



FOOD VULNERABILITY  
DURING

**COVID-19**



MAPPING LOCAL RESPONSES:  
MARCH TO AUGUST 2020

# Moray 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](mailto:foodvulnerabilitycovid19@sheffield.ac.uk).

### Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

Pre COVID-19 Moray Food Plus, a third sector organisation, provided support with access to food across Moray, in North East Scotland. They went on to play a leading role in the response during the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting their services to be able to continue to provide support to people facing financial barriers to food access and working with other organisations to provide localised food responses. They also worked with many of the local organisations who were newly providing food support in local communities. At a more local level many community organisations took on the role of supporting local residents with access to food, many of whom faced physical restrictions in food access, potentially exacerbated by the rurality of the region and a high proportion of elderly residents in some local areas. This combined third sector response mobilized quickly and benefitted from their local, on the ground knowledge and, in some cases, existing connections with local residents. Funding for COVID-19 responses seemed abundant in the area.

Moray Council also became a key actor in the response to the pandemic. They opted to use a proportion of the Scottish Government Food Fund, which provided funding to local authorities to support people with access to food, to create a local flexible food fund, to which people could apply for financial assistance with food and food related costs.<sup>1</sup> Facilitated by the Moray Council money advice team, who already had a close working relationship with Moray Food Plus, this provided a cash first response wherever possible and appropriate, with the fund being the first port of call for people facing financial barriers to food access (rather than, or in addition to, direct emergency food provision). As well as this financial support, grant recipients were supported to access a wider suite of support. The Council also provided fruit and veg boxes for people who were both financially vulnerable and shielding. This was separate from and in addition to the national shielding grocery box scheme. Lastly, existing council community support officers played a key role in supporting local communities to provide the food support.

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

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

A number of actors and activities provided a response to food insecurity in Moray 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 the third sector organisation, Moray Food Plus provided support with access to food across Moray, a predominantly rural area in North East Scotland. Moray Food Plus provide a variety of services to those either experiencing or at risk of food insecurity as well as working with partners to reduce the amount of local food waste taking surplus food and redistributing it amongst the community.<sup>2</sup> Moray Food Plus ran the only food bank in the local authority area, providing support across the region in the form of emergency food parcels for people in crisis. Prior to the crisis the service worked on a referral basis from a range of agencies (about 50) and also accepted self-referrals. Following referral, a food parcel with three days' worth of food was prepared and could be collected from the office or would be delivered to the referrer or to an agreed collection point local to the recipient. This allowed Moray Food Plus to offer this crisis service to residents across the region. The food bank reported the busiest year yet from April 2019 to March 2020, receiving 2,829 referrals and supporting 6,444 people. Moray Food Plus also worked with a range of other organisations to support the hosting and running of a food larder. In 2019/2020 twenty-two community larders were situated with partner agencies across Moray. In the year to March 2020 these larders were accessed 1,659 times, with over 5 tonnes of food distributed with recipients able to choose food from the larder at no cost. The organisations also ran holiday clubs, from which over 250 children attended and benefitted from over 340 breakfasts and 340 nutritious lunches in total in 2019, ran 210 cookery sessions with over 75 adults and 165 children in the year to March 2020 and ran regular community meals and lunch clubs.

The key response from Moray Council prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was support with income maximisation through the money advice team including support with benefits, debt advice and referrals to the Scottish Welfare Fund. The team worked in partnership with Moray Food Plus and referred to the food bank when appropriate. Moray Food Plus regularly signposted people to the money advice team.

A variety of other organisations, most often church based, provided lunch clubs for older people across the area.

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

#### Moray Food Plus

Moray Food Plus continued as a key actor in supporting food access across the region. They made a number of changes to their services as a result of the pandemic and the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://morayfoodplus.org.uk/>

conditions imposed by national lockdown. Two key adaptations were made to the emergency food parcel provision. Firstly, self-referrals for an emergency food parcel were no longer accepted. This decision was taken to facilitate a cash-first approach through the money advice services team and to ensure food parcels were provided to people who were struggling to access food for financial reasons, rather than people who were physically unable to access food (for whom other support was available). Secondly, where a local collection point for food parcels (such as a community hall) was not available home deliveries were offered. After exceptionally busy months in April, May and June with 1091, 745 and 570 people supported respectively, demand returned to levels broadly similar to previous years, attributed to a range of other support options available to people.

Other services that Moray Food Plus newly started providing included a Meals on Wheels service primarily to support people who would ordinarily attend community lunch clubs or community meals which could not continue during lockdown. Moray Food Plus worked in partnership with other local organisations, such as social work, mental health social workers, children and family social workers and a lot of the older people's groups to identify people who would benefit from this support. Three course meals were provided once or twice a week, delivered directly to people's homes. During April, May and June about 400-450 meals a week were provided, with a total of approximately 4,500 meals provided in total. Moray Food Plus also worked with 14 community council areas to provide care packages targeted at older people who were struggling to get the shops. Care packages were delivered to people's houses, through the local community groups. They were not intended to be the main source of food but rather to provide something that would take the pressure off restricted physical access to food. This service ran throughout April, May and June. Over those three months, over 3,000 parcels were distributed right across Moray.

Moray Food Plus also distributed supermarket vouchers to households and partner agencies for further distribution. Vouchers were distributed directly from Moray Food Plus to families who, ordinarily, would have attended the children's activities programmes, targeted at families who would benefit from this provision for financial or social reasons, during the Easter school holidays. Other vouchers were provided to single people and couples, these were distributed through partner agencies, for example the Drug and Alcohol team who identified the households who would benefit from this provision. Often these vouchers were offered as an alternative to a referral for a food parcel. About 200-300 people were supported with vouchers between April and June 2020, with a total value of £9,290. They also supported local community organisations to establish public facing food larders.

### Moray Council

Adopting a cash first approach Moray Council opted to use a proportion of Food Fund funding received from the Scottish Government to operate a local flexible food fund which provided both financial assistance and additional support from the money advice team.<sup>3</sup> The initiative was led by the money advice team. The flexible food fund provided two cash payments, once a month for two months, with the amount depending on the size of the household. Receipt of the second payment was conditional on the recipients engaging with the wider suite of support offered.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/coronavirus-food-fund/>

As well as referrals from partner organisations everyone who called the Council's money advice services would be considered for a grant. Eligibility criteria for accessing the fund was very flexible. Applicants were considered if they were in receipt of certain benefits, or had applied for them, or had an underlying entitlement to them (but had not yet applied). As well as these criteria based on means tested benefits people were also considered based on receiving statutory sick pay or employment support allowance or if they were in a "grey area where they did not tick all the boxes" such as having no recourse to public funds. Between May and September 700 households received support from the fund amounting to about £252,000. The flexible food fund was distinct from the existing emergency grants scheme, the Scottish Welfare Fund, although people would be considered for both if appropriate.

Moray Council also provided weekly fruit and veg parcels and parcels that were tailored to specific dietary requirements to people who were both shielding and financially vulnerable. This was a supplement to the national government provided shielding grocery boxes. Eligible households were identified when the Council's money advice services team highlighted who on the shielding list were in receipt of some form of welfare support such as, for example, Universal Credit or free school meals. The scheme ran for 11 weeks. Over this time, 290 households received weekly fruit and veg bags and 10 households received the food parcels that catered for specific dietary requirements

In addition to this support Moray Council also provided staff to support the Grampian Hub, which included a helpline for people requiring any form of support and existing community support officers played a key role in supporting local communities to provide a food response including support with funding applications, co-ordination and networking.

### Local Community Organisations

Across the Moray region many local community organisations, such as community councils, community associations, the credit union, local development trusts, existing support groups (eg. mother and toddler groups) and local businesses (hotels, cafes, takeaways, local butchers, local whisky distilleries etc.) worked together to provide support with food access in their local community. Each group provided support to a clearly defined local geographical community. Support was provided in a range of forms including food parcel deliveries, hot meal deliveries, the provision of vouchers and volunteer shopping. These more local organisations worked in partnership with Moray Food Plus and the allocated community support officer from the Council. The scale of the operations differed. For example, in one town with a population of approximately 1,500 people, 7-10 households received weekly food parcels from the community association throughout lockdown and beyond. In another town, with a population of approximately 7,000, meals were provided twice a week to about 60 households.

Although not exclusively, much of this localized support was targeted at people who were physically unable to access food, which was of particular relevance in Moray due to rurality and a proportionately high elderly population in some areas. In addition to this direct food provision the local community organisations often provided a shopping service and local supermarkets had systems in place to support this volunteer shopping.

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

The case study draws from the following data sources:

- Five interviews were conducted with representatives of different organisations.
  - Three were staff working for Moray Council in different teams (community support team, money advice services and shielding responses/Grampian Covid-19 Assistance Hub).
  - One was with a representative of a third sector organisation,
  - One was with a volunteer for a local community association.
  
- One workshop conducted with 10 participants of whom:
  - 5 worked for established third sector organisations in the area (1 already interviewed)
  - 4 worked/volunteered for a local community association or development trust (1 already interviewed)
  - 1 was a school link worker

In addition to these participants a further 7 people, from local community councils or groups providing a food response at a local community level, were invited to participate in the research but were unable to do so.

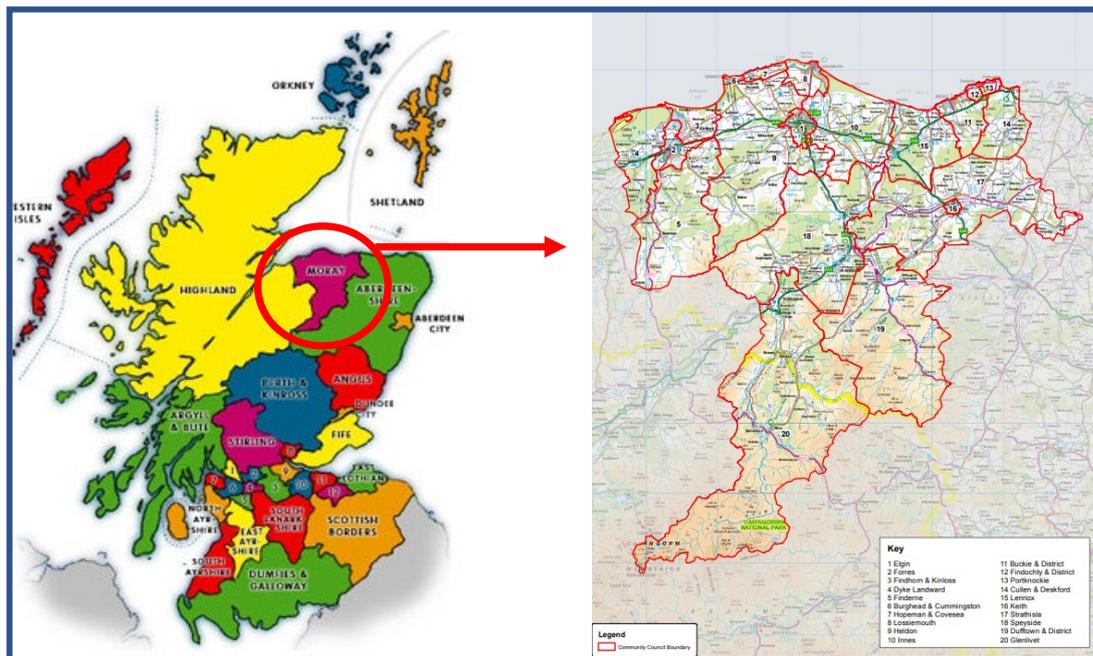
In addition to primary research data collected through the interviews and workshop, desk-based research was conducted to identify sources of information about activities and groups active in the food response during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research had a particular focus on the information available on the Moray Council website. Research participants were also invited to provide any reports or evaluations that were relevant and the representative from Moray Food Plus provided links to annual reports and relevant newspaper articles. Lastly, during the workshop, written responses were collected from participants using Padlet and level of agreement with various statements were assessed using Mentimeter. Other data included comments submitted via the 'chat' function and emails which were sent with additional comments following the workshop. These sources of data are also reported on.

## About Moray

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. Moray 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 104%.

Moray is one of 32 local authorities in Scotland, located in the north east of the country. The predominantly rural region stretches from the coastline of the Moray Firth in the north to the Cairngorms national park in the south. Elgin, located in the north, is the largest town in the region with approximately 25% of the population living there. Four other towns in the region each have a population between 5,000-10,000 residents. Most of the working population work in one of these five towns. Moray’s main businesses are varied and include fishing, farming, food, drink and textiles. With a high concentration of whisky distilleries in the area it forms part of the Scottish whisky trail and therefore tourism is a key part of the economy.



Source: Map of Scottish Council Areas and Moray Council Area<sup>4</sup>

On 30 June 2019, the population of Moray was 95,820. 21.6% of the population were aged 65 and over.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Moray is one of the least deprived areas of mainland Scotland, having the second lowest share of data zones in the 20% most deprived. However, there are pockets of deprivation: four of the 126 data zones in Moray are in the 20% most deprived, three located in Elgin and one in the town of Forres. This is an increase from 2016 when one data zone was in the 20% most deprived.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray\\_standard/page\\_45710.html](http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_45710.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/moray-council-profile.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020v2-local-and-national-share-calculator-2/>

2016 SIMD data shows that, when considering level of income, there is a gap of 23% between Moray's most and least deprived areas.<sup>7</sup>

Participants also reported that Moray is a low wage economy. Almost 25% of the working age population are earning below the living wage, compared to 18% in Scotland as a whole. In addition, Moray has a comparatively high rate of part-time employment: 38.2% of all employed, versus 33.3% in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Claimant Rate in Moray was 2.5% in January 2020, but this rose to 5.1% in July 2020.

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

### Moray Food Plus

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Moray Food Plus played a key role in supporting people and communities across the Moray region with a range of food activities and projects. The current form and focus of Moray Food Plus has evolved. It was originally established as 'Community Food Moray' in March 2012 with a focus on providing increased access to healthy food and running sessions to support the development of cooking and nutrition skills and knowledge. Through this work the organisation observed there was a need for emergency food aid and Moray Food Bank was established. Over time the food bank became the busiest service, so the organisation changed the name to Moray Food Bank (from 'Community Food Moray') and this became the central focus. Since then the services have expanded considerably, and the organisation has sought to offer more dignified responses to food poverty, adding other services such as community meals and community larders as well as the food bank. This prompted a change in name to Moray Food Plus to reflect the wider suite of services. The organisation now describes itself as providing a variety of services to those either experiencing or at risk of food insecurity as well as working with partners to reduce the amount of local food waste by taking surplus food and redistributing it amongst the community.<sup>9</sup> Their work includes emergency food, community larders, cooking skills courses, community meals, lunch clubs, school holiday clubs, food growing, cooking and wellbeing sessions with families and food recovery (including food from FareShare).

Moray Food Plus ran the only food bank in the local authority area, providing support across the region in the form of emergency food parcels for people in crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the service worked on a referral basis from a range of agencies (about 50) and also accepted self-referrals. Following referral a food parcel, with three days' worth of food was prepared and could be collected from the office, or would be delivered to the referrer or to an agreed collection point local to the recipient. This allowed Moray Food Plus to offer this crisis service to residents across the region. The food bank reported the busiest year yet from April 2019 to March 2020, receiving 2,829 referrals and supporting 6,444 people. The

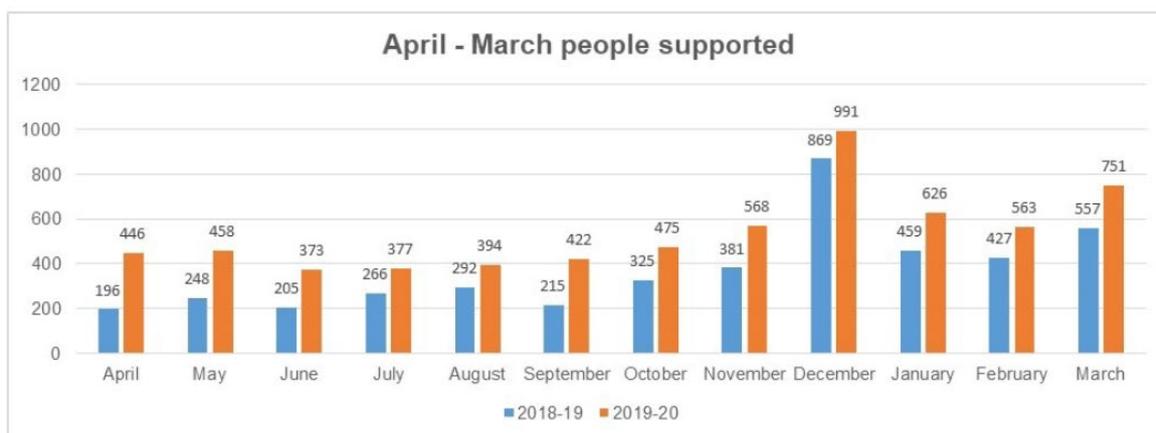
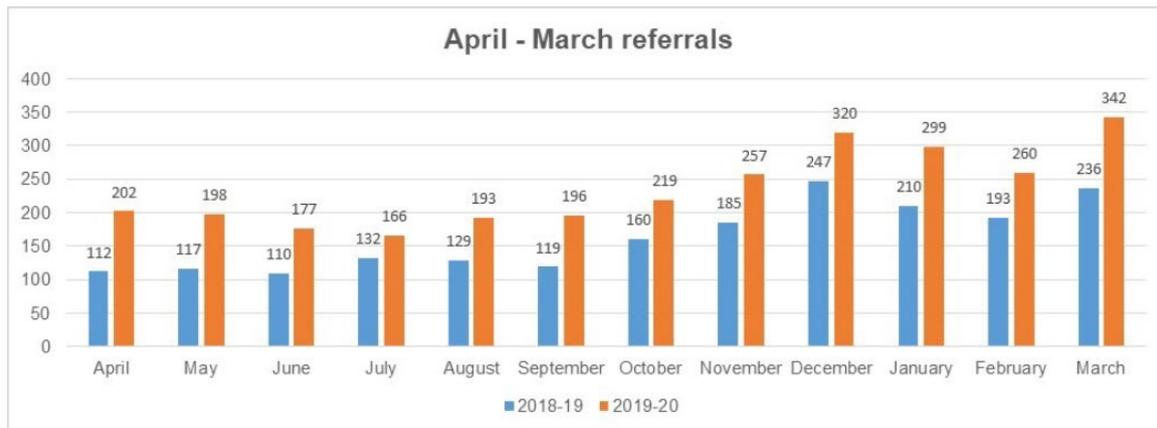
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<sup>7</sup><http://www.moray.gov.uk/minutes/data/CB20180419/5.%20Understanding%20poverty%20in%20Moray%20-%20Appendix%201%20-%20Poverty%20Profile.pdf>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.moray.gov.uk/minutes/data/CB20180419/5.%20Understanding%20poverty%20in%20Moray%20-%20Appendix%201%20-%20Poverty%20Profile.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://morayfoodplus.org.uk/>

graph below shows the number of referrals received and the number of people supported from April to March 2018-2019 and 2019-2020.



Source: Moray Food Plus Annual Review, 2019-2020.<sup>10</sup>

Moray Food Plus also worked with a range of other organisations to support the hosting and running of a food larder. In 2019/2020 twenty two community larders were situated with partner agencies across Moray. In the year April 2019 to March 2020 these larders were accessed 1,659 times, with over 5 tonnes of food distributed. These 'in house' food larders were available to the clients of that organisation, for example being hosted in supported accommodation for homeless people. The first larders were housed in homeless accommodation with the rationale that if people came to the accommodation in the evening, when other services were closed, the larder would provide them food until they could contact Moray Food Plus and other organisations, for further support the following day. Larders are permanently stocked and people are able to choose food from the larder as and when is needed. The food from the larder is provided at no cost to recipients. Moray Food Plus supported the host organisations with set up and ongoing running of the larder, as well as providing the food through their food distribution work.

Moray Food Plus also ran the 'Holibub Club', holiday clubs which ran in the school holidays in 6 towns and villages across Moray. Across the Summer and October holidays of 2019 over 250 children attended and benefitted from over 340 breakfasts and 340 nutritious lunches in total.

<sup>10</sup> <https://fliphtml5.com/lehxo/wald>

As well as this immediate provision of food Moray Food Plus ran a range of activities to provide social opportunities and to support people with food skills and knowledge. They hosted one or two community meals a month, ran a weekly lunch club and ran cooking sessions with children and families. In the year to April 2019 to March 2020, 210 cookery sessions were delivered with over 75 adults and 165 children. They also ran cooking sessions in partnership with SACRO, an organisation that provides temporary supported accommodation, to prepare people for independent living. This support also continued once the person had their own home. 120 cooking sessions were delivered to at least 20 people. They also encouraged and supported other organisations and groups in the area to provide food and cooking activities, for example, supporting a local vulnerable parenting group to start making soup together for lunch. The support provided included expertise and food from the food distribution project.

The food distribution project collected quality supermarket waste and other surplus foods and redistributed it to community groups and other projects in the area. 30-35 organisations received food through the project, either those providing food activities (cooking groups, lunches etc.) or to organisations which provide food to support clients. In the year April 2019 to March 2020 over 21 tonnes of quality surplus food and 4,000 litres of milk were recovered and redistributed.

Moray Food Plus were also part of the Fairer Moray Forum.

### Fairer Moray Forum

Fairer Moray Forum was initiated by Moray Food Plus in 2017. Early conversations in its establishment highlighted that the Forum should have a broader focus on poverty, rather than food insecurity specifically. The Forum recognised that co-ordinated work had to be done at a strategic level to prevent poverty in the region, as well as the grass roots responses to immediate need. Members include representatives from Moray Food Plus, NHS Grampian, TSI Moray, Moray Citizens Advice Bureau, The Moray Council Housing, The Moray Council Education and Social Care, The Moray Council Benefits, Department for Work & Pensions, and local councillors and MSPs.

The Fairer Moray Forum developed a poverty strategy and action plan for preventing, mitigating and undoing poverty in Moray. The plan contains 8 strategic outcomes and 26 discrete actions aimed at tackling poverty through three key mechanisms: raising income from employment, reducing the cost of living and increased uptake of social security.<sup>11</sup> When the Scottish Government introduced statutory requirements to reduce levels of child poverty this became a key focus of the Forum.<sup>12</sup>

The Fairer Moray Forum registered as an alliance with the Food Power network and received financial support to develop a food poverty action plan.<sup>13</sup> Moray Food Plus took the lead on the food poverty action plan. The food poverty action plan has five priorities: remove the stigma around poverty, income maximisation, increase access to food/social value of food, increase food knowledge, and develop holiday food provision.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://morayfoodplus.org.uk/final-poverty-strategy-action-plan.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower/about/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://morayfoodplus.org.uk/final-action-plan.pdf>

### Moray Council

Moray Council are members of Fairer Moray Forum and contribute to both the poverty and the food poverty action plan. The Council money advice team provide support with income maximization, including benefits and debt advice. They also support people with applications to the Scottish Welfare Fund. The team works in partnership with Moray Food Plus and refer to the food bank when appropriate. Moray Food Plus regularly signpost people to the money advice team.

### School food provision

As noted above, Moray Food Plus run 'Holibub' holiday clubs. Social work, school link workers, third sector organisations and other agencies identify families who would benefit from this support during the holiday. Other organisations in the area ran holiday clubs, such as Elgin Youth Café and local churches for which there may be a charge for attendance.

### Contracted Meals on Wheels

Prior to March 2018 Moray Council contracted the Royal Voluntary Service to provide a Meals on Wheels service in the area. Local volunteers delivered the service. The service was withdrawn in 2018 due to a national policy change for Royal Voluntary Service.<sup>15</sup> Since then there has been no council provided Meals on Wheels service. However, if a need for a Meals on Wheels is identified people can be directed to Wiltshire Farm Foods who operate in the area, for a charge to the recipient.<sup>16</sup>

### Meal providers

A variety of other organisations, most often Church based, provide lunch clubs for older people across the area.

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

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

### Financial vulnerability

The money advice team witnessed a lot of people who were applying for Universal Credit for the first time.

“And we could just see how the amount of Universal Credit cases were rocketing, particularly from May and June. When Universal Credit starts, housing benefit stops, the number of housing benefit stops were tiny, and still are tiny, compared to the amount of people that were going on Universal Credit. So, we were obviously seeing from just the stats that were coming through, that there was an awful lot of people that were claiming Universal Credit for the very first time.” (Council staff respondent)

As a result of this the money advice team were proactively phoning new applicants to explain about Universal Credit, such as it being a monthly payment and that advances were to be deducted from later payments etc.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray\\_standard/page\\_49552.html](http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_49552.html)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com>

Other organisations reported increased need for support from people who are self-employed, due to the support payments available through the national scheme not being paid until June.

“That was a huge surge in numbers for us in our area. Working with the COVID team on the ground level, we had to get our heads into the game for self-employed. There were farmers that were never known to look at you for help. They were desperate. They were getting nothing coming until June, middle of June.” (Third sector respondent)

Moray Food Plus also experienced a surge in need for emergency food parcels, with April being their busiest month ever. 1,091 people were supported by the food bank in April 2020, compared to 751 in March and 446 in April 2019. This included an increase in referrals for families who were experiencing increased financial pressure due to the closure of schools.

### Restricted physical access

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic access to shops in the region was identified as a potential barrier to food access with public transport being expensive, unreliable and infrequent, and car owners incurring extra fuel costs travelling to the bigger towns.<sup>17</sup> On top of these existing challenges, additional physical restrictions on food access were observed in the early days of the pandemic. Consistent with the rest of the country the food supply and retail chains were disrupted resulting in food shortages in the shops.

These barriers were then compounded with people feeling nervous about visiting shops, particularly if that involved more travel.

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

“People we supported were fearful of going to some of the shops.” (Workshop Padlet response)

One participant reported that there were some issues with the deliveries of the national grocery boxes for people who were shielding.

“Early on there was a problem with the people not getting the Scot Gov boxes and that alerted us I suppose to the fact that we were not the emergency level but we were the level below that. So we had to jump in at that stage.” (Third sector respondent)

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<sup>17</sup> [MORAY-final-action-plan.pdf \(sustainweb.org\)](#)

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

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

### Moray Food Plus

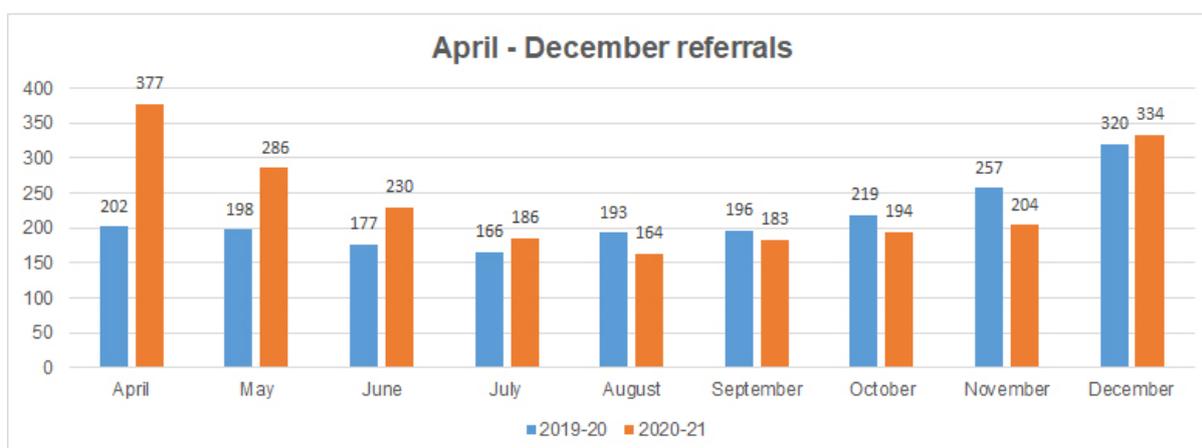
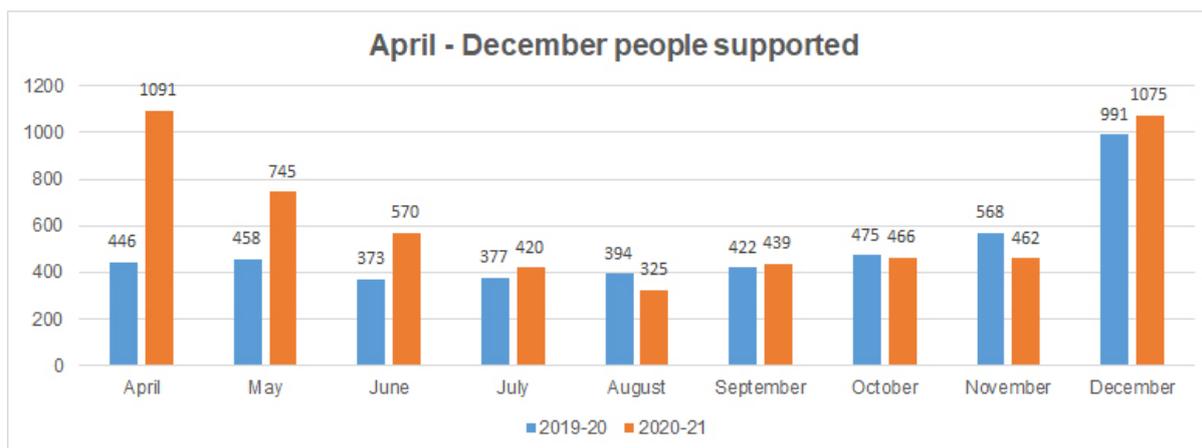
From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic Moray Food Plus was a key actor in supporting food access across the region. They made a number of changes to their services as a result of the pandemic and the conditions imposed by national lockdown, described in more detail below: they continued with an adapted model of emergency food parcel provision; started distributing shopping vouchers; started a Meals on Wheels service; started distribution of 'care' packages; stopped the community meals, lunch clubs, cooking groups and holiday programmes; and continued to provide support to new and existing community groups offering support with food access, including the development of new community larders. Most of their food redistribution work stopped as many of the recipient organisations were not operating their usual services, and with business closures and pressure on supermarkets there was much less surplus food being generated.

As well as these changes to the services Moray Food Plus suspended the volunteering programme.

"We suspended our volunteering programme. Obviously, like all food banks, really, we rely very heavily on volunteers so we suspended our volunteering. A lot of our volunteers are older and have got health issues and they were starting to feel a bit anxious about coming in. We can't really social distance so we just made a decision, to be safe, we'll suspend all the volunteering." (Third sector respondent)

### Emergency food parcels

Emergency food parcel provision continued, with a big spike in need in March, as the national lockdown began. April was the busiest month ever for the emergency food parcel service, supporting over 1,000 households with food parcels. May was also exceptionally busy and then need for the service began to reduce to levels more consistent with those experienced pre COVID-19. The pattern in need is shown in the graphs below:



Source: Graphs provided by Moray Food Plus

This subsequent reduction in the number of food parcels being provided, compared to the early months of lockdown, was attributed to other sources of support becoming available.

“I think the reason we got quieter is because, obviously, we were signposting people to the money services and, hopefully, they were accessing more money and they were able to apply for the Emergency Relief Funds and they were also able to get support locally as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Two key adaptations were made to the emergency food parcel provision service as a result of the pandemic. Firstly, food parcels are commonly delivered to the referral agency or to a drop off point local to the client (such as a local council building) from where the client collects the parcel. However, many of these access points were shut at the start of lockdown. Potential alternative drop off points were identified (such as a local café) but many of these also then had to close. In some areas a viable alternative drop off point was located, for example in supermarkets or shops, but not in other areas. For this reason, Moray Food Plus began delivering food parcels to people’s homes. This was not something that had been done before.

Secondly, self-referrals for an emergency food parcel were no longer accepted. This decision was taken to facilitate a cash-first approach to supporting people with restricted food access. This also ensured food parcels were provided to people who were struggling to access food for financial reasons, rather than people who were physically unable to access food, some of whom were misunderstanding the service which Moray Food Plus provides,

phoning them to request a food parcel. Anyone self-referring was routed to the money advice service or Citizens Advice service in the first instance.

“... to expand on the reason why we stopped taking self-referrals at a time where it's obvious need increased. It was really we were going for the cash first that Scottish Government very much were pushing because we were aware of the Scottish Welfare Fund, you had the Moray Emergency Relief Fund and that you had the Flexible Food Fund as well.

So we were just asking people to go through the money advice and the CAB to see that they were getting all their financial support and if they could access any additional funding, but it was always really clear that we made this arrangement beforehand, that they would refer back to us. We got referrals coming from those agencies because we were going through that route.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to these changes to the operation Moray Food Plus also allowed the community groups and community councils who were newly providing food support in the area (see section below) to refer people for an emergency food parcel.

### *Meals on Wheels service*

Moray Food Plus began a Meals on Wheels service, primarily to support people who would ordinarily attend community lunch clubs or community meals which could not continue during lockdown. The service worked on a referral basis and Moray Food Plus worked in partnership with other local organisations, such as social work, mental health social workers, children and family social workers and a lot of the older people's groups to identify people who would benefit from this support. Three course meals were provided once or twice a week, delivered directly to people's homes.

One of the development officers from Moray Food Plus, who was unable to carry out their usual role due to cessation of other projects in lockdown developed the Meals on Wheels programme. Other Moray Food Plus staff, as well as staff from partner organisations such as SACRO, the criminal justice team and community centre staff, worked on the service including meal preparation and delivery. Catering staff from Moray Council, who were allowed time to support the community response also worked on this provision providing expertise and help with cooking and making meals in large volumes. The meals were prepared in the kitchen of a local community centre. Moray Food Plus got funding to purchase a blast chill so once meals were cooked they could quickly be chilled. Meals were prepared on one day (the 'cooking day') and then labelled and delivered the next day. Once lockdown eased and staff from partner organisations were returning to their day job the service was run by two members of Moray Food Plus staff and small number of volunteers who were returning to their volunteer roles with Moray Food Plus.

During April, May and June about 400-450 meals a week were provided, with a total of approximately 4,500 meals provided in total. The regularity of provision varied, with some households receiving one meal a week while others receiving one meal once a month. The provision was, therefore, not designed to tackle food access barriers but rather to provide some compassion and human contact to households during the lockdown.

“The feedback we were getting from the Meals on Wheels was, “It's nice that folk are thinking about us, it's great that I don't need to cook that night.” (Third sector respondent)

As lockdown began to gradually ease the need for the service reduced as many people were able to get out more and connect more with family and friends. Therefore, this service was later reduced and, at the time of interview (November) about 50-100 meals were being provided with a focus on older people who were identified by social work and other agencies as someone who would benefit from the service. It is planned that this service will continue until March 2021.

### *Care packages*

Moray Food Plus worked with 14 community council areas to provide care packages targeted at older people who were struggling to get to the shops.

“The idea was it was just a very small package of essentials, toilet roll, teabags and then it was always something like a steak pie, potatoes, a tin of rice and that type of thing. They were targeted at older people because, in rural areas, older people were really struggling to get out to the shops.” (Third sector respondent)

Care packages were delivered to people’s houses, through the local community groups. Moray Food Plus provided the contents for the care packages to community groups on a fortnightly basis who would then ‘bag them up’ and deliver to households. They were not intended to be the main source of food but rather to provide something that would take the pressure off restricted physical access to food. This service ran throughout April, May and June. Over those three months, over 3,000 parcels were distributed right across Moray. The service was stopped at the end of June.

“By the end of June, shops were replenished and there were not any shortages or anything. Restrictions were starting to lift and people were starting to feel happier going out and were able to catch up with families outdoors so folk could do shopping for people and everything. Speaking to most of the community groups, we agreed that we would stop that service.” (Third sector respondent)

By providing a regular delivery to people’s homes the care packages and the Meals on Wheels service had additional benefits alongside the direct provision of food. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to distribute information leaflets about other sources of support available in each of the local areas. Secondly, it provided an opportunity to make contact with people using the service, providing both social contact and an opportunity to check in with households in need.

“...the feedback was that the social contact, when volunteers were dropping parcels off at somebody’s door, they were having a wee chat with folk. It let the local communities check up on the local people as well. It was very, very localised support.” (Third sector respondent)

### *Shopping vouchers*

Moray Food Plus also distributed supermarket vouchers to households and partner agencies for further distribution. Vouchers were distributed directly from Moray Food Plus to families who, ordinarily, would have attended the children’s activities programmes, targeted at families who would benefit from this provision for financial or social reasons, during the Easter school holidays. Other vouchers were provided to single people and couples, these were distributed through partner agencies, for example the drug and alcohol team who

identified the households who would benefit from this provision. Often these vouchers were offered as an alternative to a referral for a food parcel. About 200-300 people were supported with vouchers between April and June 2020, with a total value of £9,290. Providing vouchers in this way helped relieve some of the pressure on the emergency food parcel distribution, when it was already exceptionally busy.

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

### *Community larders*

The community larders which operated before the pandemic, from which people could take the type and volume of food which they required, were run by partner organisations, such as supported accommodation for homeless people. As most of the partner organisations stopped face to face contacts the majority of the existing community larders were suspended during the lockdown with the exception of those hosted in supported accommodation for individuals who are homeless.

However, working with some of the community organisations who were newly supporting people with access to food, new public facing larders were established. Having public larders, as opposed to a larder placed within an organisation, is a new model for Moray Food Plus. There are now about 25 larders across the region. Referring to the newly established larders Moray Food Plus said:

“Some of the community larders are still continuing. For us, that’s community development so we’ve got more public larders rather than just being placed in an organisation. Some of them will probably be indefinite and others, they’re thinking they’ll just continue them maybe until March but, obviously, everything keeps changing so we’re not really sure.” (Third sector respondent)

### *Changes to ‘back office’ operations*

#### *Human resources*

The suspension of the volunteering programme altered the human resources available to Moray Food Plus. Staff formed a bubble at the outset of the lockdown. Although the loss of volunteers was challenging, the suspension of some of the usual services meant more staff were now available to work on the pandemic responses. Two local organisations who Moray Food Plus have an existing relationship with also provided some staff support. For example:

“We have a really good working relationship with Criminal Justice. Under normal circumstances, we have quite a lot of people come and do their community payback with us or they bring the squads out and they help us when we have to move a lot of stock around and things like that. Obviously, all of that was put on hold. The staff actually came and helped us. They were a massive help over that period doing the deliveries and things like that.” (Third sector respondent)

Moray Food Plus also utilised a national initiative offered by Scottish Gas whereby staff who were not furloughed but were not as busy as usual were able to use spare hours to support community responses. Scottish Gas employees helped to pick up donations from supermarkets. Moray Food Plus considered this support from a large national organisation as “a really positive thing that came out of it.”

### *Food supplies*

The shortage of food in the supermarkets in the early weeks of the lockdown also forced Moray Food Plus to secure alternative food supplies.

“We go to Tesco every Monday... Under normal circumstances, every Monday, we go to Tesco and we bulk buy the UHT milk that we need for the week. The first thing that impacted us was Tesco weren’t letting us buy stuff anymore and all the shelves were empty so we had this mass spike in need as well.” (Third sector respondent)

To compensate for this loss of supply Moray Food Plus set up trade accounts with Brakes. However, this was more expensive as the available products were often branded as opposed to being able to buy Tesco’s own products. Supported by the Independent Food Aid Network they also secured supply from Aldi distribution centres.

“Through the Independent Food Aid Network, they sent out an email that Aldi were now allowing people to put in orders through the distribution centres but the distribution centre in Scotland is in Bathgate and there was an expectation you would go and collect it, which obviously, for us, is not an option. They were very kind and they agreed to deliver to the Elgin store and then we were able to collect.” (Third sector respondent)

A local businessman gave Moray Food Plus the use of an industrial unit for a couple of months to store the increased volume of food required. This gave the storage space required to do bulk purchasing and also allowed large deliveries to be made, which were difficult in the usual premises on the high street. Donations from three local organisations (golf club, rotary club and a distillery) also allowed Moray Food Plus to purchase a new van which was used to collect shopping, pick up donations and do deliveries.

Although Moray Food Plus were worried about a drop in food donations from the public, as some of the usual donation points were not accessible, this did not materialise as donations from collection points in the large supermarkets increased.

“We’re not really worried about our stock levels. I think we’re fortunate. That’s maybe a rarity. The community in Moray are brilliant. They do really support us and they have done for the past few years as well.” (Third sector respondent)

Some food was also donated from people who were receiving shielding grocery boxes through the national scheme. Donations came from people who either felt they did not need the box or that the food was not suitable or what they like.

Monetary donations from the public also increased during the pandemic. Some of this was attributable to people who were unable to physically access food donating money, in response to having received support through the care packages or meals on wheel services as well as the organisations being generally well supported by the community.

## Moray Council

Moray Council led on a number of initiatives to support people with food access. They partnered with a neighbouring authority to set up the Grampian Covid-19 Assistance Hub, created a flexible food fund to support financially vulnerable households with a cash grant, and provided fruit and veg food boxes to people who were both shielding and financially vulnerable. In addition, the existing community support officers for each of the local areas played a key role in supporting local community activity to support food access. Each of these schemes are described below.

### *Grampian Covid-19 Assistance Hub*

All local authorities in Scotland had to set up an Assistance Hub to provide a key point of contact for people seeking support. The Grampian Hub hosted a helpline and a website.<sup>18</sup> During the first national lockdown the Grampian Hub provided support for people in Moray and the neighbouring region Aberdeenshire. Aberdeen city had their own assistance hub. The hub was staffed by people who worked for the two local authorities as well as other statutory and third sector organisations. The Hub was a key point of contact for people seeking any form of support, including support with food access. The shielding population was a key population group and everyone on the shielding list received a call from the Hub to check what support they needed, including the national government provided shielding grocery boxes.

Although this was a key source of support for people there was sometimes a lack of local knowledge which meant people were perhaps not signposted to all the support options.

“The Grampian Hub just got set up and nobody knew about it. The problem with the Grampian Hub was because Grampian is such a large area, if somebody that lives in Aberdeenshire doesn’t know about Moray, they don’t know what services are here so there was a lot of misinformation and miscommunication. That was one of the challenges as well.” (Third sector respondent)

### *Community support officers*

Previously the role of the Council’s community support team was to support capacity building in the community both with individuals and community groups/organisations including the development of Local Outcome Improvement Plans.<sup>19</sup> During the pandemic, food support became a key part of their role. Each community support officer had an allocated geographical area and they worked with the local people and organisations in that area.

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

The role included supporting funding applications, providing a point of contact for support, connecting people across the areas to share learning and ensuring a collective, joined up

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gcah.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.moray.gov.uk/downloads/file119323.pdf>

response within the community. Feedback from the local people in the community was very positive about having this support.

### *Fresh food boxes*

As a supplement to the national government provided shielding grocery boxes Moray Council provided fruit and veg bags to people who were both shielding and financially vulnerable. Bags were delivered once a week and contained:

“In the main it was vegetables, vegetables that would enable them to make soup. So turnips, onions, leeks and again a sort of fruit option of apples, bananas, tangerines etc. I think initially we were going to include eggs, but we thought it would be a bit of a nightmare, the potential of throwing the stuff in the back of the van.” (Council staff respondent)

Eligible households were identified when the Council’s money advice services team highlighted who on the shielding list were in receipt of some form of welfare support such as, for example, Universal Credit or free school meals.

In addition to the fruit and veg bags, food parcels that met specific cultural and clinical dietary requirements were also provided to financially vulnerable households who made the local authority aware of their specific needs.

Households received a food bag once a week, on a Tuesday. The scheme worked on an opt out basis with all eligible households receiving a box in the first week, with a note stating deliveries would continue unless the recipient contacted the local authority to stop. Food bags were ordered and prepared by the catering service connected to the schools. Council staff from the sport and leisure division collected the bags from the schools operating as hubs and delivered them to each household.

The scheme ran for 11 weeks during May to July. Over this time, 290 households received weekly fruit and veg bags. About 10 households also received the food parcels that catered for specific dietary requirements. However, the eligible list was dynamic, with new people added to the database when required and a small number of households opted out of the scheme. Reasons for opting out included: people not using the produce as they didn’t want to, or didn’t know how to make soup; feeling that the food they received through the national scheme was sufficient; and over time people accessing other forms of support therefore bags were not needed in the latter weeks of the scheme. If there were any excess bags after deliveries were made these were donated to Moray Food Plus.

### *Flexible Food Fund*

Moray Council opted to use a proportion of Food Fund funding received from the Scottish Government to operate a local flexible food fund which provided both financial assistance and additional support from the money advice team.<sup>20</sup> The initiative was led by the money advice team which aligned with the government guidance on the funding to offer holistic, whole person/household responses. Between May and September 700 households received support from the fund amounting to about £252,000.

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

The money advice team communicated the existence of the scheme on their usual communication channels, such as Facebook, and wrote to existing partner organisations who provide support to people to make them aware that the fund was open to their clients if needed.

The flexible food fund provided two cash payments, once a month for two months. These payments did not affect entitlement to statutory benefits. The amount of the award depended on the size of the household. Receipt of the second payment was conditional on the recipients engaging with the wider suite of support offered. Recipients were made aware of the requirement for ongoing engagement as a condition of the cash payment.

“We made everybody aware that when they were entering into this, it wasn’t just about applying for money and off you pop, it was about, you know, working with the money advice team, that was part of the service, if you like, and condition of getting this money, everybody got a first payment because actually when people applied for the food fund, we wanted to make sure that we were getting that payment out as soon as possible.” (Council staff respondent)

As well as referrals from partner organisations everyone who called the Council’s money advice services would be considered for a grant. Eligibility criteria for accessing the fund was very flexible. Applicants were considered if they were in receipt of certain benefits, or had applied for them, or had an underlying entitlement to them (but had not yet applied). As well as these criteria based on means tested benefits, people were also considered based on receiving statutory sick pay or employment support allowance or if they were in a “grey area where they did not tick all the boxes” such as having no recourse to public funds.

“As I say, not everybody is entitled to everything, so we kind of wanted to have that bit in there that there are always grey areas where somebody is not going to tick all of the boxes, and if someone is absolutely desperate it’s in our power to do something about it, it’s a not a statutory scheme, if we had people with no recourse to public funds, we could pay them. So, yes, there were eligibility criteria, but, as I say, there was discretion in there as well.” (Council staff respondent)

Once eligibility was confirmed a member of the money advice team would phone them to, primarily, gather the necessary background information and specific details needed to make the first payment. A later appointment was set up to initiate the provision of and engagement with a wider suite of support. Engaging in this support was a requirement for subsequent receipt of the second payment.

“... the second phone call was, as I say, a mutually agreed appointment time and that was a more in-depth conversation about what other support was available... or what we could do for them. And also making sure that they were getting the right incomes and benefits. And also, if there was any other issues going on with housing or mental health, anything that we could pick up on from that meeting, that we would obviously try to signpost them or get somebody else involved, again, with their consent if that’s what they wanted us to do.” (Council staff respondent)

The funding from the Scottish Government was agreed and provided in tranches, and therefore determined the timescales of the local flexible food fund. Funding was received from the Scottish Government in April and the fund was operational from May. The first tranche of funding was to cover the period up till the end of June and was therefore used to

make payments in May and June. The Scottish Government provided a second tranche of funding which allowed the scheme to be extended till September. This meant anyone who had received their first payment in June could then also receive the second payment in July. At the end of September there was enough money in the budget to pay people who had received their first payment in September to also receive their second payment at the end of the month. Therefore, everybody that engaged with the service received two payments regardless of when they joined the scheme, even though in some cases the first payment was made without certainty that there would be funding for the second payment, due to the timing of the funding allocation decisions by the Scottish Government. At the time of interview, the scheme had ceased at the end of September due to the specifications of the funding from the Scottish Government, but it looked likely a third tranche of funding was available. However the amount was unknown. Plans for the third tranche were to reopen the scheme, starting afresh so previous applicants could reapply if needed and an additional amount for fuel would also be provided.

The flexible food fund was distinct from the existing emergency grants scheme, the Scottish Welfare Fund, although people would be considered for both if appropriate.

“The food fund is a contribution towards household food costs and it’s not... I mean I know it’s a payment in a crisis, but it’s not a crisis payment, as in, ‘I need money that day.’ When we rolled it out, when we said staff, ‘If you’re coming into contact with somebody, and they have got nothing that day, or the next couple of days, that’s where Scottish Welfare Fund comes in, but we can also consider them for a food fund payment,’.... So, yes, so that’s what the relationship was with Scottish Welfare Fund, they worked together or apart or whatever the person’s circumstances were.”  
(Council staff respondent)

A key difference between the two funds was therefore the Scottish Welfare Fund is commonly used to fill a gap until someone’s next benefit payment, whereas the food fund provided funds to cover food costs over a longer period of time. It was hoped that this might protect some people from reaching the crisis point at which a referral to the Scottish Welfare fund payment was required.

“People might have not got to that stage, because of the food fund, that they were counting down the days before they could get their benefits.” (Council staff respondent)

Partly as a knock-on effect of the availability of the food fund the number of applications to the Scottish Welfare Fund reduced over the summer months. Although the reduction in the payments made from the Scottish Welfare Fund received some criticism, the advice team countered this with an explanation of the food fund.

“So, we actually then, along with a few other local authorities, got some criticism that we were not spending our Scottish Welfare Fund budget, it was actually because, you know, they were getting the flexible food fund instead... it wasn’t that they were getting nothing, people weren’t left stranded, it was actually because we were working out what was the best one to give them, you know, was it a crisis, that day crisis, could they get both? Sometimes the people got both.” (Council staff respondent)

Although this cash first approach is widely advocated for, it is worth noting that some people had reservations about the utility of this due to the higher prices of food in rural locations.

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

Corroborating this, Moray Food Plus previously did some research which highlighted that a shopping basket which costs around £7 in Aldi in Elgin would cost £17 in some of the smaller villages. In this context, therefore, some people favoured a mix of approaches.

### School food provision

Alternatives for free school meals were originally in the form of cold ‘grab and go bags’ which were collected from the school. After the Easter holidays this provision changed to vouchers which were emailed to recipients once a fortnight. Families could choose which supermarket they received vouchers for.

As previously noted, transportation can be a barrier in some areas of Moray. Using the vouchers may have required some families to use expensive public transport or incur car running costs.

“What we noticed regarding the food vouchers in our area was actually the cost of the travelling to go to Asda or Tesco. Up here obviously our bus fares are really expensive, so for a mum to take her two kids for instance on the bus to Asda, you’re maybe talking about £10 in bus fare. So the way they were seeing it they maybe have £25 voucher but had a big outlay on bus fares.” (Third sector respondent)

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

Although the Council advertised the scheme widely there were still some families who were not aware that vouchers were being sent by email. Therefore, schools and school link workers contacted the eligible families to make sure that they were receiving the vouchers and explained how the vouchers would work and how to use them. Vouchers were problematic for some families who may not have had the IT access or literacy required. In these cases staff from the community organisations supported the families by contacting the Council to request paper copies of the vouchers.

### Fairer Moray Forum

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

### Local community organisations

Across the Moray region many local community organisations, such as community councils, community associations, local development trusts, existing support groups (eg. mother and toddler groups) and local businesses (hotels, cafes, takeaways, local butchers, local whisky distilleries etc.) worked together to provide support with food access in their local community. Each group provided support to a clearly defined local geographical community. Support was provided in a range of forms including food parcel deliveries, hot meal deliveries, the provision of vouchers and volunteer shopping. These more local organisations worked in partnership with Moray Food Plus and the allocated community support officer from the Council.

In the initial stages of lockdown the community groups often received and distributed the care packages and Meals on Wheels, provided by Moray Food Plus, delivering them within their local community. Many also provided additional food support or continued to support households once the care packages from Moray Food Plus had stopped (which was due to the easing of lockdown restrictions). Some of these local level responses supported, primarily, people with food access but also sought to support local business, such as a local restaurants providing hot meals.

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

Organisations used their existing knowledge from working in the communities to identify people who may need support and also widely shared information about the support they could offer.

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

The scale of the operations differed. For example, in one town with a population of approximately 1,500 people, 7-10 households received weekly food parcels from the community association throughout lockdown and beyond. In another town, with a population of approximately 7,000, meals were provided twice a week to about 60 households.

Although not exclusively, much of this localized support was targeted at people who were physically unable to access food, which was of particular relevance in Moray due to rurality and a proportionately high elderly population in some areas.

“It was more accessibility. Moray has got an older population, so a lot of folk shielding, a lot of folk vulnerable and a lot of folk scared because they didn’t have the same family or friends or access to folk delivering things.” (Council staff respondent)

The funding secured by these organisations meant that the food support could be provided free of charge.

In addition to this direct food provision the local community organisations often provided a shopping service.

“We were very busy initially with volunteers going out to those crofts and farms and rural areas with shopping deliveries from the local shop and supplemented with some stuff from the larder.” (Third sector respondent)

Local supermarkets have systems in place to support this volunteer shopping.

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

Some of the very localised support was also targeted at people who were financially vulnerable, identified through the existing organisations providing support to people and families in need. However, as time passed and lockdown restrictions started to ease, in these instances, the Moray Food Plus and the Council community support officers encouraged organisations to ensure people were accessing other forms of longer-term support.

“But, I suppose what I was trying to say to my volunteers was, “Look, we can support them short-term, but we need to get them into the right structure.” Like, money advice, that is amazing team and the work that they do, and get them into that structure to make sure that they were getting everything that was available and of use to them, and also that it was sustainable, because these are volunteers, and we knew, with the best will in the world, at some point you are going to get tired, fed up and probably go back to work. It was wrong to the community to try and keep them going. It was almost like, yes, we can do this for so long while we need to, but we need to be getting them into the appropriate systems. Whether that was to get them in through Food Plus so they were on their records, whether it was through the IMAX, through the Income Maximisation Team or whatnot, because these structures are there for a reason.” (Council staff respondent)

However, this was considered less appropriate for the support that was being provided to the population of people who were unable to access food for physical reasons, despite the easing of lockdown restrictions. The community organisations providing food support in a community with a particularly high proportion of elderly residents were, at the time of data collection, seeking additional funding to continue support through the winter months.

“Just looking at the timeline there, we’ve been waiting for a time when we could scale down our support initiatives or food support initiatives. It’s never really happened because I suppose there’s never really been a change in the statistics really where we could relax. We have kept rolling out our food support pretty much the same way all the way through. We’re more aware of the people who are most in need. I don’t like this idea of a dependency culture because I don’t want to get involved in an invidious means test, who actually really deserves food support and who really doesn’t. So basically we are carrying on rolling that out and, as I say, we’re looking

for funding now which we think we've got to keep us going right throughout the winter. The winter is going to be not just in terms of the physical hardship but I think psychologically people are going to be much more down as well. I think we've just got to keep that initiative going basically." (Third sector respondent)

Another said:

"We still have vulnerable elderly whose families can't come visit them that would usually provide meals whether or not it's the family shielding or lockdown regulations." (Third sector respondent)

Moray Food Plus continued to liaise and support the local community organisations although the extent of their involvement differed depending on what was needed in each local area.

"The Community Council in my area, again, there was just so much money around at the time so they got funding and they were able to do meals for older people once a week working with the local cafes and chippy but we enabled them to refer to us. The only support we gave this area was you can be a referral agency and they did refer now and again. Whereas, in other areas, we were doing the care packages, the meals and the larders so it varied from place to place what we did." (Third sector respondent)

As well as these community organisations that were newly providing food support other organisations that already worked with food in the community continued to do so. Most notably the Bow café, a community cafe which is part of a larger social enterprise that provides a resource of practical help for people and their families dealing with substance or alcohol misuse. Initially the Bow café worked in partnership with Moray Food Plus to run the Meals on Wheels service. However as the demand was so high the two organisations split the service, with the Bow café working with their existing partner organisations and Moray Food Plus working in areas that were further afield. We also heard from Moray Firth Credit Union, who provide affordable credit. They remained open on restricted hours to provide 'essential financial service' to those using the credit union as their bank. They also provided a range of food support including distributing food parcels, meals, vouchers, cash grants, signposted members to Money Advice and to potential grants, such as the Moray Emergency Relief Fund provided by the Lord Lieutenant of Moray.<sup>21</sup>

## Key themes emerging on supporting food access in Moray

### Benefits of a local response

Participants observed that there were many benefits to the responses being at a very local community level. These benefits were rooted in the existing local knowledge and connections. At a very practical level this could be detailed knowledge of the geography of the area, a lack of which had caused some issues with deliveries of the national shielding food box scheme.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.lordlieutenantmoray.co.uk/moray-emergency-relief-fund/>

“I did know that one of the issues that we did have in regards to the food boxes were because of the rurality and finding some of the addresses. Some addresses ‘out in the sticks’ as we call it, they often never received a delivery because whether the delivery driver couldn’t find a location.” (Council staff respondent)

Participants also reported that local knowledge made it easier to identify the people who would benefit from support, perhaps the people who engaged with existing services or attending local lunch clubs etc. It also meant relationships with people were already in place which made it easier for people to offer and access the support.

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

The communities also felt they were better able to respond quickly, from the outset of the lockdown whereas the more statutory services took a bit longer to become operational.

“I just feel that at the beginning of this pandemic it was like everybody wanted to put out the fire but nobody knew where the hose was. It was just crazy. Whereas with communities, they just went bang into place.” (Council staff respondent)

“What we did get, we quite often got a few referrals from the Grampian Hub because somebody was going to get a shielding food box but it might not be for a week so they needed food in the meantime.” (Third sector respondent)

Participants felt that the connections and collaboration between the local organisations as a result of providing the response was a positive legacy that they hoped would continue.

### Contact and engagement

Participants felt that an additional benefit of the direct food provision responses was that it provided an opportunity to check on people’s wellbeing and monitor how people were managing with the pandemic.

“We were alternating the dry food bags and the fresh meals. So that meant that there was only a window of about a week between everything. So it was really to allow us to keep tabs, if you like, on the people that were vulnerable.” (Third sector respondent)

The direct food provision also provided an opportunity to connect with people who previously had not, and may be reluctant to, engage with the support organisation, be it statutory or community. This allowed new relationships to develop.

“We did get feedback from some of the social workers that the meals we were providing helped them engage with families. So, families that normally wouldn’t open the door for them, because they were turning up with a three-course meal for everybody in that household, they were interacting a lot more and they were engaging and opening the door. It assisted other services as well.” (Third sector respondent)

“The other thing I wanted to say was that the operation of our food bank and our response to the pandemic generally has put us in touch with part of our community that we had not really had any impact in previously. So from that perspective it’s been really good and that’s brought up new opportunities for the development trust and we don’t know what it’s going to look like...” (Third sector respondent)

However, respondents also noted that despite their efforts as an organisation to reach out to the local community, some people may still have been reluctant to ask for help for various reasons. In one case this prompted the organisation to switch from a food parcel collection model to a delivery model.

“Public humiliation and judgemental neighbours in a small community have left some families not paying rent to feed their children rather than come and get help.” (Workshop Padlet response)

“One of the problems we find within [village name removed] was that we had self-referrals but mainly referrals to other people because I think people are very reluctant, I think it’s maybe a north east culture thing, but people are very reluctant to come forward and say, “I need help.” I wish I had a fiver for everyone that said, “There’s other people that are more in need than I am.” That had a knock-on effect. We tried to make it into a food hub and people just wouldn’t come to the food hub. So we really had to go out to the people with the food bags.” (Third sector respondent)

More generally, the need for the responses also acted to highlight the existence of financial vulnerability in the region, some of which may have been unnoticed prior to the pandemic.

“A part of the community has been revealed I think to people who didn’t know it existed even in a small, small place.... I’m sure not a lot of people realise that there are people in their town who are feeding their children rather than paying the rent in this town.” (Third sector respondent)

### Mobilised communities

The role of the communities in the response was considered a positive outcome of the pandemic and there was hope that this engagement and interest around food poverty could be retained and built upon.

“I keep on saying, even as a council service, even going back to the statutory duties, our community services, community groups have engaged, we need to harness that, we need to harness that engagement and use it, we need to keep it going, because none of us on our own are going to be able to solve child poverty. But they’ve been enthused into doing it and we can keep them going with that and we can provide them with maybe some support of that, then we might be able to do something, you know, better in our local area, I just don’t want it to be once coronavirus is over that they all feel they’ve been dropped like a hot potato. Let’s keep going with that, yes.” (Council staff respondent)

This new role was also welcomed by the community organisations themselves.

“I think that it shows the flexibility and the responsiveness that we got within the sector at the moment, that as a sector we were able to take this on. It’s something

that maybe traditionally sat with the local authorities is now very firmly in the hands of the community which is really positive.” (Third sector respondent)

In addition to this heightened role of communities some participants also reflected positively that funding was now being directed toward social issues in the community, which is a change of focus from before the pandemic.

“I suppose the other thing I’d say is that the big strategic priority in our area has always been tourism and the tourism economy has always been seen as where investments go. So it’s been great to see some investment going in and it’s not a particularly attractive place for funders to put their money into, not compared to a shiny new discovery centres and things like that, but you can see the funders have been flexible and willing to invest in some of the issues in our area.” (Third sector respondent)

### Fairer Moray Forum subgroup

One outcome of the pandemic was identification of a gap between the strategic level actions of the Fairer Moray Forum and the work that was happening on the ground. As a result a sub group has been formed which ties together the work that is happening at the granular community level.

“And we felt with this year, particularly with the coronavirus outbreak that the Fairer Moray Forum was up here at a high level and it was obviously... you’re reporting in retrospect as well, so it wasn’t taking account of what was happening on the ground right now. It felt as if there was a separation between that high level, strategic, you know, poverty planning and the statutory duties that were on the NHS and the Council and what was actually happening on the ground on a day-to-day basis. And I think coronavirus put a bit of distance in there, you know? So, what we’ve done now is that we’ve set up a Fairer Moray Forum action group that sits underneath the strategic level. So, the strategic level will continue to focus on the statutory responsibilities, and don’t get me wrong it all ties in together at the end of the day, but the action group that we’ve set up now is very much all of us that are working on the ground.” (Council staff respondent)

The action group will work to coordinate efforts on information, publicity, leaflets etc. and ensure strong relations and interactions across the range of organisations working in the field.

### Moving out of full lockdown

At the time of data collection Scotland was operating the tier system with Moray being in level 1, allowing Moray Food Plus to resume their wider suite of services, but adapted to comply with current guidelines. This included, for example, cooking sessions with individual families, rather than groups, outdoor walks with families as opposed to indoor parenting groups, and after school ‘supper clubs’ with a small number of families. The food fund had received further funding from the national government and was now open until January 2021, which was the hope at the time of interview. As noted above, some of the community organisations were continuing to provide their services or changing to a more sustainable model, such as a community larder rather than food deliveries.

Where appropriate Moray Food Plus were encouraging organisations to signpost people to the available financial support, rather than using direct food provision as the default responses. This recognises that the direct food provision was an immediate response to a pandemic but, longer term, more sustainable and dignified responses are needed.

Organisations could also be reassured that the existing services of Moray Food Plus were still available should somebody need an emergency food parcel or other direct food support.

“That then gave us the impetus to say to our communities, “Right. This is what Food Plus is saying. This is the evidence of why they are saying it. There is now food in the shops. Their service is still there if folk need food packages. That service is still there. This is the time to start drawing back on what they are doing.” (Council staff respondent)

Highlighting the longer-term economic consequences of the pandemic we learned that Moray Firth Credit Union had to write off £36,000 of bad debts, attributed to increased unemployment, furlough schemes coming to an end and insufficient social security, despite the temporary increase to Universal Credit.

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

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

Participants' answers and reflections on responses are summarised below.

### Positive reflections about food responses enacted over spring and summer

#### *Funding*

Participants reflected that a key enabler of providing the food response was the availability of funding, with funding for COVID-19 related responses being readily available in the area. Some examples of funders noted by participants include National Lottery Awards for All, Tesco Groundworks (distribution of the carrier bags charge), Martin Lewis Charity Fund, Highland and Islands Enterprise, Benzie's Foundation and Neighbourly.<sup>22</sup> In addition a range of local businesses and organisations provided donations to organisations providing a food response. This had a positive impact on the organisations meaning they could deliver the required services without having to worry about funding and it allowed them to 'stock up' ahead of the winter period. Funding applications were found to be less burdensome with easy processes and quick turnarounds.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/national-lottery-awards-for-all-scotland>, [https://www.groundwork.org.uk/apply-for-a-grant/national-grants/grants\\_tesco-community-grants/](https://www.groundwork.org.uk/apply-for-a-grant/national-grants/grants_tesco-community-grants/), <https://blog.moneysavingexpert.com/2020/03/i-m-making-p1m-available-to-fund-urgent-small-charity-coronaviru/>, <https://www.hie.co.uk/>, <https://www.benziesfoundation.org/>

“Quick turnaround on funds enabled quick response” (Workshop Padlet Response)

### *Form of contact*

As well as meeting a food need the research participants highlighted that many of the responses had additional benefits on the people receiving the support. For some this was a brief social exchange during weekly deliveries of food.

“I think from the recipients’ side of things, a lot of them were not seeing people on a week-by-week basis apart from the delivery from either the food box or the food bag, so again just that simple - although they weren’t going into houses or anything and they were just literally dropping the bag at the door and knocking, again a chance for these individuals to have a conversation with actually a physical person.” (Council staff respondent)

Participants also felt the responses assured people that although some of their usual social opportunities, such as the community meals, were paused they had not been forgotten about. Referring to the rationale behind the Meals on Wheels:

“Where they were coming from was more along the lines of folk that had been accessing community lunches or social things or coffee mornings and that, and it was more the...“We are still here and we are thinking of you.” (Council staff respondent)

Participants were keen for these more social elements of community food, such as community lunches, community meals, group work and face to face meetings, to resume as soon as possible.

### *Gave a focus*

Participants suggested a further benefit was experienced by the volunteers who wanted to do something in response to the pandemic and also council and staff who were involved in food responses as opposed to the usual day job. The Council staff who volunteered to deliver the fruit and veg bags benefited from a change of role and a change of scene, gaining a different insight into the local area and giving them a sense of purpose from being involved and “doing something important in the community” (Council staff respondent), all deemed to be good for their own health and wellbeing.

## *Concerns about responses enacted over spring and summer*

### *Need, reliance and duplication*

Some participants voiced concerns that people accessing support were not triaged to the same extent as pre-pandemic and therefore there was limited assessment of need. This may have been a consequence of the immediate crisis response which was supporting people with food access whilst other responses were being developed. Whilst the need for food support primarily driven by physical access issues may have reduced, for some households, due to other mechanisms being put in place (online delivery, volunteer community shopping and friend and family support) households may have continued to access the free, direct food provision simply because it was available. This concern was exacerbated by the

observation that there may have been some duplication of services which arose due to the readily available funding.

“Funding almost felt too easy to access and slight concern at lack of due diligence by funders in how organisations spent this - seemed to be duplication of some services”  
(Workshop Padlet response)

In addition, some participants reported concerns that the levels of support provided are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term but people may have built up a reliance on a service putting household budgets under additional pressure when the free food they have been receiving eventually ceases.

### *Late funding decisions*

Participants reflected that funding was sometimes provided with quite short and specific end dates. Although these end dates were commonly extended the decisions and announcements of these extensions meant that organisations had already planned and adapted their activities to adhere to the original timelines. These late extensions are already noted above on the funding used for the local flexible food fund and this was also the case for funding provided to local community organisations. This made it difficult for organisations to plan their continued activities.

“We were initially told that that had to be spent and evidenced by the end of September. Then as things were trundling along it was obvious that this pandemic was going nowhere at lunchtime on the 30th September we were told if we had any underspend we could spend it until the end of March.” (Council staff respondent)

However, as this announcement was made at the last minute the community organisations had already used any remaining funding to stock-pile for future months. Organisations had spent the funding ‘forward buying’ stock, food vouchers and credit with the local businesses so they could continue to provide for people in need in the coming months. One participant also observed that navigating the available funding and the requirements was challenging for people who may not have experience with this type of activity.

“Almost impossible to navigate the vast array of sources for the non-professional.”  
(Workshop Padlet response)



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