contact-us/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ <https://rossparishes.uk/the-community-larder/>

²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/>

Growing Local

Growing Local has been a community interest company operating in Herefordshire since 2009.²⁹ They are involved in a number of initiatives, including running a vegetable bag scheme and running land-based activities to teach schools and community organisations about local, seasonal food.

They ran a meal programme before the COVID-19 pandemic called “Big Eat” events, which also ran out of the Kindle Centre every 6 weeks to two months. These were community meals, open to anybody, where anyone was free to come and cook and eat. They ran on a pay-what-you can basis and were reported to attract about 100 people per event.

Meals on Wheels Herefordshire by Bake and Create

From our desk-based research, we learned that in 2018, The Royal Voluntary Service, which has previously provided a Meals on Wheels service in Herefordshire, stopped their service.³⁰ A local caterer, Bake and Create, began to provide the service instead from April 2018. Meals have been offered to people for £4.25.³¹

Other actors

Our stakeholders mentioned “rural support groups” in Herefordshire, some of which worked on food access issues, however, we did not receive specific details on these.

In one market town, a Christians Against Poverty branch was mentioned who provide debt counselling, but who would also do a food shop for a new client and also provide Christmas food hampers to their clients.

Community gardens operating in Ross, south Wye in Hereford City, and Hinton, were mentioned, some of which were projects set up in deprived areas.

Early signs of food access issues in COVID-19 pandemic

It was shared that one of the first signs of increased financial difficulties in Herefordshire came from housing associations, where they were reporting an increase in rent arrears.

Some of the food banks also experienced an immediate increase in need for their services that appeared to be due to both affordability issues as well as food access issues, as described:

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

²⁹ <https://growinglocal.org.uk/about-us/>

³⁰ <https://www.herefordtimes.com/news/16188393.businesswoman-steps-provide-meals-wheels-service/>

³¹ https://www.facebook.com/MealsonWheelsherefordshire/?ref=page_internal

The immediate impact on volunteers in food banks, and in turn, changes in their services was also described:

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

The capacity of other organisations to run their usual programmes was also a concern, which again, would have knock-on effects on the populations they served:

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

Another immediate issue was the supply of food in food banks:

“There was the combination of donations where particularly people had done the panic buying and the food stockpiling in their own homes, as COVID hit the shelves, but also because the people who would normally be going to the supermarket and putting tins in containers for the food bank, all of that just disappeared. So the donations suddenly were drying up, at the same time as the supermarket shelves clearing, and there was very little to purchase, and so they needed to buy more but there was less available.

In a lot of these market towns, it’s a long way to go to another supermarket. And even then you’re not going to get maybe anything different. So it was really challenging.” (Third sector respondent)

One respondent who works with young families in a community centre, providing affordable childcare, described the concerns felt by the people she worked with early in the pandemic:

“There were a lot of the families who were uncertain about being able to maintain what, for them, some would see as care for their children so they could work. But, it wasn’t just about care, it was about education and development for their children. So, there was lots of anxiety around disruption to routine for households.” (Third sector respondent)

Calls into the Council’s Talk Community response teams and helpline, mentioned below, immediately raised the concerns of older people who were concerned that they would not be able to access food and meals from their usual channels of informal support, such as from friends and family.

Issues with small-scale local food suppliers were also discussed:

“Some village shops suddenly found there was an increase in demand locally because of the lack of access elsewhere. So, they had to stock-up. They found that difficult, because the wholesale was difficult to access as well... [Another]

example, I get a box scheme delivered from a local farm and they were inundated with requests. They supplied as many people as they could, but they were not able to supply as many people as were asking. So, the whole supply chain was under stress, I think.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Herefordshire Food Poverty Alliance

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

“But I think what [the pandemic response] revealed is that it would be really helpful to have [a role in coordinating] and that is what we all learnt from that. To say, “Look, we really do need this sense of coordination.” (Third sector respondent)

“I think during COVID it definitely showed [Food Poverty Alliance members] that there were a lot of organisations out there with an interest in food and supporting the food poverty agenda. It was quite quickly apparent that not everybody knew what everybody else was doing. That there did need to be some kind of co-ordination or at least some discussion.” (Council staff respondent)

Herefordshire County Council

Talk Community Helpline, Response teams, and Volunteer recruitment

The Talk Community programme in Herefordshire was relied on to provide what was described as the Council’s “Tier 1” approach, aimed at prevention and action in the whole population. The approach was described as a “strength-based approach, enabling people to make their own resilience plans, depending on trusted friends, family, neighbours and their local community”.³² This was reflected in a letter sent to all residents on the 20th March, where residents were urged to “Create your own plan”, referring to the need for them to identify what support they can call on from family, friends, neighbours, or people in the community if they needed to self-isolate. But it was also highlighted that people should contact the Council if further support was needed: “If there are gaps in your plan and you need further support, please contact the Herefordshire Council Talk Community team using the details below.”³³

³²<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

³³https://www.hvoss.org.uk/media/88164/resident-letter-20032020_CX-final-version-for-printing.pdf

The latter referred to the Council's emergency phone line (described as a Co-ordination Centre). It was available seven days a week, run by 45 council staff who were deployed to this service.

One of our respondents described the helpline in the following way:

“There was a Talk Community phone line set up for people who needed emergency food parcels, or other support... So, this was manned...manned seven days a week, certainly, for long periods of time. Staff were obviously re-deployed into various roles to support that and support people in the community. So, that was one thing that was set up.” (Council staff respondent)

In addition to providing support for people calling in need of help, the Coordination Centre also received calls from people willing to volunteer in response to a call from the Council, with over 1,300 people reported to have been recruited to volunteer.³⁴ These volunteers were deployed to provide support to people without access to other forms of support, with collection and delivery of food being a main service.

During the spring, the helpline would also refer people to Talk Community Response teams. These were 70 council staff employees who were deployed as “Community Link Workers”. They worked at the ward level and worked with parish councils, local community organisations, and volunteer networks. These roles were not intended to provide a new direct service, but rather to work “strategically with Herefordshire’s established voluntary, community and faith organisations to inform, support, and coordinate the community response.”³⁵

“During COVID, some of those [Talk] communities identified food insecurity as an issue and set up, with the help and support of the Council, in some cases, food distribution.” (Third sector respondent)

“It is almost like they took on a slightly different function almost. Because they were responding to the immediacy of the situation. So... down in Walford, the Talk Community Hub became a hub that delivered food parcels. Whereas before it was not that.” (Third sector respondent)

By 20th April, it was reported that 2,133 calls were received to the helpline. In response to these calls, food deliveries were provided 921 times through the volunteer network or Talk Community Link workers.

Support for people who were shielding

In response to the Westminster Government announcing guidance for people who were shielding, the Herefordshire Council established their own approach, called “Project Shield”.³⁶ Part of this programme was working to identify people who fell into the extreme clinical risk group. In a report produced by the Council, this was described as very

³⁴<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

challenging due to multiple lists and changing information from the Government.³⁷ The Council worked with the local NHS and through community link workers to identify 9,000 people who were shielding, up from an initial count in March of about 3,300.³⁸ Once this list was established, 50 council staff were redeployed to contact this group, and volunteers recruited through the Talk Community programme were trained to become “Shield Buddies”, providing social contact and facilitating access to support where needed.

The Herefordshire Council established an “Emergency Delivery Hub” or “Hub Centre” at the Halo leisure centre on 28th March.³⁹ This service provided food parcels to people on the NHS shield list and was described as being a “stop-gap” until the Government’s shielding food box programme was established. The Council provided food parcels until people received a food parcel through the national scheme. They also supported people to sign up for the national scheme. However, this continued past the start date for the Government’s programme because of a “delay in people signing-up for food parcels and a delay in delivery” and also because in early April, “some deliveries of the government parcels [were] missed as the task was moved from one supplier to another.”⁴⁰ For these reasons, this provision ran from the end of March till the end of May. People were referred to this provision through the Council’s Talk Community Helpline if they were on the shielding list and could not receive help with food from friends, families or the wider community. People were therefore asked if they had received a letter advising them to shield from the NHS, and their response provided the proof of eligibility. Food parcels contained a range of fresh and ambient produce, although this was varied depending on households needs. Recipients were contacted each week to check whether they still required a food parcel, and during this contact, they were able to select the items for their food parcel. This also allowed specific needs to be met such as additional people in the household and specific dietary requirements.

As of the 30th April, it was intended that the service would reduce, being placed instead by “Shield Buddies”, who could help provide shopping to supplement the Government’s shielding food parcels where required.⁴¹ It was reported in a Council News bulletin that after acting as a food distribution centre, the Halo leisure centre then became a PPE distribution hub.⁴²

Free school meals

We were told of some issues in the early stages of the national voucher scheme put in place for replacement free school meals, leading to some schools offering their own direct provision for eligible families. The issues included schools finding the Edenred system to be overloaded resulting in having to ‘queue’ to get onto the system, calls to the helpline taking over an hour and most importantly, a delay in the implementation of the scheme. The provision by the schools took a range of forms including schools purchasing supermarket

³⁷ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ <https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/news/article/1007/leisure-and-local-authority-come-together-to-contribute-to-covid-community-effort>

vouchers online and sending them to eligible families, packed lunches being made available for collection from school, and food parcels / hampers delivered to households. We were told that the schools worked exceptionally hard to ensure this provision was in place, particularly in the early stages when it was felt the Government guidance and provision was still in development.

In addition, the Council earmarked an amount of money that schools could use to provide for families who were in need but were not eligible for free school meals. The Council reported that about 40 families were supported with vouchers.⁴³ To support these households, the Council also engaged with the Rotary who were providing food parcels (described later). Furthermore, both schools and the Council would refer to local food banks who were offering support to families that were in need but not currently eligible to free school meals. This activity was reported on by the Council:

“The Council has also issued a fresh contract (time limited) to offer wrap around care in two towns for 8.00am to 6.00pm shift workers and offered Free School Meal (FSM) vouchers to over 40 families at risk of food poverty. We have engaged with the voluntary sector to support families of the shielded or for whom the national FSM scheme was not available.”⁴⁴

Support for food banks

Some of the Council staff also worked to support food banks with food supplies, facilitating access to supermarkets and other food retailers, as described below:

“The other thing was I worked with a colleague during this time to support the food banks and make sure that they could access food. So, we regularly were asking them, can they access food, are they able to order food? There were direct lines almost set up between the supermarkets and food banks so the food banks could get the food that they needed. So, that was quite quickly secured.”
(Council staff respondent)

One third sector respondent shared that the help received from the Council was quite substantial, provided both as funding and in-kind support:

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

The Council also helped boost food banks' workforce where there were concerns about volunteer capacity. The Council made calls for volunteers through their Talk Community service, and in turn, some of these were linked up with food banks.

⁴³<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

⁴⁴<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

As noted above, people accessing local welfare assistance prior to the pandemic were referred to a food bank if appropriate. The number of referrals made through this channel increased, with data suggesting 251 referrals were made in 2020, an increase of 36 compared with 2019.

Support for third sector organisations newly offering food and food parcels

While the Council did not take a direct role in providing food parcels, they provided support for organisations that wanted to get involved in this provision, as described below:

“We had a lot of third sector voluntary organisations who stepped up and wanted to offer food and food parcels. There was a lot of that going on. So, coordinating and not managing it, because we did not want to manage it, but trying to ensure there was not overlap and that everybody was getting support rather than a small number getting a lot of support. That was challenging maybe at times. Also ensuring the nutrient content of a lot of it. So, there was work around that. We also did some meal-planning with items that were in the food boxes, to ensure that people had recipe ideas and meal plans to follow.” (Council staff respondent)

One food parcel initiative from the Rotary Club, described later below, targeted low-income families with school-aged and young children. The Council supported this initiative by helping identify families that could be in need of support, regardless of eligibility for free school meals.

“We were working with schools, to make sure that these families were identified, and even those who were not perhaps eligible for free school meals who needed it, that they were getting something. So, we did do a lot of work to try and ensure that all families had some support. That went out through early years settings as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Support for people leaving hospital

In a council report, a new programme called “Talk Community Home Safe” was described, which targeted people who were being discharged from hospital but who didn’t require a formal package of care. Volunteers from the Diocese of Hereford were deployed, who delivered “packs of essential food” which were supplied by the Council.⁴⁵

WISH

Directories of available groceries, food and ready meals delivery; supermarket priority shopping hours; and food banks for Hereford City and each of the market towns in Herefordshire were made available on the WISH website over the pandemic.⁴⁶

⁴⁵<https://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/documents/s50078930/Report%20on%20the%20councils%20response%20to%20the%20Coronavirus%20epidemic.pdf>

⁴⁶<https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/coronavirus/coronavirus-local-community-information/>

Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS)

One of the first actions by the HVOSS was to provide a briefing note on the potential impacts of coronavirus on the community sector in Herefordshire.⁴⁷ They outlined the potential impacts of small staff teams, typical of third sector organisations, being unable to work due to childcare responsibilities, and also volunteers not being available for the same reasons, as well as health risks of older volunteers. The potential increase in demand for services was also highlighted.

The HVOSS worked with the Council to coordinate volunteers. They set up a registration page for “COVID-19 Response Volunteers”. They also worked as part of the Talk Community Herefordshire response and connected people who wanted to volunteer with Talk Community groups working in local areas.⁴⁸

Food parcel providers

As already described, many food banks experienced an immediate change in volunteer availability at the start of the pandemic. In response, food banks put out a call for volunteers and generally, were able to stay open:

“They managed to get people in immediately, fairly quickly, yes. They put out a call out through the community and people came forward, particularly ones who understand the severity...” (Third sector respondent)

They were also described to have adapted their services quickly:

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

It was thought that most food banks retained a model of in-person collection, but of pre-packed food parcels, which may have been offered for delivery as well. The exception here was Bromyard Food Bank, which, as before, had always operated a delivery-only service.

Food banks also tried new ways of sourcing food, given the difficulty of obtaining food donations from supermarkets or purchasing from them in the early weeks of the pandemic. For example, they newly tried to purchase food from wholesalers. They also considered applying for funding from DEFRA’s Food Charity Grant but the model was described as ill-matched to their needs:⁴⁹

“The DEFRA one was too complex for these tiny independent organisations to manage. I approached them and asked the question about having a consortium bid into something like that, but that proved impossible to manage as well under their system.

⁴⁷ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/media/87192/potentialimpactscommunitysector.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://www.hvoss.org.uk/categories/covid-19.aspx>

⁴⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-apply-for-the-food-charities-grant-fund>

In Shropshire, for example, so the South Shropshire food banks...they have a food hub which dealt with surplus food already, so they were able to put in a bid and then they could provide and then it flowed out from there. We didn't have anything like that in Herefordshire. So the infrastructure to manage those sorts of things is just not there." (Third sector respondent)

To increase their donations, many of the food banks made use of social media to convey the urgent need for food, though as described, a lot of financial donations were received, which did not necessarily overcome food supply issues:

"They put out a lot more on social media and just to their communities saying, "This is the situation." And wanted food, a lot of people donated money, which is helpful but not helpful when you can't get the food, but it enabled them to have some backup funding, so a lot of them had very positive responses to that, sometimes physically with food but more often with finance." (Third sector respondent)

As a result of these food supply issues, it was felt that what was given out from food banks in the early weeks of the pandemic was more limited:

"There were some weeks where what they could offer was very much more limited by the things they had and how much stock they'd had in-store when the shelves were empty." (Third sector respondent)

Before the pandemic, none of the food banks in Herefordshire had received food from FareShare, as the nearest distribution centre was quite a distance in Birmingham. Over the pandemic, a number of food banks tried to obtain food through them, however, this was described as very difficult and the policies of FareShare were questioned by one respondent:

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

Some food banks also made adaptations to their referral systems due to a lack of access to referring agents:

"Some have retained the referral-only process. I think some have adapted and flexed that bit because of the difficulty of getting referrals, certainly for a time. Some might have gone back to referrals-only, some may have chosen not to, or to skip that altogether because it continues to be challenging to get that through in an easy way, sometimes...Some of them kept the need for referral rigidly and insisted on either telephone or email referral systems rather than paper, obviously. That held for most, and with the odd exception but, you know, but for most that held." (Third sector respondent)

It was felt that part of the extra pressure on food banks over the pandemic was an increase in people needing help multiple times:

“We refer quite a lot because of the nature of the work...I think [there were] concerns, [such] as recurring referrals were made beyond [usual limits] ...Yes, concerns over the amount and frequency of recurring referrals in because for people, it was just their lifeline.” (Third sector respondent)

It was shared that many food banks relaxed their limits on how often people could receive help over this period. One participant also noted that most of the food banks provided a response to families who would ordinarily have accessed free school meals, by providing extra food or food to families with children particularly during the spring and autumn half term holidays and over the summer when needed.

Below, we outline some of the ways that specific food banks were affected and adapted their services.

Hereford Food Bank

It was shared that the Hereford Food Bank lost 50% of their volunteers due to shielding. To adapt to a smaller workforce, they switched to a delivery-only model. Food parcels could be requested by email or phone and then were delivered by local taxi firms.⁵⁰ They continued to require referrals from social services agencies, GPs, churches, or schools.

One respondent shared that they set up a new premise where food donations could be dropped off, due to the need to quarantine items. It was felt that although they were lucky to have had this space donated, this did require extra resources:

“There are big implications to that. Because you then have to staff two buildings. You also have to heat and light them. Luckily, though, I think they donated it. But potentially, it could have had an implication on rent as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Leominster Food Bank

In addition to running their usual food bank sessions on Tuesday and Fridays, which require a referral voucher to access food parcels, the food bank started to also offer a free “food share” at the end of March. The food available includes food past their best-before date, such as bread, fruit and vegetables, donated from local supermarkets.⁵¹ It is noted on their website that a referral voucher is not required to access this food, but that the availability of food cannot be guaranteed.⁵² We learned that over the course of the pandemic, Leominster Food Bank worked hard to be able to access food from FareShare as well.

Ledbury Food Bank

While we did not hear directly about how Ledbury Food Bank changed their services, an article in the Ledbury Reporter shared their determination to stay open over the pandemic, despite facing the challenges of losing volunteers due to the need for them to shield or self-isolate and an increase in demand.⁵³ In a Coronavirus Information bulletin, they shared that

⁵⁰ <https://herefordfoodbank.co.uk/corona-virus>

⁵¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1866719913610250/permalink/2749454438670122/>

⁵² <https://www.leominsterfoodbank.org/>

⁵³ https://www.ledburyreporter.co.uk/news/18320915.ledbury-food-bank-vows-show-must-go-despite-coronavirus-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR3xMY5dglF61_ARwNJa1Nr4uSYTsCWolzHxHGTvdAykGwDVnYAsWksd-Fk

they would maintain their usual hours for food parcel collection, but that rather than having people coming in to choose items, people would receive a pre-packed bag of essential items. They could then additionally fill out a shopping list of items, which volunteers would then prepare and provide to them.

Ross Community Larder

While we did not speak to the Ross Community Larder directly about challenges they experienced over the pandemic, an early post on their Facebook page shared that their team had been reduced to only three volunteers who were not shielding or self-isolating.⁵⁴

Community pantry or community fridge projects

The Living Room

We heard about one new community larder starting in Hereford City during the pandemic, The Living Room. The project runs a cafe that is open to members of the public; in turn, proceeds fund a community larder, training, peer support groups, and counselling and mediation services, targeted towards people on low incomes.⁵⁵ It was delayed in opening due to the pandemic, so only opened in October 2020. On their Facebook page, the Living Room's Community Larder is described as being open to anyone. A membership is required for £5, and then, for £5 per week, people can receive a bag of groceries.⁵⁶

Before opening the cafe and community larder, and over the spring and summer, the Living Room also provided food parcels to people in financial need (no referral required) and food parcels for families during the school holidays. People were encouraged to get in touch with them by email or Facebook to receive access to this assistance. The project receives food from FareShare as well as surplus food from supermarkets.⁵⁷

Ross Food Hub

A new community food sharing project was also established in Ross in the autumn. Sourcing food from a community garden and from four supermarkets, the Ross Food Hub started offering fresh food for anyone to collect four mornings of the week from their "Zero Waste" stall in the autumn 2020.⁵⁸ It was reported that in their first week in the autumn of 2020, they served 40 people.

Meal providers

Hot meal providers serving people who were vulnerably housed in Hereford City faced similar workforce challenges, since they were mostly run by older people, and their premises were also not of sufficient size to accommodate social distancing. One provider noted above, St Peters, were able to make adjustments and continued to offer a Sunday takeaway meal. However, most of the hot meal provision was coordinated centrally through the Salvation Army:

⁵⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsofRossCommunityLarder/posts/842013906293461>

⁵⁵ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/featured-a-partnership-with-passion-for-tackling-food-poverty-in-herefordshire/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/TheLivingRoomHereford>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ https://www.facebook.com/Zero-Waste-Stall-101041668532996/?ref=page_internal

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

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

One provider was also described as delivering lunches (soup and sandwiches) to one residence where homeless people had been housed over the crisis, but this was described as “a handful of meals” (Third sector respondent), so small in scale.

Growing Local

Growing Local repurposed funding that they usually use to run family cooking workshops and programmes for families and children to instead provide free food parcels to families. They purchased food with these funds and sent out regular meal kits, as well as extra ingredients, to about 120 families.

The meal boxes were described as providing:

“Totally local food. Really, really healthy, fresh ingredients. Again, they sent out recipe cards and video links for people to watch how to actually cook these meals.” (Council staff respondent)

This was another example where the Council was involved in coordination, linking this initiative with families in potential need. Potential beneficiaries were identified through Children’s Services and Public Health Nursing Service (school nurses and health visitors). Schools also provided names of families who had previously been entitled to free school meals. They were mostly new families who Growing Local had not worked with before:

“They were new families that were referred to us through particularly the early help team with the Council, the children with disabilities team, Home-Start Hereford and also lots of primary and secondary schools as well nominated families that they thought could really do with taking part.” (Third sector respondent)

Meals on Wheels Herefordshire by Bake and Create

From our desk-based research, we learned that the Meals on Wheels service by Bake and Create continued to be offered over the pandemic. A statement on their Facebook page on 16th March 2020 outlined that they continued to offer the service, with extra measures in place such as sanitising hands and implementing a “strictly drop and go service”, except where additional help for clients was needed.⁵⁹ They also offered their services to people who were self-isolating.

HOPE Community Centre Meal Provision

The HOPE community centre in Bromyard began to offer weekly hot meal deliveries in July, serving families. Over July to December 2020, about 3,000 meals were delivered through

⁵⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/MealsonWheelsherefordshire/posts/1110660515939821>

this programme. In addition, the centre also provides lunch boxes to families in receipt of free school meals over the holidays.

Dixie's Hot Meal Provision

Another example of a specific hot meal delivery service that started over the pandemic was Dixie's Hot Meal provision. In a news article,⁶⁰ it was described as an initiative started by an individual named Dixie Furnell, who created a Facebook group called Dixie's COVID19SOS. He received the help of 28 volunteers and through social media, received donations to support the provision. This was specifically targeted towards older people who were unable to go shopping, and provided meals for free. Over April to July, it was reported that 25,000 hot meals were delivered through this initiative.

The Kindle Centre Picnic Boxes

Another project we heard about was the Picnic Box project, which operated from 24th July and through the summer holidays.⁶¹ It was run by the Kindle Centre, a community centre run by the South Wye Development Trust that ran a variety of health and wellbeing programmes before the pandemic, targeting people disadvantage, vulnerable and social excluded people in South Wye.⁶² Their picnic box project was aimed towards families that had members who were furloughed or who had recently lost job. People could email the centre to make a referral. The project was funded by Herefordshire Community Foundation.⁶³

Other third sector organisations

The Hereford City Rotary Club

In mid-April, it was reported that after being approached by a Hereford Council member about helping vulnerable people in the pandemic, the Hereford City Rotary Club would provide an emergency food parcel scheme.⁶⁴

The food parcels were prepared and packed by the Rotary Club with food purchased from wholesalers and local businesses. Help was provided by three local businesses to coordinate the food purchases and packing, provide warehouse space for storage and packing, and provide vehicles for delivery.⁶⁵ Donations to fund the purchase of foods were provided by the Council as well as a range of businesses and local foundations.

Food parcels were offered to families through the Council, as described:

“We were contacted to ask whether the families that we work with in the children's centres are part of the early help umbrella – who are identified through an early help assessment and so not only in the early years and in the children's centres, but in the wider early help team that work with families with older

⁶⁰ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/news/news-hereford-mans-community-group-creates-25000-free-meals-for-vulnerable-people/>

⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/posts/1277810989244871>

⁶² <http://www.kindlecentre.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/>

⁶³ <https://www.facebook.com/TheKindleCentre/posts/1277810989244871>

⁶⁴ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/community-hereford-city-rotary-club-launch-emergency-food-parcel-scheme/>

⁶⁵ Ibid., <https://www.rotary-ribi.org/clubs/page.php?PgID=817892&ClubID=605>

children. We were offered the opportunity to have these food parcels from the Rotary Club...we would give numbers each week of families, vulnerable families that we knew would benefit from a food parcel. Then, [the food parcels would] be taken to the head office in Hereford city. Then, my team and other family support workers from the early help service would go and collect them and deliver them to the families directly. That happened right throughout the summer holidays and, actually, it started prior to the summer holidays. I can't remember the dates, but, yes, well before the summer holidays, actually...working closely with the families, we were really able to target those that needed it most and then those that needed it less, we would reduce [how frequently they received them]... and we liaised closely with Public Health, who liaised with the Rotary Club, so that we were able to manage that as best we could." (Council staff respondent)

The Council also supported them to enhance the nutritional content of the food boxes:

"[The Rotary Club] gathered a list of items to go in the food boxes, which was similar to what goes in the food bank boxes. So, we worked with them just to adapt them a little bit. So, there were more fresh fruit and vegetables, so we could use a bit more local produce, and so that we could include some recipe ideas and encourage those families to cook, rather than just eat from the tins, kind of thing." (Council staff respondent)

Data shared with us from the Rotary Club showed that over March to August, they provided 3075 food parcels to 652 families.

Other community hubs

Though at times overlapping with Talk Community Hubs, we heard about many community hubs operating across the county that may have become engaged in a food response. One specific example, the Ross Community Development Trust, is outlined below, but in general, these were described as informal, with communities providing support in various ways, as described:

"I think there are loads of community hubs throughout the county; they're not necessarily Talk Community ones." (Council staff respondent)

"My understanding is that they were helping with food distribution where it was needed and where people could pick up and it was just access to food, they helped in that way. So, I think it was variable, from what I'm picking up. They were different everywhere. Local communities just got on with it according to need and assessed as they went along, etc. As in, you know, "Call this number if you need help to get your food," you know, they would help with that. If you needed delivery, they would help with that. It depended on what was needed and different groups did different things...I don't know how many there would have been across the county, but there were loads in rural areas and in cities as well, but people are very resourceful when these things happen and they just adapted according to what they had and what they felt they could manage" (Third sector respondent)

Of note is that the Council was actively encouraging community groups and individuals to become Talk Community Hubs over the pandemic.⁶⁶ Promotion information on the Council's WISH website stated:

"A Talk Community Hub can be developed alongside existing community settings, such as village halls, community pubs, organisations, shops or centres, which are already at the heart of the local community, or they can be something completely new. Herefordshire Council can provide support to nurture and further develop these settings, to help meet the needs of the local community and enable residents to better look after their own health and wellbeing.

It might be that you already offer a variety of daily activities, a weekly coffee morning or monthly lunch club within your community, in which case being a Talk Community Hub could enhance this further, by incorporating more elements to help the people you support."⁶⁷

The "no size fits all" model of the Talk Community hubs was emphasised, with each hub being described as "developed to meet the individual needs of different communities, therefore unique to each community."⁶⁸ The listed benefits of becoming a Talk Community Hub included potential funding from the Council, training for volunteers or staff, promotion via the Council's WISH directory, and growth and sustainability.

Ross Community Development Trust

The Ross Community Development Trust was identified as a new organisation that was set up during the pandemic. They established a small call centre and engaged in the delivery of food to people who could not go out for food. This was not free food, but rather was food ordered from supermarkets then delivered to people who were shielding or isolating.

The local response

Even before the pandemic, it was felt that a lot of informal food provision was happening across Herefordshire. Though not possible to quantify the extent to which this would have increased over the pandemic, it was felt that the pandemic made this informal provision more visible, as described:

"Prior to COVID, there was lots of invisible help going on...I know it's happening now because I know that staff at our place and elsewhere in Bromyard and in the community are doing that food shopping and cooking and providing meals for families, and relatives and friends, which doesn't come under an official form or scheme, but is a big part, particularly when you talk about the hinterlands and the rural communities." (Third sector respondent)

One example of a local neighbourhood response was featured on the "Your Herefordshire" news website on 16th April, describing a group that called itself "Helping

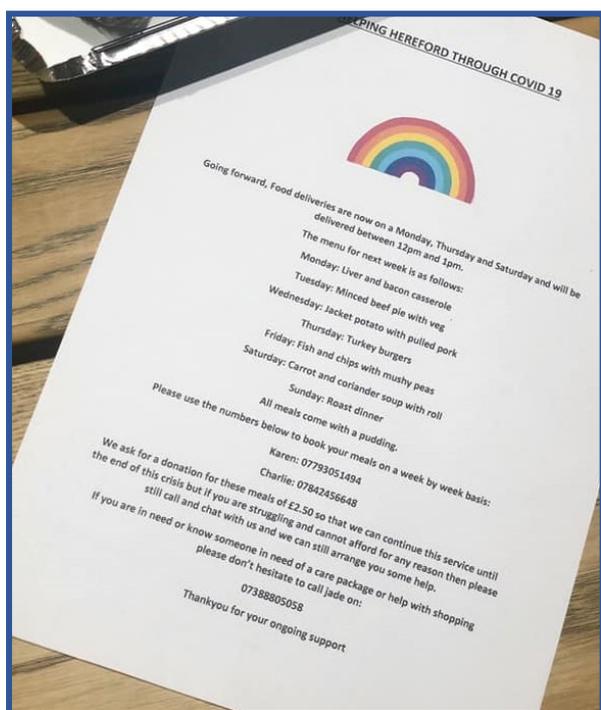
⁶⁶ <https://www.wisherefordshire.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/talk-community-hubs/become-a-talk-community-hub/>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Hereford Through COVID-19”.⁶⁹ The group promoted its help on Facebook and described itself as “a group set up to help the elderly and vulnerable and support key workers.”⁷⁰ They provided food care packs and hot meals, with the latter prepared by chefs from local food businesses. A donation of £2.50 was asked for meals, though exceptions may have been made for people facing financial hardship. A flyer advertising what they offered the week of 9th April is pictured in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Meals available for delivery from the “Helping Hereford through COVID-19” Facebook group on the 9th of April 2020.



Funders

The Herefordshire Community Foundation ran a Coronavirus Response Grant programme (funded by the National Emergencies Trust Coronavirus Appeal fund)⁷¹ over April 2020 to August 2020, giving out a total of £305,448. Their data was made publicly available through the <https://data.threesixtygiving.org/> website, highlighting how they funded the provision of food parcels from food banks and numerous organisations to offer food and medicine delivery.⁷² They also supported the provision of meals from the Salvation Army targeting people who are vulnerably housed, the City of Hereford Rotary Club’s meal parcels for families, The Living Room, and hot food delivery from Meals on Wheels by Bake and Create.

⁶⁹ <https://yourherefordshire.co.uk/all/featured-articles/community-community-group-donates-food-to-vulnerable-people/>

⁷⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/245615750173245/about>

⁷¹ <https://www.facebook.com/HerefordshireCommunityFoundation/posts/1572992299523156>

⁷² <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ocHsmXqFY57EQvMo8736pQX4uflit-MT7cOwDvkH62NI/edit#gid=104821847>

Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Herefordshire

Below, we summarise some key themes we identified in our interviews, workshop, and desk-based research in Herefordshire.

Struggle of food banks to maintain food supplies but increased awareness-raising

In Herefordshire, the struggle of food banks to access food supplies over the first months of the pandemic was notable, with many having to make considerable efforts to find new ways to source food and making appeals to the public. They particularly struggled to make use of government funded initiatives, as they, at first, appeared unable to benefit from funding for food provided to FareShare because FareShare did not operate in the area, and also because the small-scale nature of the food banks operating across the county meant they did not have the infrastructure or demand to qualify for DEFRA's Food Charity Grant scheme. It was also noted that as many of the food banks were not registered as charitable organisations, further precluding them from the scheme.

However, though there was a struggle to maintain food supplies early in the pandemic, it was noted that through increased awareness-raising, donations from the public increased over the pandemic, with many more regular collections now occurring:

“From a community point of view, our local church group every week, now, collects food donations for the food banks. Now, that wasn't going on before to the same extent that it is now because I think that this raising of awareness and understanding and response is having a ripple effect. So, I think this is happening widely across the diocese now, that there are regular collections for the food bank, where maybe they weren't before.” (Third sector respondent)

This also appeared to be the case for donations from supermarkets, with many more coming forward to help support food banks:

“Something that I'd noticed, the general, kind of, understanding and awareness of food poverty because of the COVID crisis has changed. When we first set up the Food Poverty Alliance over two years ago, I remember talking to supermarkets and trying to get their food surplus supplies and they weren't very interested, it was too much hassle. Now, it's very different. I'm getting emails from Asda Community Fund saying, “Do you know anyone who wants to apply for this funding? We're giving away food to vulnerable communities now.” That's one change.” (Third sector respondent)

More engagement from the Council

Similarly, some respondents expressed feeling like the Council was more engaged with food banks as a result of the pandemic. This was expressed in the following quote:

“Nobody from the local authority was involved or interested in where the food banks were, or what they were doing, until COVID hit and then suddenly I'm getting lots of, “Can I come and sit in on your meetings with the food banks, get an idea of what's happening?” and so forth. So things are much more

connected.” (Third sector respondent)

Encouragement of local level responses

The Council’s Talk Community Hub programme placed particular emphasis on the ability of local communities to respond to the needs they identified over the pandemic themselves. This approach appeared to reflect what happened in communities as well:

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

Limitations of the Westminster Government shielding food box programme

While there were not many concerns highlighted from our research participants about the shielding food box programme, it is notable that the one form of direct food provision that the Herefordshire County engaged was food parcels for people who were shielding in the first six weeks of the pandemic. It was highlighted that the response was enacted because the Government’s shielding boxes were not signed up for fast enough, nor were they distributed fast enough or consistently in the first weeks.

We also heard from one stakeholder that there were concerns about the contents of the boxes:

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

We also heard about food from the shielding boxes ending up in food banks because people couldn’t use it, and when asked what aspects of responses to food insecurity should not be continued into the future, our respondents listed the national food box scheme.

Rural concerns

The rural nature of Herefordshire was raised as a factor that shaped both reasons for food access issues over the pandemic and also the nature of responses enacted. For example, access to food early in the pandemic was an issue because in rural areas, there are fewer places for food banks to access food:

“The supermarket shelves [were] clearing, and there was very little to purchase, and so [food banks] needed to buy more but there was less available. In a lot of these market towns, it’s a long way to go to another supermarket. And even then you’re not going to get maybe anything different.” (Third sector respondent)

The “rural premium” of living in rural areas was also raised as a driver of food insecurity in Herefordshire:

“And then lack of transport: if you have a job you need a car, and if you’re out not in the city, you can’t get about. There is one train line that goes north to south but if you’re not moving between those two towns that it stops at then it’s no use. So, you know, you have to run a car. And often it’s oil heating out in the rural areas...”

They reckon it's over or around £3,000 per household for that rural premium of living out in [rural areas] and that isn't allowed for in wages or benefits, is it?"

As already raised, the sparse population and costs of delivering services to rural areas were also thought to be a barrier to attracting funding to address food insecurity in rural areas.

"It's so sparsely populated and spread out, that pockets of deprivation, even on the scale that they do on the super low output areas and things, it's really difficult to pick up, because often it can be just spread everywhere...[We] find it difficult to attract the funding, so we can never make a big enough difference because we don't hit enough numbers...And it is difficult to deliver because it is so rural. Combine expensive delivery with lack of numbers, it's really a challenge to get funding." (Third sector respondent)

As before, the rural nature of Herefordshire was also thought to have contributed to the lack of coordination of different responses to food insecurity over the pandemic:

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

New vulnerability to food insecurity during the pandemic

Over the course of our interviews and workshops, our participants identified new vulnerabilities to food insecurity that they hadn't seen before. The need for access to the internet over the pandemic was one, since so many services had moved online. This vulnerability was compounded by the closure of public spaces where wi-fi had formerly been freely available (e.g. libraries). Another was the specific vulnerability to food access issues during the pandemic caused by the inability of people, especially older people, to access food through their usual channels:

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

"Elderly people who rely on that support from others to provide food or deliver food." (Council staff respondent)

In general, it was felt that food access issues were affecting a much wider number of people in Herefordshire:

"So many people have needed help that aren't used to asking for help, because it has involved a much wider part of society than before."

Unmet need

We asked respondents about whether they felt there were individuals that may have been overlooked by responses and the extent to which they felt hidden hunger was a problem in Herefordshire. Some were sure this was the case:

“There’s a hidden bunch of people that have never accessed help and probably still are invisible to us. That has been my main concern that, you know, with the isolation ripping through, it’s really hard, isn’t it? If you’re not seen or known about...how do you know if you’ve not got the ability to engage through a screen or access services or knowledge through the Internet?... I reckon there are still quite a few people, however hard we try, that are still really isolated and just on the edge, which is horrible to think.” (Third sector respondent)

The difficulty in identifying groups who might be in need over the pandemic specifically was highlighted, though it was felt that frontline workers play a key role:

“Because quite often, people who are in need, not all of them know how to or are willing to access support. Maybe through the stigma, or pride, or just not knowing, whatever it might be...There are certain people within communities that know - they know who are vulnerable...The nurses, the local health visitors, that is the word I was looking for, are quite often right in the thick of it.” (Third sector respondent)

It was also felt that some of the ways that food banks operate is a barrier to people accessing food assistance, as reflected in the following quotes:

“So [at Ross food bank] they’re helping, they said, between 20 and 25 people per week. I just thought with a population of nearly 11,000, that’s not necessarily meeting some needs. So, I thought we needed to, kind of, change the story a bit, really, as well as a lot of the food is the typical food larder stuff...I know there’s some fresh stuff, but it’s mainly tinned dried items. So, there’s this thing about nutrition there. They were just open Tuesday mornings, so there’s something there about accessibility...I think the whole thing about the language, food larder, food bank, for a lot of people, has a lot of baggage and having to queue up somewhere outside of a known place...” (Third sector respondent)

“I would [agree] with that and that’s something we’ve been talking about at the food banks, about dignity, and accessibility and being more open in how they think. Some of them are beginning to address that.” (Third sector respondent)

In response to concerns about unmet need in Ross, the Ross Food Hub and “Zero Waste” project was launched, and as described, the demand for this food was taken as evidence of greater need in the town than was being reflected by the food bank’s numbers:

“So, that’s why we’ve done something, a community garden, and... really going for zero waste, which means anyone can come, whether you’re struggling or not, so making it a safer place. That’s open four mornings a week and we’ve already helped 40 people in our first week. So, I just think there’s a change, really, going on, but even a greater need, as well, I think.” (Third sector respondent)

As reflected in the above quote and in the following, a shift in provision to food share models built on the premise of addressing food waste was thought to be one way of reducing shame of accessing food assistance and reaching more people:

“So, Leominster food bank has a regular table offering of any surplus food, and all FareShare food and things like that, that they put up in different places at different times that goes out and anybody can come. It’s about, “This is going to

waste if people don't take it," and anybody can. So, that's a good thing as well."
(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 enacted in Herefordshire over the spring and summer are summarised below.

Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

Adaptability of organisations

The adaptability of organisations, and the speed at which they adapted, was praised by some of our stakeholders. This was mentioned in particular reference to food banks:

"They were able to adapt. Sometimes that meant a change of leadership, managing person leading it, sometimes it was volunteers, and in some cases it was both. So they went through a huge overhaul, in the short space of time, as well as having to adapt their delivery model." (Third sector respondent)

"It's quite unbelievable what they coped with in a very short space of time, and how they managed to adapt, being agile enough to turn it around and deliver, particularly to deliver, is quite amazing." (Third sector respondent)

The ability of organisations to reshape and remodel quickly was highlighted as an enabler of the food response seen in Herefordshire over the spring and summer of 2020.

Need to adapt brought about changes that were overdue

Some stakeholders reflected on how the pandemic accelerated changes in organisations that were for the better and that otherwise, may have taken a long time to implement:

"I think the communities continue to be resourceful and, to some extent, self-sufficient, because that's the model they have had to be, and you see that in them, but they have also learnt to cooperate and take on board some new ways of working...I have to say some of the shakeout of old ways of working has also been helpful." (Third sector respondent)

"And the opportunity to accelerate change that you wouldn't have got ten years ago... We talk about dignity and we talk about different ways of delivering it, some organisations get that better than others. I had an observation that for

some food banks it was all about food. Do you know what I mean?” (Third sector respondent)

With reference to the new single provider of hot meals for people who were vulnerably housed in Hereford City, it was shared that this was something that had been advocated for but it took the pandemic to make it happen:

“We were finding that rough sleepers were being trawled around the city and, well, the safeguarding, the issues that go with that, and it was much better to manage if it was centralised. I’d been trying for years to encourage them to cooperate together and have a central provision where we could then add in some helpful things like mental health workers and that sort of thing, and that was just a step too far for them... But when the pandemic hit, by default we got there very quickly.” (Third sector respondent)

Positive feedback from recipients of programmes

Some of our stakeholders shared the positive feedback they received from recipients of various responses enacted over the spring and summer. One came from a council staff respondent who was involved in identifying families to receive food parcels from the Rotary Club:

“I have to say, you know, it was so well appreciated and there was lots of fresh food in there as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Features of Herefordshire’s response to food insecurity that should be continued into the future

In the Padlet, a number of items were listed that were features of responses seen in response to food insecurity in Herefordshire that should be continued into the future:

- Focus on healthy local food/importance of food
- Early identification of where resources are and where to get them
- The ability to pull community together and to lead and own what is needed locally.
- Growing your own
- Stronger community feel
- Ability to adapt
- Community support in rural areas
- “Family focus”
- Community food hubs and use of surplus food
- Healthy food education projects
- Looking for more sustainable long-term ways of meeting food needs – local growing of food and connecting producers with those who need food locally.
- The local authority working closer with charities and food supporting organisations, understanding the needs better.

Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer

Lack of coordination

One concern raised by participants was a lack of coordination between different organisations engaged in the food response in Herefordshire over the pandemic. The consequences of a lack of coordination were identified as two-fold: one, that in some areas, there was a duplication of responses, with the same groups being targeted; but two, that the lack of coordination also meant that gaps in responses could not be identified and filled:

“Talk Community was a good idea in principle but [it] lacked a coordinated response... If every agency provided guidance on how they operated and what they could provide, this would have given a clearer picture of what Herefordshire was capable of and what was lacking.” (Anonymous quote from Padlet)

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

“Duplication took place in the provision of food during school holidays. Information sharing, even if it was only postcode data, would have helped identify multi-agency involvement.” (Anonymous quote from Padlet)

“I think during COVID it definitely showed us that there were a lot of organisations out there with an interest in food and supporting the food poverty agenda. It was quite quickly apparent that not everybody knew what everybody else was doing. That there did need to be some kind of coordination or at least some discussion. I think as a local authority, we did have more of an overview of what was going on than others. But still because organisations were funding these things themselves, it was up to them what they were doing.” (Council staff respondent)

“We also had a lot of third sector voluntary organisations who stepped up and wanted to offer food and food parcels. There was a lot of that going on. So, coordinating and not managing it, because we did not want to manage it, but trying to ensure there was not overlap and that everybody was getting support. Rather than a small number were getting a lot of support. That was challenging maybe at times.” (Council staff respondent)

The lack of coordination between different actors was attributed to the need to act quickly by one respondent, who also felt that ultimately, it was a positive that there were so many different organisations engaged in the response:

“The difficulty was that there was very little planning time. It was- It needed doing now. Everything was immediate. So, to coordinate the response was a massive task. We were lucky that we had so many organisations that were willing to do so many things.” (Council staff respondent)

Similarly, although it was felt that food parcels provided by the Rotary Club happened without consultation, it was felt that ultimately, it was positive how quickly they set up and provided this support:

“But, anyway, it is completed now and they did a great job of organising it very quickly, and getting it up-and-running, and delivered and linking in with the Council, which is fabulous.” (Third sector respondent, speaking about Rotary Club food parcels)

Another respondent reflected on how the lack of coordination reflected the nature of the rural area:

“Although not very well-coordinated, there are lots of things happening and did happen, which is fairly typical of our rural area, in that communities get on with it and respond to the crisis, but it’s not necessarily very well-coordinated or linked up. That’s not a surprising picture to me, I would say.” (Third sector respondent)

The move to pre-packed food parcels and loss of non-food support

Pre-packed food parcels were identified as one adaptation made by food banks that was not a positive one over the pandemic.

“I think the delivery model of everything packed up, no choice, has not been helpful. I don't know when we will lose that and whether we can move to something.” (Third sector respondent)

Similarly, the shift to “doorstep” pick-up models was viewed as a negative adaptation made by food banks but required by the pandemic:

“The Ross Food Larder - I know they did move to, like, an outside stall very early on, so it’s much safer, but then they did have to stop things like tea and toast they were doing in the local church hall or whatever. So, straightaway, you stop that whole sense of community connecting relationship thing, really. It’s “take your items and go”, really.” (Third sector respondent)

Other features of the response that should not be continued into the future

From our Padlets, the following features of responses enacted over the pandemic were identified as things that should not be continued into the future:

- National food box
- Bringing food into the county from outside providers to meet local need when we could have enhanced local provision and supply over longer term.
- Judgement on why people are asking for help
- Duplication of services
- Organisations popping up to provide support that don’t consult with others already doing this, leading to duplication in some cases.

Barriers to the food response over spring and summer 2020

The following points were listed as barriers to implementing responses to concerns about food insecurity over the pandemic:

- Lack of sign posting. Community members being sent from pillar to post.
- Herefordshire faced delays in setting up power to bulk buy food with local supermarkets. This resulted in multiple trips to supermarkets creating increased COVID risks to staff and volunteers.

The present and looking ahead

Looking beyond the pandemic, our stakeholders mentioned some specific areas of work they hoped to do or had already started. It was felt that the pandemic had raised the profile of poverty in Herefordshire, which could lead to more engagement from the Council with the issue. One stakeholder mentioned working to link schools to food banks more closely or to set up their own food banks, as well as food banks newly looking at providing money advice services at their food banks. Isolation was another focus that food bank providers were looking to address. As before, a move to food share models focused on reducing food waste and involving people being able to choose their items was also highlighted as a direction for some food banks for the future, with the idea that these models reduce stigma associated with food banks.

The Herefordshire's Food Poverty Alliance re-launch in July 2020 included setting new terms of reference including having a remit that is wider than food poverty, with the aspiration to implement a Sustainable Food Places model in Herefordshire. Their new remit was described as:

“It is fair to say [the Alliance] has got a wider remit now. Within the remit, there is still quite a strong focus on food poverty and the health aspects of food and nutrition. But being a rural county as well, we are a food-producing county. The wider remit includes, why are there people struggling to access food in a food-producing country? So looking at it in a wider-systems approach really.” (Third sector respondent).



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